

THE SUPERB AND PERFECT: ALBERTO BRAGLIA

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In an article published in April 1908, the piedmontese doctor Angelo MOSSO wondered whether ROME could stage the Olympic Games. His opinion was negative: “The Italian people cannot compete in a gymnastics world competition yet”.

The chance for Italy of being chosen to organize the Olympics - as De Coubertin had proposed - gave him the opportunity to accuse public authorities, school and cultural conditions in general. The 1908 Olympic Games did not take place in the Roman capital, although King Vittorio Emanuele, the mayor of Rome and even Pope Pio X had warranted for them.

But the quarrels with the other cities (i.e.: Milan, which wanted to be the “moral capital” of Italy, or Turin, at it was the cradle of the Italian sports movement) had totally compromised this possibility. So the eternal city’s bid was abandoned and London was chosen. This one managed to organize the Games rapidly and well. There was also Italy among the twenty-two nations, which took part in the Olympics (gathering 1999 sportsmen and 36 sports-women). Finally, sixty athletes left our country, even if it was very hard work putting together an official representative team.

The Italian Olympic Committee was founded in 1906, but their demand to the government (run by Giovanni Giolitti) for economic support was simply ignored. The Navy offered a few coal ships to carry the equipment; a 20.000 lira grant was given by the Ministry of War to take part in the horse races, which were not held; finally, just before leaving, the government gave notice of a twenty-thousand lira grant.

Two gold medals were won by Italian athletes: one, at the wrestling lightweight event, on 25th April by Enrico Porro, and the other one by the gymnast Alberto Braglia.

And that is the one whom we want to concentrate our attention on.

Braglia was born on 23rd April 1883 in Modena, and he was already well-known when he reached London: first he was proclaimed a living phenomenon at a competition held in Florence, then he beat all his opponents and surprised both the audience and the judges at the events of Mons, Brescia and Vercelli. Later, in 1906, he was second both at the gymnastics pentathlon and hexathlon at the Panhellenic (Intercalary) Games in Athens. Being far from rhetoric in a time when rhetoric was spread everywhere, he threw the laurel crown received from the King and Queen of Greece out of the train window coming back from Athens.

He needed a job, and he never stopped thanking King Vittorio Emanuele, who expressed the desire of knowing him personally, and let him get a job as a porter at the tobacco factory in Modena. At that time even the greatest sports champions were neither stars, nor rewarded at home as such. Still, he astonished the judges in London having a natural artistic talent; he did his exercises not only perfectly, but he invented other ones.

He had gymnastics in his blood. He had begun training in a barn when he was only 12 years old, without anyone who taught him. Still a kid, hardly able to read and write, he passed to the Panaro Gymnasium, and there he had Carlo Frascaroli as his coach. He overcame a lot of difficulties, such as impossible training hours, struggling to maintain his job; but thanks to his firmness, he kept on repeating his incomparable exercises. The success gained in London 1908 gave him the title of best gymnast in the world:

COMBINED EXERCISES, INDIVIDUAL (Heptathlon):

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| 1. Alberto BRAGLIA, ITA | 317,0 pts. |
| 2. S. Walter TYSAL, GBR | 312,0 pts. |
| 3. Louis SÉGURA, FRA | 297,0 pts. |
| 4. A. Curt STEUERNAGEL, GER | 273,5 pts. |
| 5. Friedrich WOLF, GER | 267,0 pts. |
| 6. Samuel HODGETIS, GBR | 266,0 pts. |

During the following years, because of his economic difficulties, he accepted even to perform on the stage as “The Bullet Man”, or as the contemporary posters called him: “The Human Torpedo”. As a consequence of these performances (he even risked his life in an accident, where he broke a shoulder and some ribs), he was disqualified by the Gymnastics Federation for professionalism.

Before the 1912 Olympic Games, however, he was qualified again as an amateur, and he gained his second success, although he suffered from a nervous breakdown caused by the death of his four year old child, who already practised gymnastics.

Braglia was the first in the individual competition, exciting so much admiration, that the judges found it inadequate to give him even the maximum score given to him at each event, and so they added the adjectives: “Optimum, Superb, Perfect”. (In the official report of the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, it is shown that only at the horizontal bar, Braglia surpassed all his opponents, at the parallel bars, at the rings and at the pommel horse his scores were among the best, but were equalled or even bettered by some of his opponents. Tony B.)

Anyway, Braglia’s performances led the Italian team to victory in the team competition.

During the following years, he exhibited also in many circuses. He appeared dressed as Fortunello, carrying a suitcase, which contained a dwarf who had been taught several exercises. He had a lot of success (he even played in front of the Royal Family at Buckingham Palace). He became very rich, he came back home and was nominated federal coach. In 1932 he guided the Italian team to the sensational victory of Los Angeles and, as a reward, he was appointed “Cavaliere Ufficiale”.

It was his last success: his training methods were considered responsible for the Italian defeat at the 1934 World Championships in Budapest. Meanwhile his savings had greatly diminished. His attempt to come back to the stage was a failure; so he tried to become a vintner, but his business went badly and even worse after the war. The town of Modena gave him monthly a small sum of money, which was later denied. In the end he asked to live in the old people’s home. Finally he received a pension fee from the Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano (CONI) and was given back that small sum by the town council. Now, he was old and shortly on the 5th of April 1954, at 3 p.m. he died of brain thrombosis. He was 72 years old. The newspapers published his pictures and for a time the world admired again Braglia’s performances. Young people wondered who this gymnast was and why he was given such importance. Italy had to wait a lot of years before having other champions as he had been (i.e.: Franco Menichelli at the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo, Juri Chechi at the Centennial Games in 1996 in Atlanta), but his name remains for ever imprinted in the history of sports.

Bibliography:

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