

# Willy Seewald and the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris\*

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The Brazilian Track and Field team which attended the 1924 Olympic Games, in Paris. From left: Alfredo Gomes, Narciso Valadares, Hogarty (US coach under contract), Willy Seewald, Álvaro de Oliveira Ribeiro, Alberto Jackson Byington Jr., Eurico Teixeira de Freitas, Octávio Zani and José Galimbert.

Photo: CEME collection.



Willy Richard Franz Seewald could be described as a typical example of a Brazilian Olympic athlete. He improvised and innovated to improve his performance even though resources were scarce. Willy was descended from German immigrants, who occupied land and created small industries in the State of Rio Grande do Sul. His father Karl Robert Seewald<sup>1</sup> had arrived in Brazil in June 1896 and settled near the city of São Leopoldo with his wife Augusta Feistauer Seewald<sup>2</sup> (Müller, 1986). Willy was born in 1900, in Taquara, in the south of Brazil and had a sister and four brothers. Since childhood Willy and his brothers had taken part in sport. The Seewald family's property in São Leopoldo was close to the Sinos River, which made it easy for them to swim and row.

Willy did well in regional and state track and field competitions especially in the javelin. His performances brought him to the notice of national selectors and he was selected for the Brazilian team at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. It should be noted that he was the only athlete from Rio Grande do Sul to take part in the Games, the others came from the states of São Paulo or Rio de

Janeiro. Willy stood out by reflecting in his athletic career, the values inherent in his socio-cultural group trying to survive an adopted country.

Surviving family members have offered a valuable insight into his Olympic career and this has been supplemented by documentary sources. We therefore interviewed brother Erich Seewald and his daughter Simone Seewald Albrecht, Willy's niece, who remembered her uncle's memories her mother and father passed on about the "Olympic Hero"<sup>3</sup>.

A Brazilian team first took part in the 1920 Olympic Games, in Antwerp, Belgium. This should not be



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forgotten because for the team. They got there by individual efforts and family support. In the case of pioneering athletes such as Willy Seewald, the obstacles they faced were very difficult to overcome, for in the early decades of the twentieth century, sport did not have the necessary financial support and management assistance from local or national governments in Brazil. Those who took part were symbolically important. Willy Seewald did not win but he did receive a participation medal in the 1924 Olympic Games and this was accepted by the family as reward for his dedication and persistence.

### Willy Seewald's initiation in sport

Willy Seewald, followed in the footsteps of his brother Erich. At the age of eight, he began to attend the Clube Esportivo Nacional de São Leopoldo<sup>4</sup> (National Sports Club of São Leopoldo) and, later, to attend nightly sessions at the Leopoldenser Turnverein (Leopoldenser Gymnastic Society). From the age of 16, Erich used to play football at the same club and practice German gymnastics, referred by him in an interview as "gymnastics apparatus" (rings, bar, pommel horse, parallel and soil).

The physical training and sports activities at Leopoldenser Turnverein were provided by the German-Brazilian instructors. Nestor Bir, Ervino Felipe Mohr and Raul Scherer all did their coaching in Germany said Erich Seewald (Seewald, 2001, p. 2).

It was at the São Leopoldo Gymnastics Society<sup>5</sup> that Willy got to know about track-and-field events. As an 18 year old in 1918 he took up pole vault, high jump, shot put, discus and javelin. However, he continued to play football. This lasted four years when he eventually gave up playing and devoted himself to athletics. This contributed to his results in local and regional competitions.

The Leopoldenser Turnverein was one of the key centres of athletics in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, however the pioneers clubs were Turnerbund<sup>6</sup> (Gymnastic Society), the YMCA (ACM)<sup>7</sup> and Grêmio Football Porto Alegrense club (GFPA); which were all in Porto Alegre<sup>8</sup>. According to the journalist Tulio De Rose (Amaro Junior, 1949, p. 137), athletics "was born in our state in the years 1912 or 1913". Some three years later, on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1916, the first official athletics competition took place in Porto Alegre. Competitors included those from Uruguay. At that time, athletics was barely recognizable as the sport today and many people associated it with German gymnastics, and, for this reason. As a result the competition was described as a "Gymnastics Festival". Apart from athletics, football, tennis and volleyball was also included on the programme.

Athletics clubs were on the increase in February 1919, it was possible to hold an inter club athletics

championship for the first time. This took place on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1919 (Silva, 1997) was held at the Turnerbund. Later that year, teachers Georg Black<sup>9</sup> and Ernest Graeff organised the Turnerbund Athletics Department of and started to provide training sessions for athletes. During the following year, in 1920, an athletic track was built there. This really helped the growth of the sport. Known today as the Estádio José Carlos Daudt, it has one of the four athletic tracks approved by the International Athletics Federation in Brazil (CBAT, 2009).



The Brazilian team marched into the 1924 Olympic Stadium in Colombes.

Photo: Official Report of 1924

Willy's first experiences with the javelin of sorts had been in his childhood, when he improvised with bamboo sticks in the vast lands surrounding his family residence. It is worth noting that, at that time, there was a shortage of sports equipment and the facilities of Leopoldenser Turnverein were also limited.

The wooden javelins were made in the family's furniture factory. Willy learned the trade of carpentry from his father and worked with him and his brothers in the production of wooden sculptures for churches, homes and other buildings. Some of these sculptures can still be seen in the Visconde de São Leopoldo Museum.

When he tried the wooden javelin he realized it performed better than the bamboo staff, which vibrated during its flight through the air. From then on, he started producing javelins by glueing two pieces of wood together to make a perfect unit. His brother Erich recalled that Willy had chosen wood found in the region where he lived. This he cut into three parts glued together in order to reduce vibration. Apart from this "other secrets to the javelin that he did not tell" (Seewald, 2001, p. 7).

Willy Seewald practising javelin throwing at the National Sports Club field in São Leopoldo 1921.

Photo: Collection Simone Seewald Albrecht.



Willy's handmade javelins were tested on the football field of the National Sports Club in São Leopoldo. Over time, he improved the equipment, "making javelins with three laths with perfect finishing" (Seewald, 2001, p. 7). The manufactured javelins were tested by him in competitions. In time, he started accepting orders to produce the equipment for sports associations and even military units.

### The reinvention of the javelin throw

The local newspapers described Willy Seewald as the "remarkable thrower" (Iuguenfritz, 1929, p. 1). This was because his technical performance and the distances he achieved in competitions in the early twenties. At the 1921 Brazilian Track and Field Championship, Willy "shattered the national record by more than three metres with a throw of 44.5 m" (*Contra Relógio*, 1997, p. 27).

In September the following year, Willy Seewald was selected for an eight-man state team which took part in the sports event staged to help commemorate the Centenary of Brazilian Independence. This took place in Rio de Janeiro, which was then capital city of Brazil. In addition to sporting and cultural activities in the federal capital, there were sporting events in other Brazilian cities, as in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre (Vicari; Mazo, 2011; Vicari; Silva, 2014).

At the so-called Latin American Olympics (Jogos Sudamericanos) in Rio 1922, Willy Seewald threw 54.515 metres, surpassing the Chilean Arturo Medina, who until then had held the South American record with 50.3 m (*O Imparcial supplement sports*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1922; *Contra Relógio*, 1997, p. 27).

To get to this point, Willy Seewald had travelled through a difficult path in overcoming financial difficulties. When traveling to competitions he used to stay in family homes, because "accommodation didn't exist, that sort of thing; sometimes we camped in a lounge of the club and we all slept on the floor" (Seewald, 2000, p. 3). His brother insisted that athletes never received any financial allowances when competing. "No, no money, money was never involved, in any way." (Seewald, 2000, p. 5)

At the time Brazilian sport was strictly amateur, so athletes had never entertained the possibility of getting money, especially those from the gymnastic societies, which strongly defended the concept of amateurism. A newspaper in his home town described Willy Seewald as a sportsman, i.e. a "physical giant, by his steel muscles, a moral giant, by his education as a correct and loyal opponent" (Iuguenfritz, 1929, p. 1). This tribute refers not only to his sporting performance, but because he had the attitudes expected from an Olympic athlete. It suggests the local newspaper had a notion of sporting behaviour and the moral code which went with it.

In these circumstances it should be noted that Willy Seewald had surpassed the symbolic boundaries that separated the "simple man" from the gentleman. To be recognised as a sportsman in his times, he had to follow a certain ethos, that of sportsmanship.

Willy Seewald also faced other problems because of his ethnic identity. As a result of the First World War, German-Brazilians were harassed in several cities of Rio Grande do Sul (Gertz, 2005). Many had encountered hostility in schools, churches, gymnastic societies, sports clubs, among other places. During this period, many gymnastic societies and clubs gave way to the pressure of the Brazilian government and unleashed a

Willy Richard Seewald, the "remarkable thrower" and "Olympic Hero" according to his home town's newspapers.

Photo: Collection Simone Seewald Albrecht.



nationalisation process, also called “Brazilianization” of sports. This involved changing the original name and adopting Portuguese as the official language used in club regulations and administration (Mazo, 2003; 2007; Kilpp, Assmann, Mazo, 2012).

In addition to the conflicts of identity, it is surprising how the athlete in question was able to get that far considering the financial difficulties, training conditions and the incipient organisation of athletic competitions in the 1920s in Brazil. With his javelins, Willy began to break regional, national and South Americans records, but the greatest surprise was the call for the Brazilian team at the 1924. Only eleven men travelled to Paris and he was among athletes from the major Brazilian cities, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

The cabinetmaker the wood artisan, who lived in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, was therefore the only athlete from the South of Brazil to win a seat to participate at Games which had then been dominated by Europeans. They too regarded themselves as reinforcing their social position through pure sport with a strong amateur ethic.

### Willy Seewald at the 1924 Olympics

Seewald was invited by the Athletics Federation of São Paulo, to participate in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. His brother Erich, believes the influence of São Paulo businessman and sportsman Alberto Jackson Byngton also played an important role. A friend of the Seewald family, Byngton was also of immigrant stock (Nicolini, 2016, Seewald, 2001, p. 12). Erich even confirmed that his brother’s participation was only achieved due to the financial help of the Byngton family as his father did not have enough funds to pay for the trip (Seewald, 2001, p. 12.). Nicolini (2016) has uncovered evidence of a public fund-raising campaign to supplement the contribution by Byngton.

At first the Brazilian government had planned to make 350 million Reis available for preparation and travel (Rubio, 2006, p. 105). However, the funds were withdrawn and the registration of the Brazilian delegation was official removed as a result of problems at the Brazilian Sports Confederation (CBD). The directors of the CBD, based in Rio de Janeiro, had no interest in taking part in the Games (Nicolini, 2016). It should be noted that, at that time, athletes were already facing problems as a result of internal conflicts among the Brazilian sports governing bodies.

With the situation as it was, the “Athletics Federation of São Paulo conducted a campaign to raise money (sponsored by the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*) to cover expenses of travel and accommodation” (Rubio, 2006, p. 105). The Brazilian Olympic team was made up of Willy Seewald from the south, two rowers from Rio

de Janeiro<sup>10</sup> and athletes from São Paulo. The team numbered eleven, headed by the journalist Americo Neto, who had coordinated the financial fundraising campaign. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 1924, Willy Seewald joined his team mates on the Dutch steamship “Orania” to travel to participate in the Olympic Games. Expectations were high.

After all at the previous Games in 1920 Brazil’s shooters had enjoyed unexpected success. Guilherme Paraense won the first gold 30 metres pistol. Afrânio Costa from Rio Grande de Sul took silver in 50 metres pistol and there was also a team bronze.

The success of 1920 was not repeated at the 1924 Games, in which Brazil did not win any medals. Willy finished 18<sup>th</sup> place with a throw of 49.39 metres. The winner Jonni Myyrä (FIN) recorded a distance of 62.96 m. Silver went to Gunnar Lindström (SWE) 60.92 m and Eugene Oberst (USA) made sure of bronze with 58.35 m.

After the 1924 Games, Willy Seewald traveled to the city of Cologne, Germany in order to visit relatives. During his stay in the city he was invited to take part in an athletics meeting at what he called “the most Modern European Stadium for sports practices, with the possibility to host many different modalities, and a capacity for 80,000 people”. He threw over 56 metres.

The report also reveals that Willy was the Brazilian and South American javelin champion. This information appeared in a newspaper clipping of the city of Cologne, which was translated from German to Portuguese by Erich Seewald. The newspaper belonged to Willy’s cousin, resident in Germany, according to testimony

Training during the crossing to France on the “Orania” in the “three-legged race” – a non-Olympic athletics discipline of the early years. Brazil’s team of 1924 consisted of only eleven participants: eight athletes, two oarsmen and one marksman. The oarsmen, the brothers Edmundo and Carlos Castello Branco, travelled alone. Their fourth place in the double sculls was the best Brazilian result.

Photo: 100 Years Brazil Olympic Committee 1914–2014



The Brazilian team took part in the Olympics for the first time at Antwerp in 1920. The crossing was made on a coffee freighter. It was a mode of transport which also had resonance in 1932. To finance the journey to Los Angeles, the "Itaquicê" had to berth in Trinidad and Panama and sell coffee. When the Brazilians arrived at San Pedro's Port in California, they were unable to pay one dollar per head tax. Only Maria Lenk was allowed to disembark. The men were forced to go on to San Francisco and sell more coffee.

Photo: 100 Years Brazil Olympic Committee 1914-2014

of Erich Seewald (Seewald, 2001, p. 15). In fact, some German-Brazilians kept in touch with relatives in Germany through letters, as was the case of the Seewald family. When he returned to Brazil, after the short period in Germany, Willy was welcomed in São Leopoldo as an "Olympic Hero". According to his aunt Martha, he caught the eye of the city girls, trying to imitate his style for throwing the javelin. But others also wanted to get to know the athlete, who became famous for participating in the Olympics.

Willy continued his training and in the following year he won the javelin in the 'First Brazilian Track and Field Championship' in São Paulo, with a throw of 54.11 m. It should be observed, that it was a better distance he achieved at the Olympics, but still not far enough to have earned him a medal. Even so it was the first ratified Brazilian mark for the javelin (CBAT, 2010). In the two years that followed he was consecrated champion, always "maintaining the same technical level" (De Rose, 1949, p. 138). In 1926 he won the Brazilian championship again improving to 56.17 m. In 1927, he won a third national title in the III<sup>rd</sup> Brazilian Athletics Championships, with the mark of 54.90 m (*Contra Relógio*, 1997, p. 27).

With that distance, he would not have been far short of the 1924 bronze medallist. His performance in the national and South American competitions would probably have earned him selection for the 1928 Olympic Games. In fact an economic crisis made it impossible for a Brazilian team to send a team to Amsterdam for the Games.

In 1928, the IV<sup>th</sup> Brazilian Athletics Championships took place in Rio de Janeiro but Willy did not take part. It is possible that he was suffering from illness but he was unaware of this. By February 1929, he was dead at the age of only 28 (Brendemeir, 2009; CECL, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2009).

His passing was marked at sporting events held in 1929. There were tributes at the opening ceremony of the VII<sup>th</sup> Athletics Tournament, promoted by the Liga das Sociedades de Ginástica do Rio Grande do Sul (League of Gymnastic Societies of Rio Grande do Sul), at the stadium of Turnerbund, and also during the opening ceremony of the 5<sup>th</sup> State Athletics Championship, promoted by the Liga Atlético Rio-Grandense (LARG) (Athletic League Rio-Grandense).

The late athlete was also honored at the 5<sup>th</sup> Brazilian Athletics Championship, held between late August and early September 1929 in Rio de Janeiro. At the event's opening ceremony at the stadium of the Vasco da Gama Regattas Club, those present were to be asked to observe "a moment of remembrance for Willy Seewald" (newspaper clipping of Rio de Janeiro not identified, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1929). In the same vein, the sports pages of *O Imparcial* newspaper, reproduced in São Leopoldo, Seewald's hometown: "Today, where the eyes of all sporting Brazil are turned to our city because it will be the theater of the greatest event of the year, which is the Track and Field Championships of Brazil, we cannot forget the name of Willy Seewald, the great athlete that on 2<sup>nd</sup> February this year was snatched by death" (Iuguenfritz, 1929, p. 1). It was to be another 20 years before Willy's record was finally surpassed. It was beaten by Nicanor Missaglia, from the Grêmio Foot Ball Club Porto Alegrense, who recorded a distance of 58.02 m in 1949.

Seewald was an Olympic athlete from the provinces at a time when most top sportsmen came either from Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo. His struggles are indicative of the many obstacles faced by the first Brazilian amateur sportsmen. His path from São Leopoldo to Paris is significant in the historical-cultural context of the 1920s. He was an athlete who represented Brazil at the Olympic Games at a time when there was a lack of Brazilian sports policies. He ascended quickly in athletics, and in less than 10 years he held regional, national and South American records, demonstrating a significant sporting performance.

Willy Seewald did not win a medal in Paris but he did become an Olympian. In his home region he came to symbolize the values of dedication and excellence embodied by Olympic athletes. In addition, Willy contributed to the spreading of athletics in Rio Grande do Sul, his home state. The story of his exploits appeared in the local press, arousing the admiration of his compatriots. At the same time, it contributed to the recognition of the state as a pillar of national athletics. The initiative of private clubs, as well as the actions of some lovers of the sport, enabled those who took part in athletics to progress from the grass roots to international competition.

Seewald's journey also reflected prominence of the German immigrants and their descendants in state





Brazil's first Olympic champion was the pistol marksman Guilherme Paraense (second from left). In the free pistol the team, which included Sebastião (Sebastian) Wolf, a German immigrant, won bronze.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

and national sport. In particular, sources showed the gymnastics societies acting decisively in the introduction and spread of various sports across Rio Grande do Sul and Brazil. Not only the training of athletes, but also promoting sports as one of the pillars for physical and moral education of citizens. Moreover, the case of Willy Seewald reveals that being a sportsman was part of the identity of Germans making their way in Brazil. ■

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1 Karl Robert Seewald was born on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1874 in Sprottau, Germany. He died in São Leopoldo, Brazil on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1948.



*Willy Seewald m. 42 m 50. 25.9.21.*

**Communal training at the Leopoldenser Turnverein in 1921 organised by German-Brazilian instructors with the participation of Willy Seewald.**

Photo: Collection Simone Seewald Albrecht

- 2 Augusta Feistauer Seewald, born on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1876 in Montenegro/RS and died on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1931 in São Leopoldo. Her parents migrated from Bohemia to Brazil in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- 3 The participants signed a written informed consent form authorizing the publication of their names and declarations.
- 4 The football club was founded in 1915 by a group of members of the Orpheus Society (Sociedade de Canto São Leopoldo). When they were not playing football, club members took part in athletics. This continued until the end of the 1920s. Then the club came to an end and the football field was replaced by a residential area of the Independência Street in São Leopoldo.

- 5 São Leopoldo is considered the cradle of German settlement in the state. The first German arrived in Rio Grande do Sul were sent to the region in 1824 (Seyferth, 1994). In this locality the second gymnastic association was created in the state: the Leopoldenser Turnverein (São Leopoldo Gymnastic Society), founded by immigrants and descendants of Germans on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1885, after an unsuccessful attempt in 1880 (Ramos, 2002). This association aimed not only to offer sports practice but to bring together the local community.
- 6 The Turnerbund, current "Sociedade de Ginástica Porto Alegre 1867," known as SOGIPA, was founded in 1867 by an initiative of German immigrants in Porto Alegre. This society was the first in Brazil and the second in Latin America, followed by the Society of Joinville. After the founding of the Turnerbund other gymnastic societies were set up in the state of Rio Grande do Sul in cities where there was a sizeable German immigrant community (Mazo, 2003, Silva, 1997; Tesche, 1996).
- 7 YMCA Porto Alegre was founded in 1901. The club encouraged the development of athletics in the city of Porto Alegre (Buono, 2001).
- 8 At the turn of the century, running, jumping and throwing events were considered part of the gymnastic family and were reported as such by newspapers. All these events are now described under the umbrella of athletics or track and field (Mazo; Maduro; Pereira, 2010).
- 9 Georg Black, a German immigrant and instructor of German gymnastics, practiced, taught and propagated the ideals of the Turnen (gymnastic) movement in clubs of Porto Alegre and Rio Grande do Sul. He was also an important figure in the spreading of new sports such as the football and cycling. Black helped to spread gymnastics and other sports in schools, public squares and parks (Lyra; Mazo, 2010).
- 10 Brothers Edmund and Carlos Castello Branco, finished fourth in double sculls in a time of 6 minutes 38 seconds. They paid their own way to the Games.