

Fernand de Montigny (1885–1974): multiple Olympic champion and architect

By Roland Renson



An elegant pose from young épéist Fernand de Montigny

Photo: Jean-François de Montigny (JFdM) Archive

Berlin. He won four Olympic medals: gold in Antwerp 1920, Chamonix 1924 and St. Moritz 1928, and silver in Lake Placid 1932.

The American skier Colin Stewart (1927–2015), who participated in the slalom at the 1948 St Moritz Winter Games, was awarded his degree in architecture from Harvard in 1955, and there are probably several other Olympians like him who combined their passion for sport with architecture.

On the other side of the medal, there was the Dutch architect Jan Wils (1891–1972), who had designed the Olympic Stadium of the 1928 Games in Amsterdam and who won the gold medal in architectural designs in the Olympic art competitions of these Games, but Wils never competed in any Olympic sporting discipline.

The Belgian fencer, skater, ice and field hockey player Fernand de Montigny (1885–1974) was a multiple Olympic champion who won six official Olympic medals in 1908, 1912, 1920, 1924 and one non-official medal at the 1906 “Intercalated” Games. He was also the architect of the Antwerp Olympic Stadium where the Games of the VII Olympiad took place in 1920. This article will therefore focus on his remarkable career, both as a sportsman and as an architect.

I would like to thank sincerely Jean-François de Montigny, the son of Fernand, who provided first-hand information, documents and pictures of his father. Moreover, he donated many of these valuable documents to the Sportimonium (Sport and Olympic Museum, Zemst, Belgium) where they now reside and can be consulted.

Introduction: sport and architecture

There have been many Olympic champions, who were – or became – professional architects, such as Alfréd Hajós (1878–1955), who won in the 100 m and 1200 m freestyle swimming during the 1896 Athens Olympics while an architecture student in Hungary. More than that, he won the silver medal for architecture in the 1924 art competitions at the Paris Olympic Games with his plan for a stadium. He had devised the plan together with his compatriot Dezsö Lauber (1879–1966), who had played tennis at the 1908 London Olympics.

Swedish figure skater Gillis Grafström (1839–1938), was born in Stockholm but lived from 1925 onwards in Potsdam, Germany, and had studied architecture in

Athletes are born first ... than made

Fernand Alphonse Marie Frédéric de Montigny was born on 5th January 1885 in the port of Antwerp in Belgium in a well-to-do family. His son Jean-François wrote: “One of our forefathers wrote that the family was of French origin and that one of his ancestors had to seek refuge in Thuin (now Belgian Province of Hainaut) to escape from the consequences of a duel in which he had been involved in France during the reign of King Louis XIV (1643–1715), who enforced strong laws against duelling. So far, there has been nothing to prove this contention” (Montigny: L’origine s.d.).

Primary schoolboys at the Notre-Dame Jesuit College of Antwerp, posing before their yearly 'shields game'. Young Fernand de Montigny is first from left in the second row. He is looking to his left and not at the photographer.

Photo: JFdM Archive



Fernand de Montigny attended the Collège Notre-Dame of Antwerp, which was run by the Jesuits, where, after primary school, he studied Greek-Latin humanities. Young Fernand was particularly enthusiastic about the so called 'jeu du bouclier' (shields game) which was only played on special occasions and in which teams of young pupils would throw small, hard balls at each other while trying to protect themselves with shields. These balls were the 'balles pelotes' used in the wall games practiced daily during recreation time.

All secondary and higher education courses in Belgium were at that time still only taught in the French language, even in the Flemish part of the country, with Antwerp as its major city. This would only change in 1932 when Flemish became the official language in local government and lower and secondary education.

French, however, was often spoken up to the 1950s by the upper echelons of society, and was thus also the language of the majority of the 'sporting class' in Flanders (Renson 1998). This explains why all official correspondence and documents concerning the 1920 Olympic Games (except for some local newspapers) were only in French.

Fencing with style (1901–1920)

Fencing would become a part of the family lifestyle. Fernand started his career as a young fencer at the age of 16 in the private fencing hall of master Cyrille Verbrugge (1866–1929), which later became the prestigious Cercle de L'Épée with Charles Cnoops (1870–1928) as president. As junior champion, he was selected to participate in the 1906 "Intercalated" Games of Athens and was trained by

fencing master Verbrugge himself. The Belgian Olympic Committee was founded on 18th February of that same year to enable the participation of a Belgian delegation. The initiative was taken by Colonel Clément Lefébure (1861–1928), an ardent promotor of Swedish gymnastics and Commander of the Normal School for Gymnastics and Fencing of the Belgian Army (Delheye 2003; Renson 2006: 35–37).

The Belgian delegation left by train from Brussels on Sunday 15th April for Trieste (Italy), where they took the boat to Athens on 17th April. Cyrille Verbrugge won two gold medals in Athens in the competitions for fencing masters, one for épée and one for sabre.

These competitions between fencing masters, who were later considered not to be 'amateurs', only took place at the 1900 Paris Olympics (where Verbrugge ended 15th in the foil competition [Mérillon 1901: 147; Mallon 2009: 116]) and during the 1906 Games. His pupil, Fernand de Montigny, participated in the épée and the foil individual competitions and won a bronze medal in

The Belgian épée team, which won bronze at the Second International Olympic Games in Athens 1906. From left to right: Edmond Crahay, Fernand de Montigny, Constant Cloquet and Philippe le Hardy de Beaulieu.

Photo: JFdM Archive





Far left: Members of the Cercle de l'Épée d'Anvers, with president Charles Cnoops (seated left) and fencing master Cyrille Verbrugge (seated right), after they won the 1911 Belgian championship in Ostend. Fernand de Montigny, second standing from the left.

Adjacent: The cup awarded to the champion of the Cercle de l'Épée. It was won 14 times by Fernand de Montigny.

Photos: JFdM Archive



the team épée with his companions Constant Cloquet, Edmond Crahay and Philippe le Hardy de Beaulieu (Ameye 2006; Renson 2006: 38–39).

For the 21-year-old architecture student, the voyage to Athens was like a pilgrimage to the cradle of European culture. Among the photographs he took, there are many pictures of ancient Greek monuments and pillars, which seem to have inspired him later when he designed the Antwerp Olympic Stadium of 1920.

Although Montigny sometimes handled the sabre, he was in the first instance an excellent épée and foil fencer. He was ambidextrous but with a dominant left hand, which often confused his right-handed opponents.

Two years later, at the 1908 London Olympics, Montigny fought in the individual and team épée competitions. He won his first official Olympic bronze medal with his teammates Paul Anspach, Désiré Beaurain, Ferdinand Feyerick, François Rom, Victor Willem and Fernand Bosmans.

At the Stockholm Games of 1912, he participated in the foil and épée individual competitions, but he won the gold medal with the Belgian épée team consisting of Paul Anspach, his brother Henri Anspach, Robert Hennot, Jacques Ochs and François Rom.

The Cercle de l'Épée won the Belgian fencing championships of 1911 in Ostend. A year before the outbreak of the First World War, Montigny became Belgian foil champion in 1913, a sporting feat he would repeat in 1921. Moreover, he was 14 times club champion of the Cercle de l'Épée of

Antwerp between 1908 and 1928. After his 12th victory, he was allowed to keep the champion cup permanently, which still is one of the family memorial pieces today.

High sport society: the Beerschot Athletic Club and the Palais de Glace (1902–1920)

One year after he had become member of the Cercle de l'Épée, the 17-year-old Fernand de Montigny joined the elitarian Beerschot Athletic Club. The club had been founded on 1st February 1900 on the initiative of Alfred Grisar (1881–1958), who had become inspired by the British sporting culture when a student at Brighton College in Sussex, England. Grisar and several of his friends had left 'The great old' Antwerp Football Club in 1899 and started the new club on the Kiel grounds which Grisar's father Ernest (who died the same year) had recently bought. The families Van den Abeele, Grisar, Havenith, Gevers and Osterrieth, the prime instigators of the new club, had all been members of the prestigious Cercle d'Escrime d'Anvers, founded in 1887 by Frédéric Van den Abeele. They all belonged to the 'haute société' of the city (Montigny: Le sportifs.d.; Den Hollander 2006: 146–149).

Montigny played tennis and also field hockey at the 'holy grounds' of the Beerschot AC. In 1911 the Belgian field hockey team beat the French 6–2, and Montigny played for both the men's and the mixed team, composed of 6 male and 5 female players. These two

Fernand de Montigny plays a tennis match against René Havenith on the 'hallowed grounds' of Beerschot Athletic Club in 1910.

Far left: A remarkable picture: fencers who participated in the 1906, 1908 and 1912 Games pose together during the Stockholm Olympic Games. Montigny standing fourth from left in the straw hat.

Illustration: Collection Sportimonium





Fernand de Montigny (third from right) with the mixed field hockey team of Beerschot Athletic Club, which won the 1913–1914 Belgian championship.

Photo: JFdM Archive

Beerschot Athletic Club hockey teams won the Belgian championship of the 1912–1913 season against their rivals from Brussels.

But Fernand de Montigny still had another play ground in his home town: the famous Palais de Glace in the Gezondstraat (Rue de la Santé in French, nowadays Van Heurckstraat). A roller skating rink had been established there in 1910 and that year the Antwerp Skaters Club already numbered 250 members and the Federation of Belgian Societies of Roller Skating was founded (Den Hollander 2006: 178). The location was a meeting place for elegant young women and men of leisure. The weekly *La Semaine* (22.10.1912: 4) wrote: "... the Skating of the Cercle is a very restful institution where the families can send their young daughters without fear ..." Moreover, it was also the place where Fernand would meet his future wife (Montigny: *Le sportif* s.d.).

Montigny and his five team mates of the Beerschot Athletic Club won the 1910, 1911 and 1912 Belgian roller skating hockey championship. They also won the so-called Coupe Percy by 3–1 against the Centaur Roller Club de Paris in 1911.

In 1913, the large hall was changed into an ice skating rink with the prestigious name Palais de Glace and a new Cercle des Patineurs Anversoïis was founded (Den Hollander 2006: 178–180). The Belgian Ice Hockey League had been founded a year before in 1912 (Ligue Belge 1943: 1). Strangely, this exquisite location was not mentioned in the luxurious brochure *Aurons-nous la VII^e Olympiade à Anvers en 1920?* (Comité Provisoire 1914), which was edited in 1914 with the aim of bringing the 1920 Olympic Games to Antwerp. Although figure skating had been accepted as an Olympic discipline at the London Games of 1908, it had not appeared on the programme of the Stockholm Games in 1912 for lack of an indoor skating rink. However, both figure skating and ice hockey competitions would be staged for the first time in the Olympic history at the end of April 1920, four months before the official opening of the VII Olympiad (Renson 1996: 23–26).

The vocation of architecture – Architects are trained problem solvers

Sport and architecture are closely linked and have a long-standing and impressive history, ranging from the ancient Greek stadia to the modern soccer or Olympic stadia (Verspohl 1976). The British geographer John Bale (1985–1993) laid the basis for the geographical (spatial) dimension of sport and the German scholar Henning Eichberg, who moved to Denmark, held an 'alternative plea' for a new social ecology of sport (Eichberg 1988; 1993). Some of the recent sporting 'megalodromes' are indeed rightfully qualified as 'vandalist monumentalism' (Kirkegaard 1984) or as 'white elephants' because of their temporary character (Mangan 2008; Alm e.a. 2016). Nevertheless, Benjamin S. Flowers stated in his recent book *Sport and architecture* (2017: 3) that: "In spite of myriad examples of the rich and complex relationship between sport and architecture, there is relative paucity of scholarly work on the subject."

We hope therefore to shed some light on the difficulties faced by the young architect Fernand de Montigny, who, together with his companion Louis Somers, had accepted the challenge to transform the Beerschot Stadium into an Olympic Stadium.

Jean-François de Montigny, Fernand's son, wrote: "It is difficult to determine what was paramount in my father's life, as he has constantly mingled his talents of aesthetic, artist and architect with his sporting passion, especially for fencing, which he considered as an art in itself." (Montigny: *Mon père* 2012).

From an early age, Fernand de Montigny showed his talent for drawing, and before long also for water colours. A friend of the family, the well-known Brussels architect Paul Saintenoy (1862–1952) convinced him, however, to become not an artist but an architect because "... an artist has seldom the opportunity to see his creations again once these are sold, whereas an architect can endlessly revisit his most beautiful constructions ..." (Cit. in Montigny: *Mon père* 2012). After finishing his secondary education (Greek–Latin humanities) at the elite Antwerp Jesuit College, he entered the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts where he started his architecture courses in 1902. Already inspired by 'classicism' in architecture, his voyage to Greece to participate in the 1906 Games of Athens marked him profoundly (Montigny: *Mon père* 2012). He studied an extra year at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Antwerp and moved in 1908 to France, to perfect himself in the Atelier Pascal in Paris. On his return to Antwerp in 1909, he finished his internship with art nouveau architect Emile Thielens (1854–1911), where Louis Somers, his later associate, was his fellow trainee. The least one can say is that they were a 'complementary twosome': Fernand the creator and Louis the executor.

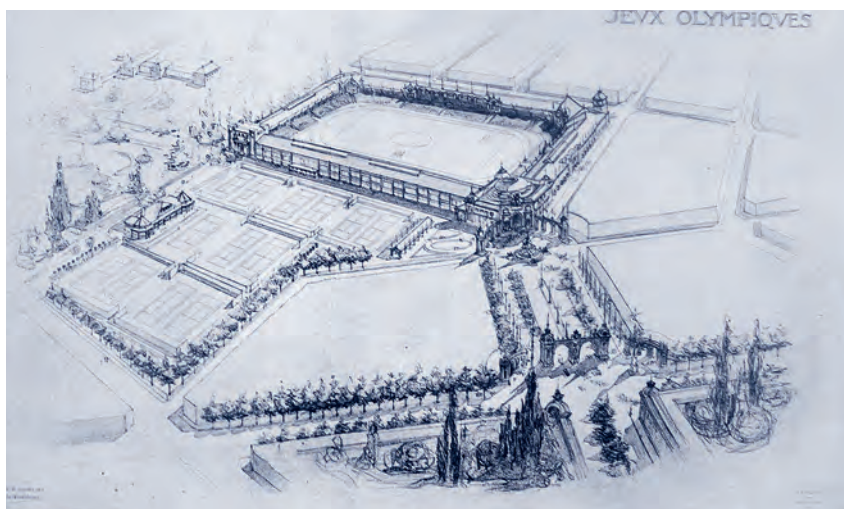
"Always on the lookout for new ideas, strongly engaged in his intensive practice of multiple sports and in his daily lifestyle, more attracted by the artistic component of the projects than by the supervision of the construction sites, and with high esteem for the deep professional knowledge of his fellow Louis Somers, an excellent practitioner who came from an entrepreneurial background, he was very happy to associate himself with him." (Montigny: Mon père 2012).

One of his first accomplishments was the Aquarium and the Reptiles Pavilion in the Antwerp Zoo, which were inaugurated in 1911 (Montigny: Mon père 2012), but his whole architectural oeuvre was impressive. Among the sports facilities he designed were the new facilities of the Beerschot Athletic Club in 1913, the transformation of these facilities into the 1920 Olympic Stadium, the adjacent tennis pavilion and tennis courts, the Olympic Aquatic Stadium, the club house of the Antwerp Polo Club and the race course in Hoogboom, and the club house of the Antwerp Golf Club in Kapellenbos (both near Antwerp City). Furthermore the Fencing and Gymnastics Hall of master Verbrugge and the Concorde Fencing Hall, both in Antwerp, a sports field and pavilion in Uccle (Brussels), two indoor tennis halls (one in the city of Verviers and one for the Beerschot Athletic Club) and finally an indoor swimming pool in the centre of Antwerp (Montigny: L'oeuvre 2011).

When consulting the Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Flanders (Inventaris 2018 a, b, c), Montigny is cited for having designed or restored one parish church and one residential palace, and Somers for one villa and one eclectic mansion, but together they are cited for three parish churches, one presbytery, twelve mansions in different styles ranging from neoclassic to art deco, five villas either in neo-rococo or cottage style, one castle, one municipal school, two rows of houses in residential streets, an apartment block and the original Seamen's Hotel of Antwerp. Strangely, none of the sport facilities he and his colleague Somers created are registered in the inventory. One reason might be that most of them have since vanished, another that some 'conservationists' still do not have the term 'sport' in their vocabulary ...

The 1920 Antwerp Olympic Stadium: building with the available bricks ... or plaster

On 9th August 1913, a Provisional Committee was founded in Antwerp and an official bid was made to host the 1920 Olympic Games. A magnificently-illustrated, 109-page promotional brochure was published in 1914 under the title *Aurons-nous la VII^e Olympiade à Anvers en 1920?* (Comité Provisoire 1914) to support the bid. The brochure already showed a ground plan and an aerial view of the planned facilities of the 1920 stadium designed by Montigny and Somers. However, World War I intervened



and it was only on 5th April 1919, barely sixteen months before the actual opening of the Games, that the city of Antwerp was officially selected (Renson 2006: 11-14).

The *Official Report* of the 1920 Games, edited by the Secretary-General of the Executive Committee, Alfred Verdyck, cites that Baron de Coubertin visited Antwerp on 13rd September 1913 (the report erroneously states 1915) in order to meet the Belgian Olympic Committee (BOC) and the members of the Provisory Committee of the VII Olympiad, and visited the stadium of Royal Beerschot Athletic Club, which was "... proposed as theatre of the Games." (Verdyck s.d.: 6)

Coubertin declared himself to be pleased with the plans of the installations and of the planned facility expansions. Montigny added in crayon "... proposed by the architects F. de Montigny and L. Somers on the instructions of Mr. Ch. Cnoops." (Verdyck s.d.: 6).

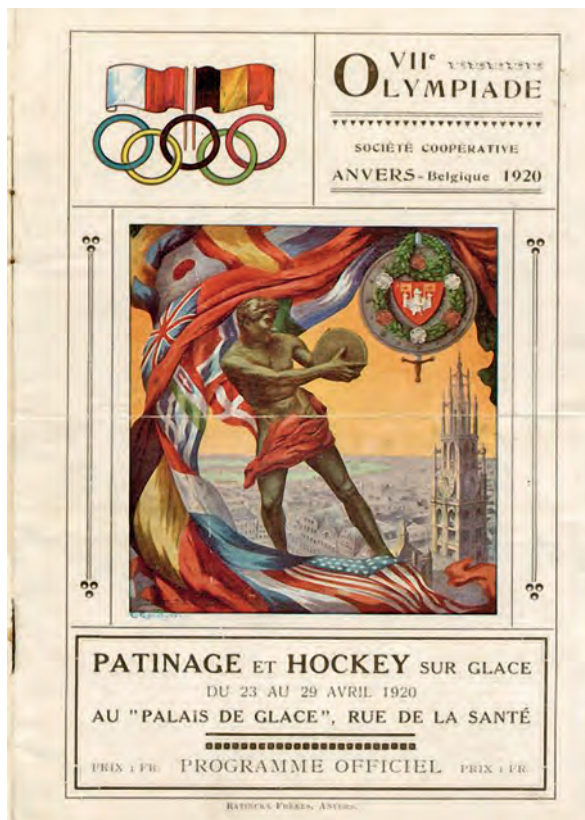
The report also reminds us that the day after the Armistice Coubertin had beseeched the Belgian Count Edouard d'Assche in Bern to inform the Belgian King and government of his wish to propose Antwerp as the venue of the VII or the VIII Olympiad. Verdyck commented: "This enterprise, which already looked hazardous in 1914 to those who were aware how youngish the Belgian sporting organisation still was, now almost became a folly in 1918." (Verdyck s.d.: 10).

The laying of the first stone of the new Olympic Stadium, actually the 'temporarily upgraded' Beerschot Stadium, took place on 4th July 1919 in the presence of Count Henry de Baillet-Latour, the Antwerp city mayor Jan De Vos, Charles Cnoops, many civil and military representatives and, of course, the architects Fernand de Montigny and Louis Somers.

Money was very short and the original 1914 plan had to be slimmed down, but architects are trained problem solvers! Instead of building the Entrance Gate and the so-called Marathon Gate in solid Belgian brick or decorative stones, much cheaper, temporary constructions in wood and plaster were opted for. This also held true for the

Bird's-eye view of what would become the Olympic Stadium of 1920 by Montigny and Somers in a promotional brochure *Aurons-nous les Jeux de la VII^e Olympiade à Anvers en 1920?*

Illustration: Comité Provisoire 1914: 69



majestic rows of classical Greek pillars, which surrounded the contours of the Stadium. The global construction looked very classic and prestigious although it was mostly a beautiful layer of make-up. This creative adaptability is expressed in sporting terms as “rowing with the oars you have got” and was dubbed by Coubertin himself as a “... record ... de la Débrouillardise” (a record of problem solving) in his opening speech in the Antwerp town hall on 17th August 1920 (Coubertin 1920).

Building under time pressure: a look at the original sources

In 2017, an inventory entitled *Pièces en instance* (Matters pending), which was meticulously kept by Verdyck and his assistants between 17th April 1919 and 22nd June 1921, was discovered in the archives of the Belgian Olympic and Interfederal Committee in 2017 and donated to the Sportimonium (Comité Exécutif 1919–1921). It contains a wide-ranging overview of meetings, correspondence, contracts, and so on. From it, I have distilled the notes related to the construction – or rather transformation – of the Beerschot Stadium into the Olympic Stadium by the architects de Montigny and Somers (M&S). These are the primary sources from which one can obtain an idea of the difficulties faced by the Executive Committee on the one hand, and the architects on the other hand. Well aware that these are only fragmental notes, I have tried to reproduce and translate these notes as literally as possible and to structure them under five headings.

• Honorarium architects:

24.04.1919 ‘Honorarium of the architects’ to be handled by Mr. Havenith and Mr. Cnoops; 27.06.1919 ‘Supplementary works’: authorisation to undertake supplementary works; 26.07.19 M&S: Proposal of 8 monthly payments of 3875 fr.; 23.07.19 M&S: Examination of the plans of the Stadium and request for supplementary works. [Such requests for supplementary works show up regularly]; 5.09.19 (pavement); 16.10.19 (gas and water); 8.11.19: The architects are warned that their requests will be no longer taken into consideration when not justified by a general plan (8.11.19); 13.01.20 M&S: Request of official documents concerning 5000 fr.; Request on 19.01.20 to acknowledge receipt of 306,566 francs H [?]; idem on 15.03.20 for cheque of 105,960.00; 6.04.20 ‘M & S’: Request to acknowledge receipt of 1500.00 (stands); 30.06.20 M&S: Request to provide some explanation concerning the 2184.65 fr. which they claim as supplementary honorariums; 7.07.20: Explanation concerning supplementary costs for stairs in granite 9.09.20: Examine Montigny’s demand to obtain the payment of 775 frs for ‘places plan’ and 3250 frs for plan of Telephone Pavilion (Letter 26.09.20).

The relationship between Verdyck and Montigny was always rather cool and businesslike, both belonged moreover to two different local sport ‘clans’: Antwerp FC and Beerschot AC.

• Contract with Humphreys company:

11.06.1919 ‘Entreprise Humphreys’: Seeldrayers will translate the file for the stadium in English for the Humphreys company; 27.06.1919 ... Meeting with the two architects, the lawyer and the delegate of Humphreys on 1.07.1919; 15.12.19 M&S: Request to acknowledge receipt of cheque of 200,000 fr. for Humphreys; 23.04.20 M&S: “... transmit him (sic) 105,265.00 f for Humphries”.

Humphreys Ltd was an international construction company with offices in London, Antwerp, Dublin and Buenos Aires, specialising in the building of large halls for exhibitions (e.g. Brussels 1910) and football stadiums (e.g. Manchester United). Apart from the Olympic Stadium, they also constructed the Aquatic Stadium and the tennis courts of Beerschot AC. (Written note by Montigny in Verdyck s. d.: 172)

The running track was built by Charles Perry of the London Athletic Club, who had already assisted the Greeks in 1896 preparing the track and its infield. He also laid the tracks at London in 1908 and Stockholm in 1912 (Polley 2011: 97). According to Verdyck’s official report, the Antwerp track stayed in excellent condition despite the heavy rainfall in August (Verdyck s. d.: 49). This statement was, however, contradicted by some of the pictures which show athletes (for instance Albert Hill, winner of the 800 m), running on a ‘plowed’ track!

- **Maquettes (models)**

17.06.1919 'Plaster maquette': the constructors are asked to make this model in two pieces for its transport; 13.08.19: M&S: Decision to buy a second model. Total prize may not exceed 1800 fr.

- **Various**

14.01.20 M&S: Request for providing information on the tug-of-war pitch; 3.02.20 M&S: Request to provide plans of athletic lockers, press room, chalets, streets around the Stadium; Request on 15.03.20 to know the number of flagpoles; Request on 3.04.20 to submit drawing and plan of Post Pavilion; Request on 3.04.20 to send Stadium plan and supplementary works; Request on 13.04.20 to send urgently the quote for the furniture; 2.06.20: Demand to explain the sum of 500 fr. paid to decoration firm; 8.06.20: Immediate request of duplicate of the estimates of the works undertaken by Mr. Holt in the Palais de Glace; 8.07.20 'Somers architect': Request to provide purchase price of the flagpoles and of the name boards of the nations during the parade; 12.07.20: Repair of zinc plates and maintenance of wooden laths ... make connection with the sewer of the new main road; 15.07.20: Start clearance of Stadium. Finish stair next to café terrace; 15.07.20: Contact the Administration of the Postal Services in order to install post boxes;

- **Clearance sale**

17.11.20: 'Enclosure of the Beerschot [Stadium]': It's important to fix as soon as possible the day of sale of the enclosure of the Beerschot [Stadium] and to inform Count de Baillet and his father (senator); 22.06.21: 'Drapeaux olympiques': France is prepared to take over the Olympic flags from us (Note from M. Count de Baillet).

When the Games were over, the Executive Committee was faced with enormous financial problems, which would lead to the failure of the Belgian Olympic Committee (Triaille 1988: 60–79; Renson 1996: 78–84; Mallon & Bijkerk 2003: 8–10). This explains why Verdyck and his collaborators tried to sell the impressive but temporary colonnade (enclosure). The last dated note in *Pièces en instance* (Comité Exécutif 1919–1921) expresses the same concern to recuperate some money from the Olympic event by trying to sell the Olympic flags, which were flown for the first time in Olympic history during the Antwerp Games.

The origins and socioeconomic factors of this Olympic bankruptcy have been analysed in the chapters 'Merchants and arrivistes' and 'The roots of the financial debacle' of *The Games reborn: The VIIth Olympiad Antwerp 1920* (Renson 1996: 78–84) and in a separate article (Renson & den Hollander 1997).

Let's therefore return to our central person: Olympic champion and Olympic architect Fernand de Montigny.

Versatile Olympic athlete and sportsman (1920–1952)

A Belgian team participated in the ice hockey competitions, which were staged for the first time in the Olympic history at the end of April 1920 in the Palais de Glace. Montigny did not play for the Belgian team but he was, with André Poplimont, official secretary of these 'Winter Games' (Montigny to Mollet 1965). Montigny was urged by Verdyck (Comité Exécutif 1919–1921) to transmit the results of the figure skating events by return mail (28.05.20) as well as the results of the ice hockey competitions (10.06.20). The Belgians were beaten 8–0 by the Swedish team, which would finish fourth (Renson 1996:26).

At the Antwerp Games, he competed again both in the foil and épée individual competitions and ended sixth in



The Palais de Glace with the signature of Fernand de Montigny. In addition to figure skating, an ice hockey tournament was also held for the first time. This was won by Canada.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

The Belgian field hockey team, which took the bronze Olympic medal at the 1920 Games. Montigny stands second from the left.

Photo: Charles François Du Houx (1885–1965), Collection Sportimonium



the foil ranking. The Italian épée team – with the famous Nedo and Aldo Nadi – won gold, but the Belgian épéeists captured the silver medal. Fernand de Montigny's successful team mates were Paul Anspach, Victor Boin (who had taken the Olympic Oath), Joseph De Craecker, Maurice De Wee, Ernest Gevers, Felix Goblet d'Alviella, Philippe le Hardy de Beaulieu and Léon Tom.

Montigny's Olympic fencing feats have already been highlighted, but during the same VIIth Olympiad, he also won a bronze Olympic medal as a member of the Belgian field hockey team. This is quite remarkable because fencing and field hockey require quite different sporting skills! Gold went to the British team and silver to the Danish. The Belgians lost 12–1 to the British team and 5–2 to the Danish, but managed to win 3–2 over the French team, which lost all its matches. According to a written note in Montigny's archives, there were also so-called European Field Hockey Championships "... at the occasion of the Olympic Games", but, understandably, the results were the same as above as no teams from outside Europe participated (Montigny: handwritten annotation in his copy of Verdyck's *Rapport officiel* s.d.: 78 addendum).

In February 1924, Montigny travelled with ice hockey team captain André Poplimont and his men to Chamonix to the 'Winter Sports Week', which was later officially recognized as the First Winter Olympic Games. Montigny, however, was not in the hockey team, but acted as judge for figure skating (Renson 2006: 59–60).

Montigny was again present at the 1924 Paris Games, where he competed both in the Belgian foil and épée teams. Both teams won silver: Montigny's fifth and sixth 'official' Olympic medal! His fellow foil fencers were Désiré Beaurain, Marcel Berré, Charles Crahay, Albert De Roocker and Maurice Van Damme (Bronze foil individual). His épée team mates were Paul Anspach,

Joseph De Craecker, Charles Delporte (Gold épée individual), Ernest Gevers and Léon Tom.

He took second place in the individual épée at the European Championships in Ostend in 1926 and continued his fencing practice, gradually shifting more to foil than to épée, until 1952 when he had already passed his 65th birthday.

Conclusion: the waning of the sporting class

Fernand de Montigny's biography is a perfect illustration of the lifestyle of a social and cultural elite, which has been labelled 'the leisure class' by Thorstein Veblen (1899). These fortunate sportsmen had enough time, money and physical energy to indulge in elegant sporting pastimes. All this is well documented and illustrated in *Vingt-cinq années de vie anversoise 1903–1928* (1928). Fencing had a long-standing chivalric tradition and was therefore considered a perfect preparation for young gentlemen like Montigny. Fair play was the watchword of the gentleman amateur – a notion which came under pressure when team sports like football and rugby were taken up by the working classes. Professional players were considered by the defenders of amateurism as spoilsports, who no longer played the game for the game's sake (Renson 2009).

However, this "Belle Epoque for the happy sporting few" was abruptly brought to an end by the First World War. The Antwerp 1920 Olympics, which had been conceived by the Antwerp pre-war sporting elite, brought this class distinction clearly to light. Fernand de Montigny can therefore be seen as a true representative of the 'old school' of this sporting ethic.

Montigny married Germaine Vrancken in 1921, whom he had met ... at the Palais de Glace! They were both excellent waltzers both on ice- and roller-skates.

Mrs. Montigny was, moreover, a skilful tennis player. Their son Jean-François, born in 1925, commented: "Despite all his talents, he never aspired higher public functions or leadership. An explanation could be that he was not gifted with eloquence, at least not in public." (Montigny: Mon père 1912).

But in the world of sport there were two notable exceptions: in 1934 he received a gold 'Sport Merit' medal from the Minister of Sport at the town hall of Antwerp and he also received the Golden Palms of the Crown Order "... for services rendered to physical education in the performance of his functions" (Montigny: Mon père 2012). Moreover, he founded and presided the Belgian Association of Olympic Medallists (ABMO) after the Second World War (founded 1st January 1951).

Let us conclude this biographical contribution to this exceptional Olympian with the respectful words of his own son: "My father liked to say that he had been an architect in the service of sport and a sportsman in the service of architecture." (Montigny: Palmarès sportif 2012). "He was the antithesis of an ambitious person and even more the antithesis of an opportunist." (Montigny: Mon père 2012). ■

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Membership card for Belgian Association of Olympic Medallists. This was founded in 1951 by Fernand de Montigny who became its president.

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