

The Rumoured Football Matches at the 1896 Olympics

By Bill Mallon and Volker Kluge



Olympic football 1906: Smyrna versus Saloniki. The games took place in the interior of the velodrome in Neo Phaleron. The pitch was 15 metres narrower than usual. The team from Smyrna (dark clothing), which was formed from British and French players, came second.

Photo: Sveriges Deltagande i Olympiska Spelen i Athen 1906

The first modern Olympics were held in Athens in 1896, and there were nine sports on the programme – athletics, cycling, fencing, gymnastics, shooting, swimming, tennis, weightlifting, and wrestling.¹ In addition, there were a number of other sports that were considered. These included cricket, equestrian, ice skating, mountaineering, paume, pentathlon, polo, rowing, water polo, and sailing.²

The other sports are mentioned by Mallon and Widlund³, with descriptions of the purported plans for those sports, and why they were not held, if that was known. The rationale for including those sports was that they were usually included in early programme lists and publications such as *Bulletin du CIO*.⁴

Notifications from the 1894 Congress were published and included mention of some of these sports, including football in the first release in 1894. In the releases of the *CIO Bulletin* in November 1894, both rugby football and association football (soccer/football) are included on the potential 1896 programme. When a later programme was published in the *CIO Bulletin* of January 1895, football was not mentioned, and football is also excluded from the programme of 1st April 1896, only a few days before the start of the Olympics.

Note that football is not included in our list above, but actually Mallon and Widlund did discuss the possibility of football. They wrote as follows:

*Football is sometimes listed as having been contested in 1896 as an exhibition sport or demonstration sport at the Olympic Games, although no such designation existed at the time of the 1896 Olympics. Supposedly, a match between a Greek club and a Danish club was conducted. No 1896 source supports this and we think this is most likely an error which has been perpetrated in multiple texts. No such match occurred.*⁵

That is quite dogmatic and makes it seem certain that no matches took place as part of the 1896 Olympic Games. Since that book was written (1998), the rumour or possibility that football matches were contested at the 1896 Olympics has not died. In fact, over the last few months, both Mallon and Kluge have been contacted by sports historians who have been quite firm in their insistence that such matches did take place. Further, they gave the results of two of the matches.

When we look at the sources for the Mallon/Widlund book, all of the pertinent sources from 1896 were used, including the *Official Report*⁶. Further, Widlund had access to, and photocopies of, all the main Athenian newspapers from 1896 and used those to review all the results of the 1896 Olympics.⁷ Widlund found no mention that any such football matches took place in any of those newspapers. There is also no discussion of such matches in the *Official Report* which, even if they were only demonstrations or exhibitions, would likely have been included. Finally, the daily programmes from the 1896 Olympics are available and have nothing about football matches being played.⁸

The International Federation of Football History & Statistics (IFFHS) put out a 2-volume book on the early Olympic tournaments:

*Already in 1894, it was discussed in Paris which sports should become Olympic disciplines two years later. Originally, football had also been one of those. Some countries had made efforts to field an Olympic football team, but in the end failed due to lacking funds and enthusiasm, or else poor national organization.*⁹

Other football historians have studied the Olympic tournaments, and there is a book in English by Canadian football historian Colin José.¹⁰ He does not even have a sentence related to an 1896 tournament or match.

There are many websites devoted to the history of football. One such site is www.rsssf.com. On their page on the Olympics no mention is made of any match.¹¹

Former ISOH President Karl Lennartz and the German sports historian Jürgen Buschmann wrote a series of books on the Olympic tournaments from 1900–1936. In the first volume¹² they say nothing about an 1896 matches, only noting that Germany considered sending a football team but never did so.¹³ This is likely based on the

report of the Imperial Embassy in Athens to the German Reich government of 15th April 1896¹⁴, and the detailed report by Professor Hueppe, which was published in *Allgemeine Sport-Zeitung*.¹⁵ In both reports, a football tournament is not mentioned.

More recent interest in the possibility of an 1896 Olympic football tournament may have come about from the publication of the book by David Goldblatt, *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Football*,¹⁶ in which he states that "... teams from Izmir, Athens and Denmark competed in an unofficial tournament at the time the games were taking place."

So what about these purported matches, and their scores, that were allegedly held at the 1896 Olympics? We have both received this information, and the scores are listed as follows:

Denmark vs. Greece 9-0; Denmark vs. Izmir 5-2.

That certainly looks official. There is a superb book done on the history of Danish participation at the Olympic Games, edited by Hans Agersnap Larsen.¹⁷ He has nothing about Denmark competing in football at the 1896 Olympics.

But something about those match scores looks very familiar. If we look at the 1906 Intercalated Olympic Games in Athens there was a football tournament and there were four matches, with results as follows:

Denmark vs. Athens 9-0; Smyrna vs. Thessaloniki 3-0; Athens vs. Thessaloniki 5-0; Denmark vs. Smyrna 5-1¹⁸

The 1906 Olympic football tournament was contested by Denmark and Greek teams, representing Athens, Thessaloniki, and Smyrna, which is on the coast of Anatolia, and is now known as Izmir, Turkey.

If you look closely at those scores, one of the matches is exactly the same two teams, and same score, as one of the rumoured 1896 matches (Denmark 9, Athens 0), while another (Denmark 5, Smyrna 1), is almost identical, with only the score slightly different (5-1 vs. 5-2), and as noted in the footnote above, the score of that 1906 match appears in both ways. So it appears that the matches that purportedly took place at the 1896 Olympics are actually being copied from those that took place in 1906.

Despite all this evidence to the contrary, we looked at it further. Mallon works with a group of Olympic statisticians termed the OlyMADMen, and this theory was circulated among them. After reviewing the documents the OlyMADMen concluded again that there was no football contested during the 1896 Olympics.

Both of us (Mallon and Kluge) have published multiple books on the Olympics and, because we are human, there are mistakes in those books. We acknowledge that. Further, we willingly admit when we have made a mistake, as both of us are only interested in documenting the actual Olympic history, and we change the data for



Denmark – the Olympic champion of 1906 and winner of the Crown Prince's Cup. The opponent in the final was the team from Athens. As the Danes already led 9:0 at halftime, the Greeks abandoned taking part in the second half.

Photo: De Olympiske Biografier af danske OL-deltagere 1896-1996

future reference. We are not ashamed of this nor are we reticent to do so, as we only want the historical record to be correct. In order to do that for 1896 football, however, we would want evidence from the 1896 documentary record, either in magazines or newspapers, and no such evidence is available, to the best of our knowledge.

In this case, both of us have known about the possible 1896 Olympic football matches for over 20 years, and we have examined the evidence. At this point we continue to believe that no football matches, or tournament, were held during the 1896 Athens Olympics. ■

- 1 One can actually say 7 as, in that era, weightlifting and wrestling were often contested as part of the athletics programme, but by modern standards, it would be nine sports.
- 2 Mallon, Bill; Widlund, Ture. *The 1896 Olympic Games: Complete Results*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 1998.
- 3 Mallon and Widlund. *op. cit.*
- 4 *Bulletin de Comité International des Jeux Olympiques*, January 1895, Vol. 3.
- 5 Mallon and Widlund. *op. cit.*
- 6 Coubertin, Pierre de; Philemon, Timoleon; Lambros, Spiridon P.; and Politis, Nikolaos G., editors. *The Olympic Games 776 B.C. - 1896 A.D.; With the approval and support of the Central Council of the International Olympic Games in Athens, under the Presidency of H. R. H. the Crown Prince Constantine*. Athens: Charles Beck, 1896.
- 7 Widlund could read the original Greek sources, while Mallon relied on Ture's expertise.
- 8 1896 Daily Olympic Programmes, available in archive of Volker Kluge.
- 9 International Federation of Football History & Statistics. *Olympic Football Tournaments: 1908-1912-1920-1924-1928-1936*. Kassel, GER: self-published, ca 2000, p. 4.
- 10 Colin José. *Soccer: The International Line-ups & Statistics Series: Olympic Football Part 1 1900-1964*. Humberstone, ENG: Soccer Book Publishing Ltd., 1996.
- 11 www.rsssf.com/tables/olympics.html, retrieved 10 February 2017.
- 12 Lennartz, Karl. *Geschichte des Deutschen Reichsausschusses für Olympische Spiele: Heft 1 - Die Beteiligung Deutschlands an den Olympischen Spielen 1896 in Athen*. Bonn: Peter Wegener, 1981.
- 13 Buschmann, Jürgen; Lennartz, Karl. *Die Olympischen Fußballturniere: Band 1 - Erste Schußversuche 1896-1908*. Kassel, GER: AGON Sportverlag, 1999, pp. 10-43.
- 14 Available in archive of Volker Kluge, editor of the *Journal of Olympic History*.
- 15 *Allgemeine Sport-Zeitung*, Wien, November/December 1896.
- 16 David Goldblatt. *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Football*. New York, NY, USA: Riverhead Books, 2008.
- 17 Larsen, Hans Agersnap, ed. *De Olympiske Biografier af danske OL-deltagere 1896-1996*. København, DEN: Danmarks Idræts-Forbund, 1996.
- 18 The score of this match is listed variously as 5-1 and 5-2.