

SWEDEN

by Ove Karlsson

As in several other European countries, modern competition sport developed rapidly in Sweden during the last decades of the 19th century and early in the 20th century

Sweden was represented at the Olympic Games in 1896 (1 participant) and 1900 (10), but abstained from the 1904 Games in St. Louis.

Thus, the 1906 Games were warmly welcomed, and gave the first real opportunity for several Swedish athletes to test their ability in international competition. Except for the 1900 Olympics, only few Swedish athletes had competed outside the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden) and had mainly done so individually. Since the 1870s, several gymnastics teams had been in other countries (England, Belgium, The Netherlands, France, Germany), but true to the philosophy of the *Swedish Ling Gymnastics*, it was always exhibition, never competition.

Colonel Viktor BALCK, a founding member of the IOC, was the leading pioneer in organising modern competition sport in Sweden, and he was also the one agitating most actively for Swedish participation in the 1906 Games. The Athens organising committee provided 10,000 Swedish crowns towards travelling expenses, the Swedish government 5,000, while considerable sums were donated by some 90 sport supporters, including Prince

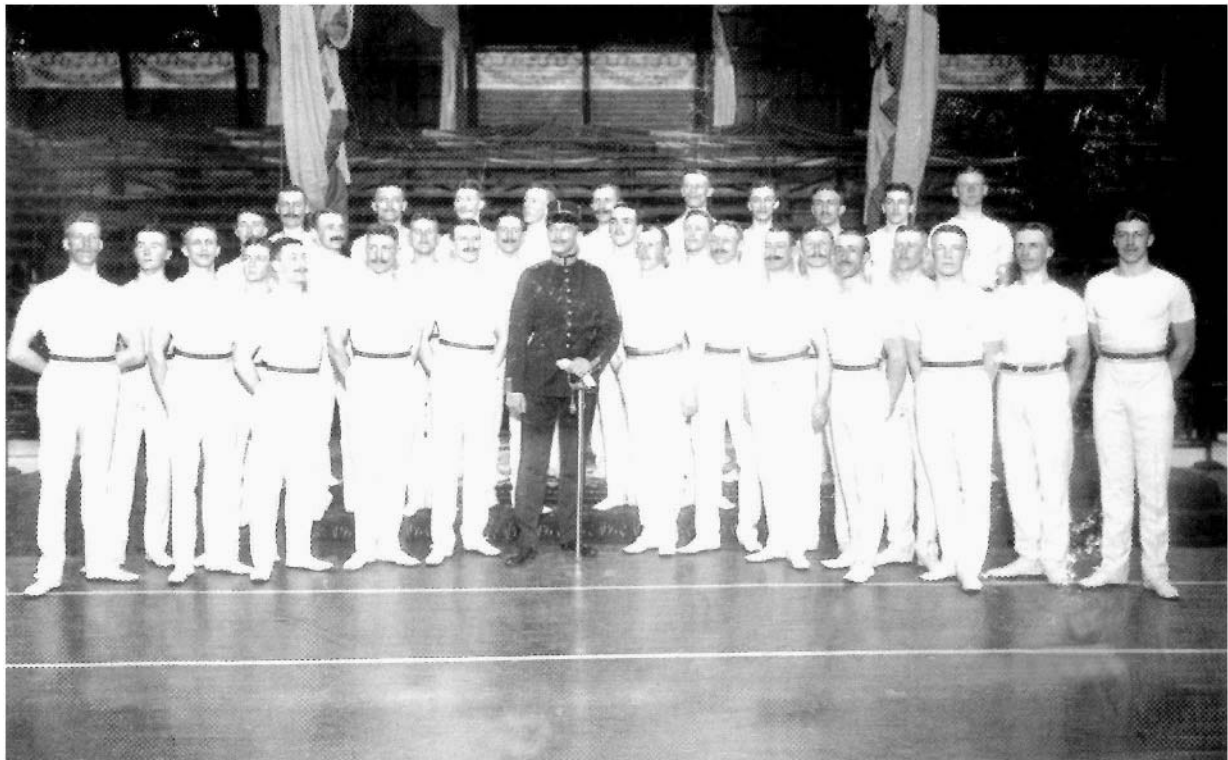
GUSTAF ADOLF (later, 1950-1973, King GUSTAF VI ADOLF), J. Sigfrid EDSTRÖM (later IOC member, from 1920, and President, 1942-1952) and 1900 Olympian Isaac WESTERGREN.

The time for the 1906 Games, end of April/early May, gave the Swedes few opportunities to train during the immediately preceding (winter) months. A large part of Sweden was still covered in snow and ice when the majority of the team left Stockholm. The journey, by train and ship, lasted nine days, including a longer stop in Berlin, and the team arrived in Athens only one day prior to the Opening Ceremony

The Games became something of a breakthrough in international sport for Sweden with 14 medals (2-5-7) and 7th place in the nations' ranking (based on 3-2-1 points for gold-silver-bronze).

A total of 38 Swedes (men only) competed in the official events, one in both aquatics (diving and swimming) and athletics, one in both aquatics (diving) and tug-of-war, one in both athletics and tug-of-war, one in both tug-of-war and weightlifting, twelve only in aquatics, eleven only in athletics, five only in tug-of-war, three in shooting, two in fencing and one in cycling.

Swedish gymnasts (below) and the aquatics team (right) before leaving for Athens





Only two athletes remained from the 1900 Games, Eric LEMMING (athletics and, in addition to 1900, tug-of-war) and Emil FICK (fencing).

The Swedish team was headed by eight officials, including BALCK and EDSTRÖM. The two latter, and Count Clarence von ROSEN, IOC member 1900-1948, were also among eight Swedes acting as competition officials/jury members. The team was accompanied by three journalists from Stockholm daily papers and one photographer.

The Great Lemming

Sweden's first Olympic title, won in 1900, was actually only one half as three Swedes teamed with three Danes to win the tug-of-war in Paris.

The first individual gold medal came April 26, 1906, when Eric LEMMING (1880-1930) bettered his World Best Performance in javelin by 11 cm to 53.90 to win ahead of three fellow-countrymen. LEMMING'S winning margin - 8.73 m - is impressive, but perhaps not surprising as the event was new in international competition and previously rare outside the North European countries, where LEMMING was outstanding.

From Gothenburg, LEMMING was the first star, and role model, during the first decades of modern Swedish competitive sport. In javelin, he recorded 36.45 as a 16-year-old and later came to dominate the event for 15 years, improving the World Best Performance from 49.32 (1899) to the first official IAAF World Record of 62.32 (1912), which remained his personal best. Already as a 20-year-old, LEMMING had shown his versatility in the 1900 Olympics, where he was 4th in high jump, pole vault and hammer throw. He won a total of seven Olympic medals, four gold in javelin, also 1908 (two, incl. Free style) and 1912, and three bronze in as many events, shot put, pentathlon and tug-of-war, all in 1906.

In four Games, LEMMING (191 cm, 94 kg) competed in a total of 15 events (incl. long jump, triple jump, three forms of discus throwing and three forms of javelin throwing): six events in 1900, nine in 1906, five in 1908 and four in 1912.

Rules in track and field athletics were not really internationally unified in 1906, which left the field open to different interpretations. The 1972 edition of the annual Swedish *Idrottsboken* quoted what Finland's Verner JÄRVINEN was reported to have told



about the shot put in 1906. JÄRVINEN had recorded some 13 m, far better than all opponents, of which LEMMING was 4th. The Swede, however, turned to the judges, pointing out that JÄRVINEN had been throwing, not putting, by not letting the hand with the shot rest toward the shoulder before heaving the equipment. The judges agreed, JÄRVINEN was disqualified and LEMMING got a bronze medal!

In Sweden, LEMMING was a highly regarded expert on track and field rules. There were several examples like the one in Athens, though not necessarily to the advantage of LEMMING, more often in competitions without him as participant.

Outside the Olympics, LEMMING won a record number of 25 national titles 1899-1917: 10 in javelin, 6 in shot put, 5 in hammer, 3 in discus and 1 in pole vault. In addition 25 silver and 7 bronze. As a 42-year-old, in 1922, his 3rd place in hammer helped his club to win the national team title. In the same year, he still threw 55.10 in javelin.

After having been a police man, he worked from 1910 for the company in charge of the shops selling alcohol in Gothenburg. (In Sweden, bottles of strong liquor still can be bought only in special shops run by *Systembolaget*, the alcohol retail monopoly.) Towards the end of his sporting career, when he advanced in the company management, LEMMING often competed under the pseudonym "Eric Otto" because of the unholy link between sport and alcohol. He became the Chief Executive Officer of *AB Göteborgssystemet* in 1923. Beside work and sport, LEMMING was an excellent pianist, accompanying many famous artists at charity events.

Erik Lemming: Olympic gold and bronze in the Athens Games 1906

Eric LEMMING'S younger brother Oscar was also an Olympian, did not finish his heat at 110 m hurdles in 1908 and was eliminated after four events in the pentathlon in 1912, while their sister Anna-Lisa was a member of a 1912 gymnastics exhibition team.

Other prominent Swedes

Sweden's second title at the 1906 Games was won by Hjalmar MELLANDER (1880-1919) in pentathlon. He was not first in any event, but the most consistent of the six competitors left for the concluding wrestling. MELLANDER also placed 4th in long jump, his best event (both Nordic and Swedish champion in 1904) and javelin.

He moved to England (Liverpool) in 1902 and died in the Isle of Man of exhaustion when trying to save a drowning person.

Three Swedes left Athens with more than one medal, LEMMING, John SVANBERG, silver at 5 miles and marathon, and Bruno SÖDERSTRÖM, silver in pole vault and bronze in javelin.

John SVANBERG (1881-1957) was given a very valuable prize at the Games and named honorary citizen of Athens. A highly talented runner, though with a weak finish, SVANBERG did not live in the ascetic way sportsmen were supposed to live at the time, but was probably the most popular Swedish sportsman in the early 1900s. But? Maybe it was because of his athletic successes despite his way of living? After having sold his prizes, JÄRVINEN was declared a non-



Hjalmar Mellander (r.) with his prize for the pentathlon - a challenge cup?*

Successful exhibitions - Popular Swedes

Several of the 38 Swedes in official events, some medallists, were also members of the exhibition teams in gymnastics (32 members) and aquatics (21), incl. Bruno SÖDERSTRÖM in gymnastics.

Sweden refrained from the gymnastics team competition because the programme's degree of difficulty was to be included in the judging.

However, the team gave a highly appreciated exhibition at the end of the Opening Ceremony

The Swedes in general and the gymnasts in particular were, according to Swedish newspapers at time, very popular among the spectators and also with Greeks in the streets.

One example is given in the Swedish report of the Games, *Redogörelse för Sveriges deltagande*. Following the closing party in Zappeion, an incident occurred when the Swedes were to leave their lodging at *Hotel Achilleion*. The hotel host, "a greedy Bulgarian", had seized the Swedes' valuable prizes and some of their luggage, frightened he would not be paid in full. (This was, however, a matter for the Greek organisers.) According to *Redogörelse för Sveriges deltagande*, rumours spread in the city and many Greeks came to the aid of the Swedes. Police could not stop people from entering the hotel. The Swedish flag, still flying at the balcony, and flagpole were taken down because "the hotel was not worthy to show the flag". With the Swedish flag in front, Greeks accompanied

amateur in 1909 and turned to professional races in the USA, where he 1909-1910 was very successful against, among others, Dorando PIETRI, Alfred SHRUBB and Tom LONGBOAT. Winning a marathon in Chicago in 1909 gave SVANBERG US-\$ 7,500.

Bruno SÖDERSTRÖM (1881-1969) was in Sweden reported to have received an Olympic gold medal in the 1906 pole vault despite losing the jump-off for gold. However, no confirmation or trustworthy explanation has been found.

SÖDERSTRÖM was the pole vault pioneer in Sweden with four national titles (1902, 1904, 1906, 1907) and several records. While studying in the USA in 1908, he set a personal best of 3.66 and became familiar with tenpin bowling, a sport he later introduced in Sweden. In 1910, SÖDERSTRÖM founded the sports paper *Idrottsbladet* and was its first editor.

Bruno SÖDERSTRÖM was a younger brother of Gustaf SÖDERSTRÖM, member of winning Danish/Swedish tug-of-war team in the 1900 Olympics.

Both SVANBERG and SÖDERSTRÖM were medallists in 1908, bronze at 5 miles and in pole vault respectively.



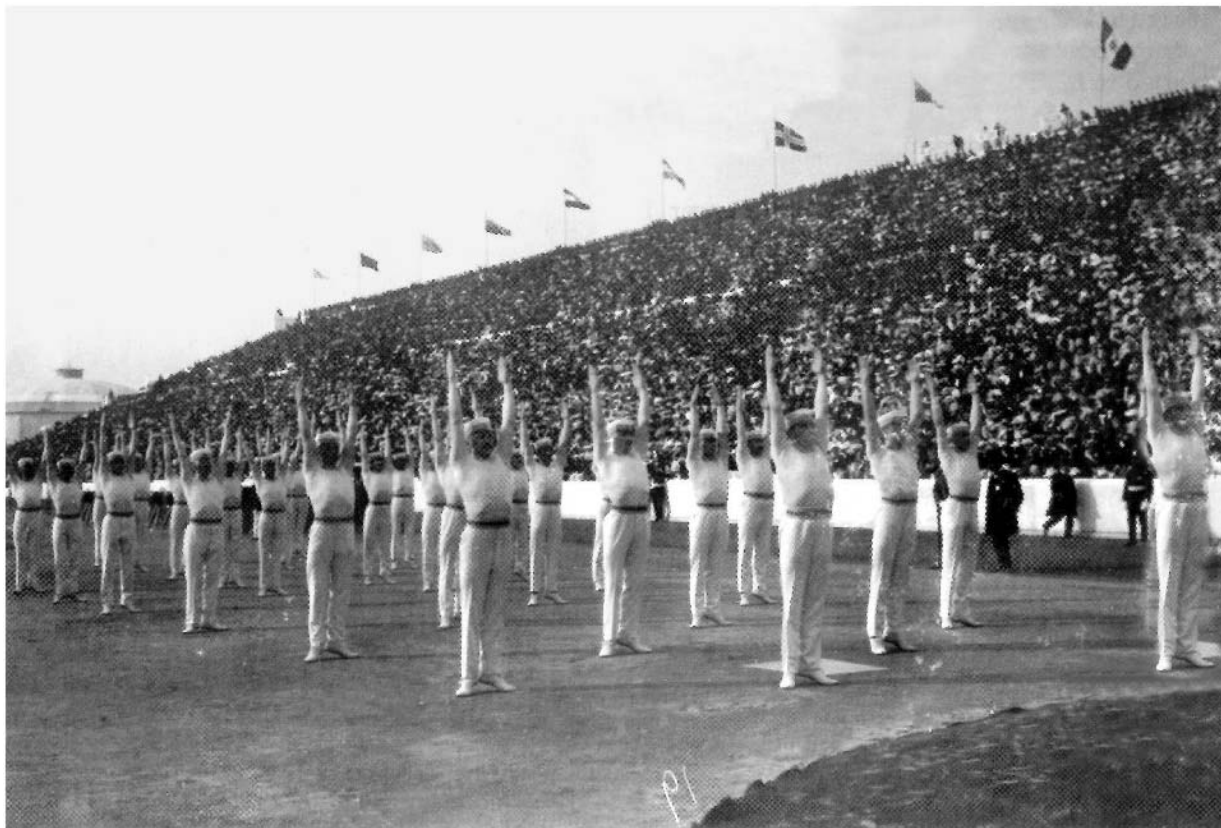
Bruno Söderström clearing the bar in the pole vault

* Hjalmar Mellander was requested by Coubertin to send back the prize. Until Mellander received Coubertin's letter he did not know that his award should have been a challenge trophy. Cp. WIKBERG, Karin, "The Mellander Trophy. From Olympic Heights to the Bottom of the Sea", in: JOH 10(2002)2, pp. 1, 31-34 (Editor's note)



The Swedish gymnasts enter the Panathenaic stadium through the gate from the locker rooms ...

... and convince the spectators of the Swedish gymnastic system



the guests from the North through the streets to the railway station, where an extra train took the Swedes to Patras. Flag and flagpole were handed over to the Swedes, while people were cheering.

One explanation for the popularity of the Swedes could be, that the Swedish Ling gymnastics was introduced in Greece around 1900, and soon became very popular, mainly thanks to Ioannis CHRYSSAFIS. In 1898, the Greek government sent two teachers from the newly (1897) founded gymnastics school in Athens to Stockholm to study Ling gymnastics at *Gymnastiska Centralinstitutet* (GCI), the school founded in 1813 by Pehr Henrik LING. (GCI's present name in English is "The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences".) One of the teachers was CHRYSSAFIS, who in 1917 published a handbook further strengthening the leading role of Ling gymnastics in the motherland of gymnastics.

polo in 1908, BERGVALL was among the founders of the *Fédération Internationale de Natation Amateur* (FINA) in 1908 and member of its board until 1928, the last four years as president. He was general manager of the *Stockholm Stadion* (the main 1912 Olympic arena) in 1916-1945, the editor of the 1912 official Olympic Report and wrote/edited or was a main contributor to some 30 books, including reports on the Olympics in 1920-1948 (some of them for the Swedish NOC).

After the Games, both gymnasts and aquatic specialists performed exhibitions in Patras before the Swedish team left by ship; the gymnasts held exhibitions at some stops during the journey, both to and from Greece.

At their return, the Swedish team was greeted jubilantly. The successful showing in Athens contributed a great deal in changing many Swedes' questionable view of the relatively new phenomenon sport.



The main Swedish aquatic exhibition was held in the Neo Phaliron Bay on April 29. The display, watched by the Royal Greek family and by multiple spectators on boats, included demonstrations of diving, figure swimming, underwater swimming, life-saving and water polo.

The water polo team with white caps won a 15-minutes match against the team with red caps 1-0 (according to the Official Report) or 2-0 (the newspaper *Athene*). The Swedish report of the Games claimed, this was the very first time water polo was performed in Greece.

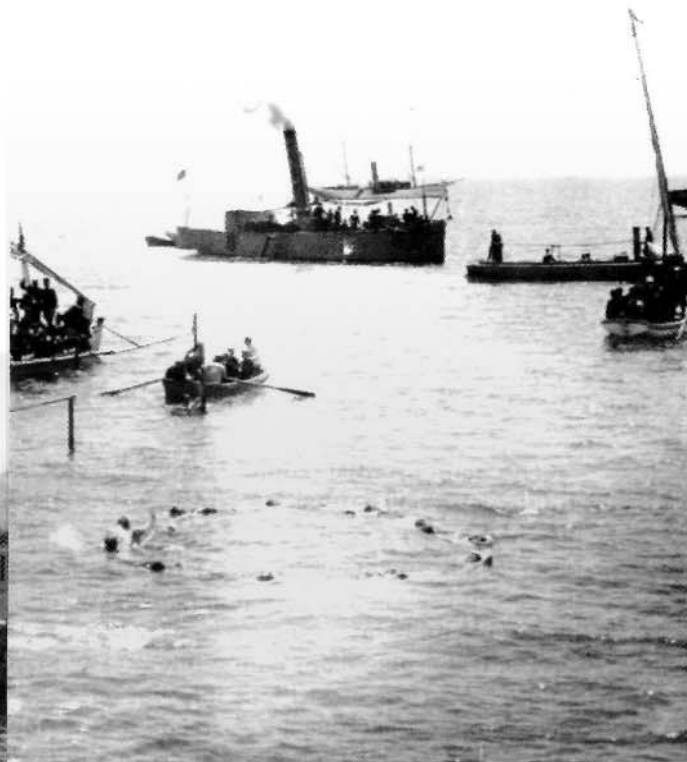
One notable member of the aquatics team was Erik BERGVALL, a pioneering sportsman, official and journalist. An Olympic bronze medallist in water

The aquatic competitions took place at the Bay of Neo Phaleron. The spectators viewed the contests from the boats or the quays

Publications in Swedish

Olympiska Spelen i Athen 1906 Redogörelse för Sveriges deltagande, Report by the Swedish Organising Committee through Viktor Balck.

Med svenskarne till Athén by Baltzar Roosval with photos by Oscar Halldin (Gustafson & Pålsons Bokförlag, 1906).





The Swedish team shows their excellence in diving, figure swimming and water polo on April 29th in the Neo Phaleron Bay watched by members of the Royal families and many other spectators. Especially water polo was not known to Greeks before the 1906 Olympic Games.

