

The “Coubertin Project” Paris 1900: What Might Have Been

By Jean Durry



Jean Durry and members of the ISOH Executive Committee visiting the Archives at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

Photo: Markus Osterwalder

A personal note on the discovery ... A map cabinet. A large open drawer revealing a poster.

More precisely, an “indoor poster”, 40 x 48 cm in size and well preserved. A surprise find, that of a document, a reflection in itself of the more than eventful genesis of the second Olympic Games of modern times ...

14 May 2018 was destined to be a happy day for me. Later in the afternoon, I received ISOH’s Life Achievement award from President David Wallechinsky and IOC President Thomas Bach. It was a special moment in life which I found quite moving.

Our small group, mostly members of the ISOH Executive Committee, were welcomed to the Archives of the Olympic Museum’s collections by Patricia Reymond. We enjoyed the museological quality and the exemplary layout of these volumes, located in the basement of the Museum itself. In turn we paused at objects, outfits, paintings, and sculptures, all methodically arranged, installed, and classified as they should be.

As I was following a little behind the group, my attention was caught by a light grey cabinet to the side, designed to store posters. I began to open the drawers. Were there any Olympic posters? Was there anything about the 1900 Olympic Games? In fact, there were not many documents ... but what was this?

Suddenly I glimpsed a poster entitled “THE 1900 OLYMPIC GAMES PROGRAMME. PARIS”. This was something I had never seen before, let alone held in my hands. It was immediately apparent that this was a veritable mine of information. Its black and white print clearly revealed the traces of the chaotic events surrounding the preparation of the Games at the end of the 19th century.

It was composed of three sections: “International Committee for the Olympic Games”, “Organising Committee of the 1900 Olympic Games”, and “Games Programme” and ended with six lines of footnotes and the address where “all communications relating to the Olympic Games of 1900 must be sent.”

To my astonishment, and to my keen researcher’s eye, I realised we had discovered a hitherto almost “unknown” item.¹ The Olympic Museum were happy to make a copy for me and welcomed my proposal to analyse it and share the information contained therein.

At the friendly urging of Volker Kluge, now is the time to keep this promise, and to see what can be learned from this apparently modest, but certainly significant document.

A meeting without follow-up

Pierre de Coubertin wrote: “On 30 January 1894, Alfred Picard, quite recently installed in his office at the Council of State, received Mr. [Georges] Strehly and myself. The eminent professor [at Lycée Maigne, distinguished Hellenist] put his signature next to mine at the bottom of the document, which we handed to the Commissioner-

General ...” It was the draft of an “Athletic Exposition” which would take place within the World Exposition of Paris in 1900, “in an enclosure exactly reproducing the Altis at Olympia, in so far as the excavations and discoveries made up to that point had made it possible to recreate it.”²

This proposal was intended to propagate “the athletic idea closely intertwined with Greek civilisation [but which] suffered, at different times, eclipses; its purity has been tarnished; the athlete has been led astray. In this respect, modern professionalism plays the same role as the bestiality of the circus in the past. It is with a view to preserving athleticism, to keeping it on the right path, to preserve the philosophical and patriotic tendencies, that the undersigned submit this draft to the Commissioner-General of the 1900 Exposition. Above all, they wanted to crown the work of athletic propaganda to which they had devoted themselves actively. They therefore intended to act in a completely disinterested manner but wanted to maintain the moral direction of the enterprise.”³

During the meeting with Picard, Coubertin also spoke of the International Athletic Congress, planned for June 1894 at the Sorbonne, and the desire to revive the idea of the first Olympic Games of the contemporary era to coincide with the World Exposition in 1900.

Picard listened politely, but was non-committal and at the end of the meeting he immediately “filed” the documents. In fact Picard, the all-powerful Commissioner-General would very deliberately not follow-up on Coubertin’s suggestions. When in 1931, nearly four decades later, Coubertin recalled these moments and this period,⁴ his account was quite different from description of his “Battles of Physical Education” from 1909: “I understood that there was nothing that the Olympic Games could expect from Mr. Alfred Picard ... I had resolved to organise the 1900 Games by means of a private committee without any administrative interference.”⁵

Two different paths

Alfred Picard had recently been named Commissioner-General of the World Exposition of 1900. This was organised under the auspices of the Ministry of Commerce, Posts, and Telegraph.

Born in Strasbourg on 21 December 1844, Picard was known to be a great servant of the state with a strong personality. He had become a civil engineer by the age of 18, and later left the world of roads and bridges to specialise in railways. He became a state councillor in 1882, and by 1886 he was a section president. A few months before his death on 8 March 1913, he became vice-president of the Council of State. As the general rapporteur for the previous World Exposition in 1889, he

was well positioned to become the key man of the 1900 edition. His authoritarian face, with scrutinising eyes, left no doubt about his abilities and desire to be sole master aboard the overwhelming enterprise entrusted to him.

Since this idea did not come from him, Picard considered it an anachronism. The establishment of an autonomous athletic exposition did not interest him in any way, and so he rejected it from the outset and stuck exclusively to a programme of “International Competitions for Physical Exercise and Sports”, formally incorporated into the general programme. As it was set in motion, the organisation of the World Exposition was a machinery of rare heaviness and complexity.



For this specific sector, Picard made a point of establishing a Preparatory Commission on 2 September 1894. It was presided over by General Auguste Baillod, inspector general of the cavalry with Daniel Mérillon, former member of parliament, president of the National Union of Shooting Societies of France as vice-president. It had no fewer than 74 members, not including six ex-officio members with voting rights and a secretariat of three. Among the 74 members, Coubertin appeared in 64th position, as secretary-general of the French Union of Athletic Sports (USFSA, Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques) just behind Michel Gondinet, who was described as the USFSA’s president.⁶

After its first meeting, the commission quickly expanded, with ten sub-commissions corresponding to the organisations responsible for the physical exercises that had been selected. Pierre de Coubertin did not attend this meeting. On 3 November 1894 he had spent

A bold design for an Olympic Stadium with a tented roof for the 1900 Games – unmistakably inspired by the Panathenaic Stadium of 1896.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

Alfred Picard (1844–1913), Commissioner-General of the Paris World Expositions of 1889 and 1900 and later briefly Minister for the Navy. He was an opponent of the Olympics, which he regarded as an “anachronism”.

Photo: *L'Illustration*, 14 October 1908



several days in Athens, where the fate of the first modern Olympic Games was in great peril: Greek Prime Minister Charilaos Trikoupis decided that, given the current financial situation in Greece, the government could not afford the costs of the Games, and so refused to back them. But Coubertin turned the situation around. He succeeded in changing public opinion and convincing the leader of the opposition, Theodoros Deligiannis, and especially Crown Prince Konstantin. The Greek prince became the acting president of the Organising Committee and would reanimate the project with energy and enthusiasm.

The spring of 1895 also saw Coubertin's marriage to Marie Rothan, the daughter of a diplomat under Napoleon III, on 12 March. He therefore had many concerns and much work to do. The fact remains that he did not participate in any of the meetings of the commission. In a general report written by Daniel Mérillon and issued in May 1895, there was no mention whatsoever of the Olympic Games.

However, between 16 and 23 June 1894, the founding Congress of the Olympic Movement was held at the Sorbonne in Paris. Then the first modern Olympic Games were staged in Athens with great success in 1896. The dates were 25 March to 3 April 1896, according to the Greek calendar, or from 6 to 15 April, according to the Georgian calendar. Many points were scored by Coubertin.

However, Picard remained uncompromising and stuck to his plan. But time was running out and nothing

seemed to move forward. It was only on 7 January 1899 that the Minister of Commerce would issue an organic decree concerning the structure of the sports organisation of the Exposition.

President of the International Olympic Games Committee

Faced with this failure to strike a chord and the resulting stagnation, what could Coubertin do? On the evening of 15 April 1896, the day of the closing ceremony of the Athens Games, he sat alone in his room at Hotel de Grande-Bretagne. He had sent a letter to King George I of Greece, simultaneously communicated to the international press, which began: “Sir, By taking the presidency of the International Committee of the Olympic Games, I wish that my first act ...” This clearly meant that, despite all the Hellenic pressures of the moment, the next edition would not be held in Greece, but in Paris. He could draw on the minutes of the six meetings of the IOC held from 4 to 14 April.

Friday, 10 April: “The Committee met at the offices of Mr. Vikelas, President, under his chairmanship. Mr. Vikelas pointed out that in accordance with the rules adopted by the Paris Congress [in June 1894], the presidency of the International Committee belonged to the country in which the next Olympic Games were to be celebrated. Nevertheless, he proposed to his colleagues to confirm this Congress's decision by a vote, under which Mr. de Coubertin would become the acting President from 1896 to 1900: adopted.”

Sunday, 12 April: “The Committee, considering that the resolution adopted by the Paris Congress stating that the Olympic Games must be celebrated successively in all of the capitals of the world, is the very basis of the work for which it is responsible, has decided.”

Tuesday, 14 April: Presidency of Mr. Vikelas, President. Present were: MM. de Coubertin, de Boutowski, Balck, Gebhart [sic], Jiří Guth, Kemény. The Committee dealt with the question, raised unexpectedly in the Athenian press and in public opinion about the celebration of the Olympic Games in the future, and their being definitively fixed in Greece. After an exchange of views between MM. Gebhart [sic], Coubertin, and Guth, it was unanimously agreed that it was not desirable for the Games to belong exclusively to one country, and that, moreover, the Committee's task was to implement the Congress decision on this point in favour of Paris, and was not free to change this.”

In addition, a second Olympic Congress was held in Le Havre, from 23 to 31 July 1897. This was hosted by the President of the Republic, Félix Faure, and was notable for Father Henry Didon's eloquent intervention on the moral influence of athletic sports, as well as the brilliantly improvised response from Reverend

Courcy-Laffan, delegate of the Association of English Headmasters. The reverend was soon to be a new recruit to the nascent Olympic forces.

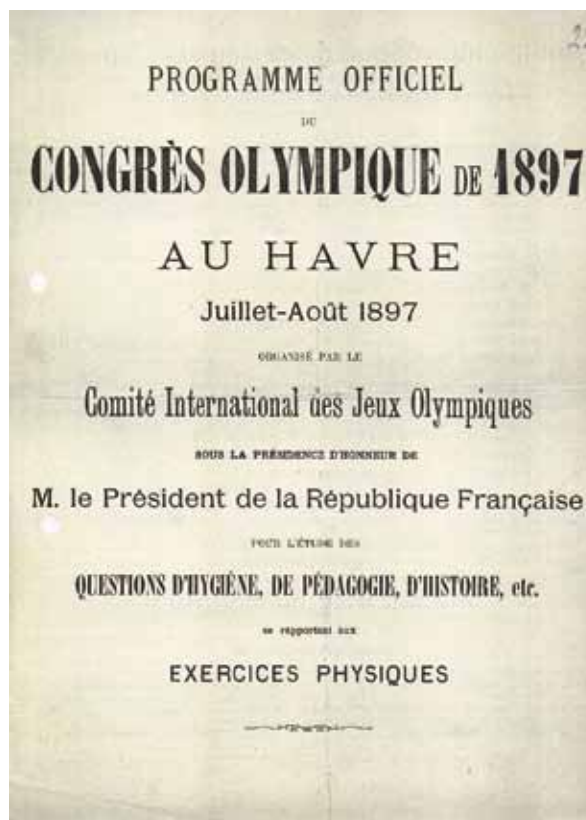
Admittedly, this Congress was devoted to questions of hygiene, pedagogy, and history related to physical exercises, Coubertin having voluntarily put aside the question of the Olympic Games – to the marked discontent of Viktor Balck. As Coubertin explained, this was because “The organisation [of the] major international competitions, difficult and complicated though it may be, is not, in my view, a sufficient programme of work. In the interval between Olympiads, we thought there was room for scientific manifestations.” Furthermore, “To turn to this subject in the aftermath of the Games was to recall the intellectual and philosophical character of my initiative, and to place at the outset the role of the IOC very much above that of simple sports groups.”⁸

Certainly only a handful of the IOC Members were there, only seven in all, but in the words chosen by Coubertin, they “had assembled under conditions that would give them the feeling both of their permanence and their usefulness ... From that day on, the question of disbanding and abandoning the pursuit of our enterprise to others was never raised among us.”⁹

The months passed; the deadline of 1900 was getting closer, and it was high time for action. It had taken nine months for the Preparatory Commission to produce a general report. This document of 24 May 1895 was drawn up by Mr. Mérillon, the commission’s vice-president and spokesman, summing up the work of his sub-commissions. It proposed that “during the period of the 1900 Exposition, in the Vincennes region, and more particularly in the vicinity of Lake Daumesnil, a series of major competitions and international festivals be set up”, and qualified the prospects for expenditure and revenue. After that there was nothing.

Call to action

In autumn 1897, a “general classification” of the exposition was finally published in 121 chapters. On 14 November, Pierre de Coubertin then decided to send the Minister of Commerce, Henri Boucher, a piquant letter tinged with irony, which was also communicated to the press: “The public will certainly experience some surprises in noting ... that the physical exercises are spread out in the strangest way ... I wonder what unfortunate fate has nipped in the bud the commission charged to study the organisation of the 1900 competitions: it has been almost two years since it ceased to be convened” – adding “which may not be a bad thing, given the way it was made up; but the interested parties and the organisers of the next Olympic Games would like to know what it has been replaced



Front page of the programme for the 1897 Olympic Congress in Le Havre. Coubertin had called it in response to the Greek requests to stage all future Olympics in Athens.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

by.”¹⁰ Having thus explicitly recalled the prospect of the next Games, he concluded with this sentence: “Minister ... I would like to, on behalf of many others, respectfully ask you to shed a little light on this subject that is close to our hearts.”

In this text can also be found the note from the Commissioner-General: “Not one or the other of the grievances articulated by Mr. Coubertin are well-founded.” Picard stood on his conviction that “No more in 1900 than in previous Expositions, physical exercises cannot be considered as a class of the general nomenclature.” As far as the commission was concerned, “This commission no longer exists. Special committees must be charged with detailed studies; their constitution would be premature.”¹¹

Coubertin only took responsibility for the situation after the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and President of the Council, Alexandre Ribot, communicated with Picard to “know if the latter would be disposed if necessary to ensure the celebration of the Olympic Games within the enclosure of the Exposition”, a step categorically rejected.

It was now to be a private organisation, presided over by Viscount Charles de La Rochefoucauld. He was “a childhood friend and old classmate” and “a passionate sportsman ... without being subordinated to any of the ‘small chapels’ whose influence I dreaded so much”, energetic, and “capable of obstinate perseverance”, and it seemed all the more relevant to him that he made his beautiful home available, located at 47 rue de

Daniel Mérillon (1852–1925), Secretary-General for the sporting competitions of the 1900 World Exposition. He was a former Member of Parliament who was also President of the Union National Sociétés de Tir (UNST, National Union of Shooting Societies). As a competitive shooter, he took part in the Olympic Games of 1908 and 1912.

Photo: *La Vie au Grand Air*, 6 May 1900



Varenne[s] in the immediate vicinity of 20 rue Oudinot, the Coubertin family home – where he welcomed the “Comité La Rochefoucauld”.

The committee was presented to the press on 25 May 1898, and the next day Pierre Giffard’s sports newspaper, *Le Vélo*, reiterated that it was set up “in the face of ill will and inertia of the offices of the Exposition.” The first meeting of this Organising Committee of the Olympic Games was held on 29 May, and was very satisfactory according to Coubertin. Constituted in full agreement between himself and La Rochefoucauld, its secretary-general was Robert Fournier-Sarlovèze, cavalier emeritus and future mayor of Compiègne. He was energetic too: “in addition to calculating spirit and administrative sense, he had an eye for everything and made his world move.” The Organising Committee included “40 or so members, 18 of whom ... were designated as ‘stewards’ chosen in accordance with their competence and independence ... and placed in that capacity at the helm” of the various disciplines, supported by a number of personalities. “It was impossible, I believe, to form a committee of honour that was at the same time more devoted to sports, more imbued with sportsmanship, and more personally selfless.”

Their competence was real. It must be objectively noted, however, that the noble elements were numerous. This responded to a logic: in contrast to the “chaotic forum” of the Exposition, the intention was to give “to participants ... that which they cannot find elsewhere. They came into contact in Athens with the

purest antiquity. Paris should then introduce them to the old France with its traditions and refined setting. The crowd will have the competitions and the celebrations of the Exposition and we, we will have Games for the elite: elite competitors, few, but including the best world champions; elite spectators, people of the world, diplomats, professors, generals, members of Institutes.”

Whatever may be the case of this assertive and duly “elitist” concept, its reception seemed favourable. The next day, 32-year-old Henri Desgrange, the enterprising director, “made available his [very recent] Parc des Princes Velodrome and his field of 26,000 square metres for running, tennis, and cycling.” Pierre Lafitte proposed the services of his innovative weekly *La Vie au Grand Air* (VGA), freshly launched on 8 April 1898; the VGA presented “Our programme” in issue no. 21 from 4 February 1899, noting with pleasure that “The 1900 Olympic Games Committee, chaired by MM. [sic] Baron Pierre de Coubertin and Viscount de La Rochefoucauld have chosen it as the official organ” – which would have no tangible result. Giffard lauded the decision to award the swimming events to *Le Vélo*. Abroad, as far away as Australia, there were many positive reactions.

The financing was “very simple too. I will take charge of all the publicity, sending of programmes, correspondence, etc., as I have done in the past.” This speech was addressed to the various sports societies solicited: “Every year you organise a big sporting meeting. In 1900, simply give it an international character with more solemnity than usual. In return, we will relieve you of the task of providing the prizes – a significant savings for you.” Consequently, “a total of a few thousand francs was sufficient to cover the expenses of the second Olympiad, and we were already assured of double this amount.”

It was time to “publish the programme”. At the end of October, all was ready. *Le Vélo* dedicated its “page one” of its 27 October 1898 issue.

An indoor poster

(Re)discovered in a drawer, this poster is an utterly unique milestone. It crystallises a suspended moment of Olympic history. To fix it on a wall would be like pinning a butterfly. It’s a snapshot of a moment in time, a portrait of perfect precision.

At the top there is the composition of the title, INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC GAMES COMMITTEE, which is how the IOC was known at that time. “President Mr. Baron Pierre de Coubertin” had succeeded Demetrios Vikelas after the Athens Games. Then, listed in two columns, in alphabetical order, are the 15 members. Their nationalities were not listed; instead some were named along with their respective cities: Lord Amphyll (London), V. Balck, Vikelas, Brunetta d’Usseaux, Mr. de Bousies

PROGRAMME DES JEUX OLYMPIQUES DE 1900 PARIS

Comité International des Jeux Olympiques:

Président.	M. le Baron PIERRE DE COUBERTIN.	Paris.
MEMBRES. MM. Lord AMPHILL.	Londres.	Berlin.
Le Commandant V. BALCK.	Stockholm.	Prague.
D. BIKELAS.	Athènes.	Londres.
Le Comte BRUNETTA D'USSEAUX.	Turin.	Budapest.
Le Comte M. de BOUSIES.	Bruxelles.	New-York.
Le Général de BOUTOWSKI.	Saint-Petersbourg.	Velsen (Pays-Bas).
E. CALLOT.	Paris.	Concepcion del Uruguay
L. A. CUFF.	Christ Church (N.-Z., etc.).	(Rép. Argentine).
MM. le Docteur W. GEBHARDT.		
le Docteur JIRÍ GUTH.		
C. HERBERT.		
Fr. KEMÉNY.		
W. M. SLOANE.		
Le Baron F. W. de TUYLL.		
J. B. ZUBIAUR.		

Comité d'Organisation des Jeux Olympiques de 1900

Président: M. le Vicomte de la ROCHEFOUCAULD.	Secrétaire général: M. Robert FOURNIER-SARLOVÉZE.
MEMBRES: MM. le Comte PHILIPPE D'ALSACE.	MM. le Comte CHANDON DE BRIAILLES.
G. BAUGRAND.	le Marquis de CHASSELOUP-LAUBAT.
* le Baron JUAN DE BELLET (Lawn-Tennis).	* M. DUBONNET (Avion).
* le C ^e A. de BERTIERRE de SAUVIGNY (Tir à l'arc).	R. DUPUYTREM, député.
* P. de BOULONGNE (Yachting).	le Comte d'ESTERNO.
* GEORGES BOURDON (Sports athlétiques).	le Baron ANDRÉ de FLEURY.
BOUSSOD.	ALFRED GALLARD.
le Duc de BRISSAC.	* le Comte A. de GUÉBRIANT (Yachting).
* BRUNEAU de LABORIE (Boxe).	Gordon BENNETT.
* E. CAILLAT (Avion).	J. J. JUSSERAND.
Charles CAMBEPFORT.	le Baron LA CAZE.
le Baron de CARAYON LA TOUR.	* le Baron LEJEUNE (Polo).
	MM. le Duc de LORGE.
	FÉDÉRIC MALLET.
	* le Comte F. de MAILLÉ (Vélocipédie).
	F. DE NEUFVILLE.
	* ANTHUR O'CONNOR (Course Paille).
	* le Comte N. POTOCKI (Escrime).
	* le Comte JACQUES de POURTALÈS (Golf).
	* Ch. RICHEFREDI (Longue Paille).
	ANDRÉ TOUTAIN.
	le Comte TURQUET de LA BOISSERIE.
	* HÉBARD de VILLENEUVE (Escrime).

N. B. — Les Noms des Commissaires sportifs sont précédés d'une astérisque. Les Commissaires pour la gymnastique, la natation, le foot-ball, etc., seront ultérieurement nommés.

Programme des Jeux

Sports athlétiques. — Courses à pied: 100 m., 400 m., 800 m., 1500 mètres (courses plates), 110 mètres (courses de haies).
Concours: Sauts en longueur et en hauteur (running long et high jump).
Saut à la perche (Pole vault).
Lancement du poids (Putting the weight) et du disque.
Pentathlon (Championnat général d'athlétisme) 4 épreuves: 100 ou 400 m., 800 ou 1500 mètres. — Saut en hauteur, en longueur ou à la perche. — Lancement du poids ou du disque.
(Règlements de l'Union des Sociétés françaises des Sports athlétiques).
Gymnastique. — Exercices individuels: Corde lisse en traction des bras. — Rétablissements divers à la barre fixe. — Mouvements aux anneaux. — Barres parallèles profondes. — Saut au cheval. — Travail des poids.
Escrimes. — Assauts de fleuret, de sabre et d'épée. — (Amateurs, Professeurs civils et militaires).
(Règlements de la Société d'Encouragement de l'Escrime).
Assauts de boxe anglaise et de boxe française.
Assauts de canne et de bâton.
Lutte: suisse et romaine.
Sports nautiques. — Yachting: Courses à la voile en rivière (Yachts au-dessous de 5 tonnes). — Courses à la voile en mer (Yachts de 20 tonnes).
(Règlements du Cercle de la Voile de Paris et de l'Union des Yachts français).
Avion: Un rameur: 2000 mètres sans virage (Skiffs).
Deux rameurs de pointe: 2400 mètres sans virage (Outriggers).
Quatre rameurs » » » »
Huit rameurs » » » »

Natation: Courses de vitesse: 100 mètres.
» fond et vitesse: 500 mètres.
» fond: 1000 mètres.
Concours de plongeon et de sauvetage.
Water-Polo.
Vélocipédie. — Course de vitesse: 2000 m., sur piste, sans entraîneurs.
Course de fond: 100 kilomètres, sur piste, avec entraîneurs.
(L'entraînement mécanique sera prohibé).
Courses de tandems: 3000 mètres, sur piste, sans entraîneurs.
Port hippique. — Polo (Règlements des Clubs de Hurlingham et Paris).
Jeux. — Foot-Ball (Rugby et Association).
Cricket.
Golf (Règlements de Saint-Andrews, modifié selon les nécessités locales).
Lawn-Tennis (simple et double).
Croquet.
Hockey.
Longue-Paille.
Course-Paille.
Alpinisme. — Un prix olympique sera décerné à l'auteur de l'ascension la plus remarquable accomplie sur un point quelconque du globe depuis la célébration des Jeux olympiques de 1896.
Tir à l'arc. — (Un règlement de concours est à l'étude).
Patinage. — id.

N. B. — Conformément aux décisions fondamentales du Congrès International de 1894, les Concours olympiques sont réservés aux seuls amateurs répondant aux définitions adoptées par l'Union des Sports athlétiques, l'Amateur Athletic Association d'Angleterre et les autres Sociétés d'Amateurs du monde.
Les concours sont tous des championnats.
Les dates et lieux des concours ainsi que les dates de clôture des engagements, bien que déjà fixés, seront publiés ultérieurement, le Comité d'organisation se réservant d'introduire, s'il y a lieu, quelques modifications dans cette partie du programme.
Les prix consisteront en objets d'art, exclusivement.

Toutes les communications relatives aux Jeux olympiques de 1900, doivent être adressées:
47, Rue de Varennes — Paris.

PARIS. — Imp. A. QUÉQUERET, ROT. GERBERT, 10.

AFFICHE D'INTÉRIEUR.

(Brussels), Boutowski, Callot, Cuff (Christ Church [sic]); Gebhardt, Jiří Guth, Herbert (London), Kemény, Sloane, Tuyll, Zubiaur, (Conception de l'Uruguay, Rep. Argentine [sic]).

As Coubertin later confided in his *Olympic Memoirs*: "I was allowed a free hand in choosing the members of the IOC" when it was created in the immediate extension of the founding Congress of 1894. "Nobody seemed to have noticed that I had chosen almost exclusively absentee members ... I needed elbow room at the start,

for many conflicts were bound to arise. Some at any rate would want to seize the helm, either to benefit from the success of the venture or to modify the direction. Such is human nature."¹²

"It was a 'self-recruiting body' ... But it had already become what it was to remain for the next 30 years, and what it still is today – a committee composed of three concentric circles: a small nucleus of dedicated active members; a 'nursery' of willing members capable of being educated along the right lines; and finally, a

Poster for the Olympic Games of 1900 in Paris, to be held under the direction of the IOC and organised by the Committee of Viscount de La Rochefoucauld.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

The World Expo competition programme consisted of 13 sections. Sports also included international fishing, which was held on 5 August 1900 on Île des Cygnes (Island of the swans). The poster and a photo demonstrate that women were allowed to take part in this event.

Photos: Musée National du Sport (France); *La Vie au Grand Air*



facade of people ... whose presence would serve to satisfy national pretensions while lending prestige to the whole."¹³

Of the original constellation, several had already left or were about to do so: Count Lucchesi Palli and Duke d'Andrea Carafa (Italy), Count de Bousies, Lord Amphyll, and Vikelas himself. The first names were distinguished: Coubertin, Callot, Herbert, Sloane, Balck, Kemény, Guth, Cuff, Zubiatur (1894), Gebhardt (1896), Brunetta d'Usseaux, Tuyll, and soon thereafter, Courcy-Laffan and Alexandre Mercati (1897-1898). A new list, drawn up by Coubertin, as he would establish and would point out so often for different reasons over the years, was attached to a letter addressed to Jiří Guth on 9 October 1900 under the title, this time, of "International Olympic Committee".

It showed a rapid and sensitive development, grouping Coubertin, 25 members (including the Englishman Lord Harris, who had been suggested as a potential member but never joined the committee), and 16 other nationalities, with this annotation: "Still missing: Austria, Spain, Belgium." Whatever their real role, they would be the guarantors, the trustees of the Olympic idea.¹⁴

Then came the Organising Committee of the 1900 Olympic Games. This included the President, as mentioned, Viscount de La Rochefoucauld as well as

Secretary-General Robert Fournier-Sarlovèze and 35 members, of which 18 stood out in particular. Marked with an asterisk were the appointed stewards: Ernest Callot and Marius Dubonnet (Rowing), Louis Bruneau de Laborie (Boxing), Count N. Potocki and Hébrard de Villeneuve (Fencing), Count Jacques de Pourtalès (Golf), Arthur O'Connor (Indoor Tennis), Charles Richefeu (Outdoor Tennis), Baron Lejeune (Polo), Baron Jean de Bellet (Lawn-Tennis), Georges Bourdon (Athletic Sports), Count Bertier de Sauvigny (Archery), Count F. de Maillé (Cycling), P. de Boulogne and Count A. de Guébriant (Yachting). Those "for gymnastics, swimming, football, etc." were not yet named.

The competence of several of them was recognised, as well as that of the Marquis de Chasseloup-Laubat, and that of Jean-Jules Jusserand (author of a reference book on *Old Form Sports and Exercise Games* and a future ambassador to Washington). Jusserand had been, with Georges Bourdon, one of the three speakers for the Union of French Athletic Sports Societies (USFSA) Jubilee on the evening of Friday, 25 November 1892, when Coubertin had closed his own remarks by evoking, for the first time, the idea of "pursuing and carrying out, on a basis in accordance with the conditions of modern life, this grandiose and beneficial work, the restoration of the Olympic Games." This was applauded by most of the audience but was misunderstood.



Although the poster for the International Gymnastics Championship has no relation to the Olympic Games, the gymnastics and athletics mix was “Olympic”. The winner was Frenchman Silvaine Gustave Sandras. The best performance by a “foreigner” was by Jules Ducret of Switzerland, who finished 19th.

Photos: Musée National du Sport (France); *La Vie au Grand Air*

With these two pillars of the structure, the IOC and Organising Committee, solidly established, the lower half of the poster proposes, in good logic, the PROGRAMME FOR THE GAMES, set out according to its disciplines and its events. This section is augmented by a few notes in small print – which were actually essential to distinguish the originality of the concept “Olympic” from other sports competitions.

One of Coubertin’s main intuitions was not to confine himself to the Games of the Ancient Olympia, but rather to adopt “modern” sports and their contemporary specificity, united in a common manifestation, and on equal footing – which was a major innovation at the time. The 1900 programme must therefore have been very close to that of 1896; or rather the more complete programme, originally conceived and written by Coubertin himself in November 1894 in Athens on notepaper headed: “Olympic Games Committee. Athens 1896. Paris 1900”.

Indeed, the actual staging of the first Games had generally followed the plans laid out in 1894, but with some modifications. These included, for example, the addition of the triple jump, a 100 metres swimming for sailors, various shooting events (rifle, revolver, and military pistol), and a cycling marathon – and notably the omission of rowing, boxing, horse riding, yachting, water-polo, any wrestling discipline other than that

called “Graeco-Roman” (where the holds must be made only with the arms and are prohibited below the belt), and épée fencing.

For those interested in this nomenclature, the draft programme proposed for this second edition retained all of the athletics events from Athens – except for the marathon race, which was undoubtedly considered to be intrinsically linked to its Greek location. There was also to be a “general championship” (2 races, 1 jump, 1 throw), and rowing (including eights), yachting and water polo, as well as diving and water rescue. Fencing now included épée, and there was English and French boxing (with the use of feet, cane, and stick), and Swiss wrestling instead of archery (“under study”) and skating were also added. Alongside lawn and hard court tennis, there were various team games such as football (rugby and association), cricket, and hockey (on grass), as well as golf and croquet. An Olympic mountaineering award was created for “the author of the most remarkable climb on any peak in the world since the 1896 Games”. With these updates, the general idea was a “modernisation” of the Games in line with the times.

Affirming their original tone in relation to all other sports competitions, and especially with regard to competition between professionals – the “Nota Bene” at the bottom of the poster was indeed essential. It refers expressly “to the fundamental decisions of the

Pierre de Coubertin
on the promenade
of La Croisette in
Cannes, circa 1900.

Photo: Geoffroy de Navacelle
Archive



International Congress of 1896, Olympic contests are reserved for amateurs meeting the definitions adopted by the Athletic Sports Union, the Amateur Athletic Association of England, and the other Amateur Societies of the World ... Prizes would exclusively consist of works of art."

The note reasonably stipulates that "the dates and places of the meetings, as well as the closing dates for the events, although already fixed, will be published later, the Organising Committee reserving the right to introduce, if necessary, some modifications to this part of the programme". Nevertheless, "the circumstances require this Olympiad to be treated differently from the first." It was useless to make an effort to group sports and festivities into an "Olympic fortnight", whose brilliance would always be tarnished by the proximity of the Paris Exposition. Various sites had already been found in and around Paris, in Compiègne (golf and archery), and even in Meulan and Havre (yachting).

All communications relating to the 1900 Olympic Games were to be "addressed to 47 rue de Varenne[s],

Paris." This concludes the "Indoor Poster", printed at A. Quelquejeu, 10 rue Gerbert in the 15th arrondissement of Paris – a key document, rich in information of all kinds.

Everything seemed to be in good order for this "private" organisation of the second Olympic Games. But...

A "Stab in the Back" from the USFSA

"We were just going to start thinking about the housing for the athletes ... when the bomb dropped. One will judge me as very naive not to have foreseen it."¹⁵ The terms were different from those Coubertin had used to describe the episode a quarter of a century earlier when he said: "Then came the real obstacle. It was phrased with great skill."¹⁶

At a meeting on 7 November 1898, the 20 members present voted unanimously on a chilling agenda: "The Council of the USFSA, having received the programme of the Olympic Games, thanks the Olympic Committee for adopting the Union's sporting regulations for athletic competitions, and takes this opportunity to declare that the Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques¹⁷ has been and remains completely adverse to the organisation of a sports event in 1900 by private initiative, reserving its full support for any official organisation undertaken by the State or by the City of Paris."¹⁸

There were many reasons for this deliberate "assassination". The Union, with its rather precarious financial resources, did not want to cut itself off from the support and possible subsidies from the powers that be. The hope of some decorations could also have played a part. But the real motive was deeper, as Coubertin put it, "to free oneself from the counts and the marquises", and from the influence of the one whose independence irritated the microcosm of the French sports leaders more and more. The fact remains that this massive coalescence, even if it was not mentioned, was, in the opinion of Alfred Picard and the "Competitions of Physical Exercises and Sports" of the World Exposition, a blow below the belt without appeal. And all the more hurtful because Coubertin – who had been the tireless driving force behind the progression of the Union from 1890 to 1893 – had permitted his name to appear as "Secretary-General" of the Union, even though he was now devoting himself to the Olympic cause and his many other points of interest. The "coup" was completed, and Coubertin immediately withdrew, as did Viscount Léon de Janzé, president of the Union since 1891, out of friendship for him, and Jules Marcadet, the artisan together with Georges de Saint-Clair of the foundation since 1887, then the efficient and devoted secretary of the Technical Committee.

Coubertin certainly did not admit to being beaten, and continued to believe that he was going to carry out the

1900 Olympic Games, "as we had the right to do." But the opposing forces were growing. On 22 April 1899, at the end of a "suddenly stormy" meeting of the Organising Committee, Charles de La Rochefoucauld, "in a moment of panic that he regretted afterwards", decided to resign.

Pierre de Coubertin dealt with this as best he could. In a letter to Fournier-Sarlovèze, he wrote: "Dear friend, it is unlikely to me, as your despatch says, that you spent six weeks before coming to Paris. I imagine that there is a misprint at the World Exposition ... I consider the incidents of the last few days as closed. Charles de La Rochefoucauld has apologised profoundly, as he should, and as I expected – and on the other hand the publication of my letter, agreed in substance with him beforehand, covered our general retreat."¹⁹

The letter, dated 23 April, had also been communicated "to some newspapers" on the 24th. "At the same time, I informed Mr. Mérillon of the competition which he could henceforth count on from our behalf ... The International Olympic Committee, which is permanent, and whose role consists of bringing about the celebration of the modern Olympic Games in the various capitals of the world, is free to bring the support of its international organisation, and the various groups which depend on it, to the sporting events of the Exposition."²⁰

The "Olympic Games" of 1900

Henceforth, could Coubertin have done anything else than load his rifle? If he wanted to look good and save what could still be, he had to deal with Daniel Mérillon, who had been officially appointed on 1 May 1899 as "General Delegate for competitions of physical exercises and sports". With five deputy delegates, this general attorney at the Court of Cassation was one of the notable figures of French sport, who also went on to lead the International Shooting Union for a long time. The two

men did not like each other, but they knew each other well.

Mérillon knew that he would need Coubertin, especially to help him to ensure substantial international participation; Coubertin could only play the game. He would do so in two circulars. The first in the spring was followed by a later missive on 15 December 1899, informing the IOC Members about the progression of events. He asked for support "for the amateur competitions exclusively". Members were encouraged "to bring to the Exposition all the zeal that they were ready to put at the service of the Rochefoucauld International Committee" while stating that "in a general way I have to disclaim, as President of the International Olympic Committee, any responsibility with regard to the details of the organisation of the Competitions."

This did not prevent him from noting the extreme slowness of the actual start of the workings of the Exposition and its bureaucratic stagnation. It is only necessary to consult the two volumes of the *Official Reports* published in 1901 to be amused by the endless lists of the members of the various Commissions, designated for the most part in June 1899. They number almost a thousand. It is hard to believe that it was only on 19 February 1900 that Mérillon announced to Coubertin that "all [is] signed" and that we will "begin full execution" for competitions envisaged from 15 May to 15 October!

Coubertin had to accept that "the competitions of the Exposition would be held as the Olympic Games for 1900, and would count as equivalent to the celebration of the 2nd Olympiad". This was a reality, even if, contrary to the suggestion made by Coubertin,²¹ we don't find this formulation in any "official" correspondence.

He was forced to come to terms with the fact that there was no mention of "Olympic Games" on any of the posters for the "International Competitions of physical



The 1900 World Expo was a mixture of sport and popular entertainment. The barrel rolling finals attracted many visitors.

Photo: La Vie au Grand Air

This inconspicuous pillar recalls that the 1900 athletics competitions took place on the grass court of the Racing Club de France in Bois de Boulogne. In the *Official Report* of the World Expo, the total number of spectators for the entire event is given as 2,000 to 3,000.

Photo: Klaus Feuerherm



Right: The announcement from 19 July 1900 for the International Amateur Athletics Competition lists Coubertin's name with the title "Président du Comité International des Jeux Olympiques". The foreign commissioners are interesting. In addition to British IOC Member Charles Herbert, they included the Americans Barton Summer Weeks and Charles Sherrill (both later IOC Members) and AAU Secretary-General James E. Sullivan. Georg Demmler was the chairman of the German Athletics Association. Representing Austria is Olympic swimmer and fencer "Othon Sterschmann" otherwise known as Otto Herschmann. Photos: Musée National du Sport (France)

exercises and Sports" at the World Exposition of 1900. In truth, the only allusion appeared on the programme of the "International Meeting. Running race. Athletic competitions. Amateurs", organised on Thursday, 19 July on the grounds of the Racing Club de France (Pelouse de la Croix-Catelan, Bois de Boulogne), with mention of: "President: Mr. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, President of the International Olympic Games Committee".

To detail the uncertainties and the unfolding of the competition organisation, who frequently abandoned "the Vincennes annex" and often had to revert back to the places and mechanisms planned by the Rochefoucauld Committee, would use up more pages than are available in the *Journal of Olympic History*. This was not my intention.

Instead, it has been to focus on the poster of 2 October 1898 and its analysis, by stopping time and imagining that this project for the "private" organisation of the 1900 Olympic Games might have succeeded, significantly modifying the course of events.

We cannot help but think that these "Olympic Games" were drowned in the World Exposition, but that they were at least evanescent, if not to say ghosts. Consequently, the 1901 *Almanac of Sports*, in both the editorial by Maurice

Leudet and its many sections, these two words were completely ignored. Certainly, the effort of the World Exposition in this field was of a remarkable magnitude.

We can then understand Pierre de Coubertin's final assessment: "The athletes did their best. Interesting results were achieved, but with nothing Olympic about them." The experience of 1900 showed in all equanimity the danger "to allow the Games to become dependent on or be taken over by a big fair where their philosophical value vanished into thin air and their educational merit becomes nil." And more: "However, in this 'unholy union', Olympism would at least enjoy an increasingly independent position and would no longer be reduced to the role of humiliated vassal to which it had been subjected in Paris."²²

This would still be the case in 1904 in St. Louis, and to a lesser extent in London in 1908. With hindsight, we know that these were just the first years of Olympism, and that Coubertin's tenacity and intelligence enabled it to bounce back, continue on the road, and surpass the difficulties and adventures inherent in any "beginning of life". It would be necessary to wait for Stockholm, and the Olympic Games of 1912, to live the first Olympic summer without such clouds.

Would this process have been accelerated, had Pierre de Coubertin's project for the 1900 edition in Paris prevailed? And could he have even imposed this? These are questions asked by a certain "indoor poster", unearthed nearly 120 years after its publication, in the Olympic Museum Archives. ■

- 1 Except for in Otto Mayer, *Olympic Retrospectives* (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1960). He made some notes on what were the preparations for and the unfolding of what are now called the Games of the second Olympiad, and which do not deserve such a title. In any event, this rather modest pamphlet had the merit of choosing from among its illustrations the grounds of the Racing Club de France.
- 2 I have decrypted and transcribed this handwritten wording, written by the hand of Coubertin himself. See Jean Durry: *Coubertin autographe*. Volume I, 1889–1915 (Bière: Cabédita Editeur, 2003): "Le 30 Janvier 1894, M. Alfred Picard assez récemment installé dans ses fonctions nous reçut au Conseil d'Etat, M. [Georges] Strehly et moi. L'éminent professeur [au Lycée Montaigne, helléniste distingué] avait mis sa signature à côté de la mienne au bas du document que nous remîmes au commissaire général". [...] "dans une enceinte reproduisant exactement l'Altis d'Olympie tel que les fouilles et découvertes exécutées jusqu'à ce jour permettent de le reconstituer." Ibid. "L'idée athlétique étroitement mêlée à la civilisation grecque"
- 3 [mais qui] "a subi, à différentes époques, des éclipses; sa pureté s'est ternie; l'athlète s'est dévoyé. Le professionnalisme moderne joue à cet égard le même rôle que jadis la bestialité du cirque. C'est en vue de préserver l'athlétisme, de le maintenir dans la voie droite, de lui conserver des tendances philosophiques et patriotiques que les soussignés soumettent au Commissaire G[énéral] de l'Exposition de 1900 le présent projet. Ils ont avant tout le désir de couronner l'œuvre de propagande athlétique à laquelle ils se sont dévoués activement. Ils entendent donc agir d'une manière absolument désintéressée mais veulent conserver la direction morale de l'entreprise."
- 4 Pierre de Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques* (Lausanne: Bureau International de Pédagogie Sportive, 1932).
- 5 Pierre de Coubertin, *Une campagne de 21 ans* (Paris: Librairie de l'Éducation Physique, 1909): "J'avais compris qu'il n'y avait, pour les Jeux Olympiques, rien à attendre de M. Alfred Picard. [...] Je m'étais résolu à organiser les Jeux de 1900 en dehors de toute ingérence administrative par le moyen d'un comité privé."
- 6 In reality he only had been vice-president.
- 7 It was indeed in the very minutes of the beginning of the IOC Athens Session that the name of Dr. Willibald Gebhardt was spelled incorrectly! We must therefore keep this error – but with the mention [sic].
- 8 de Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques*: "Se tourner de ce côté au lendemain des Jeux c'était rappeler le caractère intellectuel et philosophique de mon initiative et placer d'emblée le rôle du C. I. O. très au-dessus de celui des simples groupements sportifs."
- 9 de Coubertin, *Une campagne de 21 ans*: "s'étaient assemblés dans des conditions propres à leur donner à la fois le sentiment de leur stabilité et de leur utilité [...]. A partir de ce jour, il ne fut plus jamais entre nous question de nous dissoudre et d'abandonner à d'autres la poursuite de notre entreprise."
- 10 André Drevon, *Les Jeux Olympiques Oubliés. Paris 1900* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2000): "Le public éprouvera assurément quelques surprises en constatant que [...] les exercices physiques se trouvent éparpillés de la plus étrange façon [...]. Je me demande quel sort fâcheux a tué dans l'œuf la commission chargée d'étudier l'organisation des concours de 1900: voici bientôt deux ans qu'elle a cessé d'être convoquée" – ajoutant "ce qui n'est peut-être pas un mal étant donné la façon dont on l'avait composée; mais les intéressés et les organisateurs des prochains Jeux Olympiques aimeraient savoir par qui elle a été remplacée."



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- 11 Ibid. "Ni l'un ni l'autre des griefs articulés par M. de Coubertin ne sont fondés. [...] Pas plus en 1900 que lors des Expositions antérieures, les exercices physiques ne pouvaient faire une classe de la nomenclature générale. [...] Cette commission n'existe plus. De comités spéciaux doivent être chargés des "études de détail; leur constitution serait prématurée."
- 12 Pierre de Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques*.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Durry: *Coubertin autographe*. Volume I, 1889–1915.
- 15 de Coubertin, *Mémoires*: "Nous allons commencer à nous occuper du logement des athlètes [...], lorsque la bombe éclata. On me jugera bien naïf de ne l'avoir point prévue."
- 16 de Coubertin, *Une campagne de 21 ans*: "Alors surgit l'obstacle véritable. On le dressa avec beaucoup d'habileté."
- 17 Union of French Athletic Sports Societies (USFSA).
- 18 This statement was qualified by the journalist Paul Champ in *Le Vélo* the next day, as "a wise attitude".
- 19 Durry: *Coubertin autographe*, pp. 116–117. Letter by Coubertin from 29 April to Fournier-Sarlovèze, who had momentarily distanced himself: "Cher ami, il m'est peu vraisemblable comme le dit votre dépêche, que vous passiez six semaines avant de venir à Paris. J'imagine qu'il y a l'Exposition Universelle faute d'impression [...]. Je considère les incidents de ces derniers jours comme clos. Charles de la Rochefoucauld s'est excusé affectueusement comme il le devait et comme j'y comptais – et d'autre part la publication de ma lettre, convenue en substance avec lui précédemment, a couvert notre retraite générale."
- 20 Drevon, *Les Jeux Olympiques Oubliés. Paris 1900*. Letter from 15 May 1899: "En même temps, j'avais M. MÉRILLON du concours sur lequel il pouvait désormais compter de notre part [...] Le Comité International Olympique qui est permanent et dont le rôle consiste à provoquer la célébration des Jeux Olympiques modernes dans les diverses capitales du monde devient libre d'apporter aux fêtes sportives de l'Exposition l'appui de son organisation internationale et des divers groupements qui en dépendent."
- 21 de Coubertin, *Une campagne de 21 ans*.
- 22 His stories and his analysis of the tumultuous adventures that surrounded the Olympic Games of 1900 have long been known. See Pierre de Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques*, pp. 48–59; Pierre de Coubertin, *Une campagne de 21 ans*, pp. 136–152. He stood up against Alfred Picard and supported Daniel Mérillon, who had been head despite disorder and carelessness and thanks to his goodwill, intelligence, and hard work. But he stigmatised the government itself, which seemed bound to incompetence and mediocrity whenever they tried to join a sports organisation. These impressions by Coubertin were published in the years 1908 and 1931; no other source mentioned the event before that.

The logo of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, which was presented on 21 October, is a circular signet that unites three symbols: a gold medal, the Olympic flame, and the French national figure, the Marianne. For the first time, the same logo, designed by the Paris agency, Royalties Ecobrandings, will also be used for the Paralympic Games.

Photo: paris2024.org