

For Principality and Britain: Wales at the 1908 Olympic Games

By LUKE J. HARRIS

The 1908 London Olympics represented Great Britain's first serious entry into the Olympic Games.

The team numbered 676, nearly a third of the total number of competitors. Of these 39 came from Wales, the least populous of the four nations that made up the 'Great Britain and Ireland' team. They included its first female representatives and its first Olympic medallists. This article will give details about some of the prominent performances of Welsh athletes, along with providing analysis of the coverage offered by the Welsh press with the desire to explain how this provides evidence from a sporting perspective of a new Welsh identity which historians believed had been developing throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Edwardian Wales

The Edwardian period (1901-1914) was a prosperous one for Wales, both in terms of its economic output and its sporting endeavours. The discovery of large quantities of coal in the valleys of South Wales during the industrial revolution had changed the very nature of the country, from an agricultural centre, to 'one of the first truly industrial societies in the world', placing at the 'the heart of the imperial economy'¹ by the start of the twentieth century. The consequence was that Cardiff expanded from having a population of just 10,000 in 1841 to 164,000 in 1901 and on its way to becoming a city in 1905.²

Historian Kenneth O Morgan describes the period between 1905 and 1914 as one 'when the economic prosperity, national awareness, and political creativity of the Welsh people were most effectively deployed for the benefit of themselves and their neighbours.'³ He identified a 'glow of optimism' present in Wales during this period, owing to its economic strength, sporting prowess and the achievements of Welshmen such as David Lloyd-George, who became Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1905, the highest governmental position held by a Welshman for over a century. Consequences of Wales's new optimism was the creation of a new sense of Welsh nationalism, viewed as a factor in helping to save the Welsh language.⁴

The growth and prowess of Wales owed much to the central position it played within Britain and the Empire, and this was a source of immense pride. This sentiment was expressed in 1900 by a Liberal Party candidate in Barry on St David's Day (1st March). He confessed to be 'proud of being a Welshman', but had 'a greater pride that Wales was part of the British Empire-the largest and best in the world.'⁵

There were those that were not as passionate about the Union as the Liberal candidate, as a home rule movement was emerging, while there was also realisation of a critical division between North and South Wales.⁶ Despite this, those running the country were committed to British Imperialism, and kept problems that could have been created by this to a minimum.⁷

From a cultural standpoint there were moves during the Victorian and Edwardian periods which illustrated the new Welsh identity. In 1858, the Eisteddfod (an ancient festival of Welsh literature, music and culture) was revived, while a national library and museum were established in 1907. These all helped to give Wales institutions that were not British, but Welsh. David Andrews explains that 'the Welsh were looking to create a nation which would contrast with and yet complement England. Within the parameters of a Great Britain, Wales was intent on developing a separate identity out of historical difference, rather than one based upon hostile resistance.'⁸ Pride in Wales's role in Britain along with establishing its own identity separate, but uniquely Welsh are themes prominent in their representatives and coverage of the 1908 Olympics.

Excluding the Olympic Games, sport provided Wales with an opportunity to develop and express its burgeoning identity, as the first international sporting contests came between the nations of Britain. For example, Wales's inaugural international football match was in 1876 (against Scotland) and its maiden rugby international in 1881 (against England). Rugby quickly became the national sport and historian Richard Holt states that rugby held a 'central role'⁹ in the development of Wales's new identity at the end of the nineteenth century. Its significance to the nation was

further enhanced by its successes during in the Edwardian period, particularly following a famous victory over the touring New Zealanders in 1905.

Before facing Wales, the New Zealanders had won all 27 of their matches beating England, Ireland and Scotland.

The *Western Mail* newspaper suggested believed that the Welsh victory had come 'to the rescue of the *Empire* and that the team had demonstrated the fine attributes of 'pluck and determination' and had 'produced sons of strong determination, invincible stamina, resolute, mentally keen, physically sound,'¹⁰ statements which implied a strong physical identity.

The match has taken on legendary status and in his essay on the game, Gareth Williams believed, 'that it was far more than a game, but a factor defining national existence...It was not merely that the Welsh XV-at this time enjoying the Wales whose offspring they were, a Golden Age of enterprise, optimism and confidence.'¹¹ This sporting success was Wales's alone, but it contributed towards the greater good.

Historian Martin Johnes explains that during this period; 'Popular Welsh patriotism was more concerned with achieving recognition within a British context than with separation. Sport offered a perfect vehicle for this: an opportunity to get one over the English neighbour without any of the uncertainties of extremities of a political movement.'¹² This is certainly apparent here and represented a chance for Wales to 'get one over' on England, whose own physical status had been a cause for concern. This followed the recruitment crisis for the Boer War, where many recruits failed to reach the required physical fitness standard, resulting in a 1904 Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration.

The separation between Welsh and English athletes is a theme which is prominent in Welsh press reflections on the 1908 Olympics, as when a Welsh athlete is successful this is often highlighted as being different to that of England. The coverage of Welsh athletes is generally positive, whatever the performance.

Wales at the 1908 Olympics

In comparison with other international sporting contests, the Olympic Games provided Welsh sportsmen and women something different, as they competed for 'Great Britain and Ireland.' Prior to the Games, the various Welsh Sporting Associations had the opportunity to submit their athletes for selection in the British team. This came as a result of both regional and national trials with different processes undertaken. For example, it was reported that the Welsh Swimming Association considered that:

'only one entry in each event was feasible, and only when a swimmer had a reasonable chance was it advisable to enter him. Aspirants in the various towns would have to swim a trial against the watch, and only in a case where the time shown would compare with last season's championships would further consideration be given.'¹³

The consequence of this was that a mixture of trials against the clock and races between the Welsh swimmers took place in either Cardiff, Newport or Swansea. In total, ten men were named in an article which reflected on a meeting of the Welsh Amateur Swimming Association Executive Committee, although only one, Paulo Radmilovic was to compete.¹⁴

Radmilovic, won two of the three gold medals won by Welsh athletes. In all five medals were won (3 gold, 1 silver and 1 bronze). The other Welsh medallist was Albert Gladstone, grandson of the former Prime Minister Ewart Gladstone, in the rowing eights.

Gladstone, who was born in Hawarden, Flintshire, was just 21 years old and the youngest member of the Leander crew, one of two British crews in the event.

They defeated a Belgium crew in the final. The only silver won by a Welsh athlete at the Games was won by archer Reginald Brooks-King in the double York round. Born in Monmouth and a five-time national champion between 1900 and 1908, he finished second behind William Dod, another British archer.

The largest percentage of athletes from Wales competing in any single sport was hockey, where in common with the other all three home nations entered their home team.

The competition therefore included England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

This came about after the Irish Hockey Association rejected an English proposal for a combined British Hockey team. This resulted in the decision that each of the British nations would enter their own team, all under the name of 'Great Britain and Ireland'.¹⁵ This made for a six-team competition alongside France and Germany.

The hockey tournament at the 1908 Olympics was one of the events often referred to as the 'Autumn Games'. It which took place between 29-31 October. After a bye in the first round (where France and Germany were eliminated), Wales took on the Irish in the semi-final, a match they lost 3-1. Despite the defeat, the Welsh team were awarded a bronze medal alongside Scotland, who were defeated by England in their semi-final. England defeated Ireland 8-1 in the gold medal match.

Amongst the Welsh competitors were three female archers who competed in the double National round archery. These were Louisa Nott Bower who finished

11th, Doris Day who placed 16th and Katherine Mudge 17th respectively. These were the first ever Welsh women to compete at the Olympic Games.

The coverage of the 1908 Olympics in the Welsh Press

The 1908 Olympic Games received extensive coverage in the Welsh press and provide a valuable source, principally the *South Wales Daily News (SWDN)* and *the Western Mail*. The latter claimed to be the 'voice of Wales',¹⁶ and included some of the most extensive and insightful Olympic commentary found in the British press. These publications reported daily on the efforts of British athletes and often played special attention to the performances of Welshmen. Predominantly, these articles presented the conclusion that Welsh success was one for Britain and that all British successes were a source of Welsh pride.

Other newspapers analysed for this article gave less comprehensive coverage of the Olympics, and principally focused on the performances of Welsh athletes. A prime example of the Welsh press concentrating on their own came in the weekly *Cardiff Times* and *South Wales Weekly News*. For instance, following the first week of the Games, an article appeared reflecting on the opening ceremony events, before concluding with a subsection entitled 'Welsh gymnasts at the Stadium':

*Welsh athletes will watch with interest the doings of the representatives of the Principality in the Olympic Games. The four countries are considered as one in these championships, and in the gymnastic section Donville, of Cardiff St Saviour's, and Meade, of Abertillery, will do battle for Wales. Both are internationals.*¹⁷

This section does little more than state the facts, but crucially it demonstrates a firm interest in the performance of Welsh athletes at the Games. The statement of how the gymnasts were doing 'battle for Wales' could be seen as an indication of the pride in representing Wales.

The *South Wales Weekly Post*, published in Swansea, also concentrated upon Welsh athletes in an article headed 'South Walians "out of it" at the Stadium.'¹⁸ This referred to the exit of three men from Swansea, Newport and Cardiff, who had competed in the Olympic athletics events. The preference for concentrating upon the efforts of Welsh athletes continued the following week with a description of the half mile race.¹⁹ Both these articles promoted Welshmen, separating themselves from Britain, a notion that was also ap-

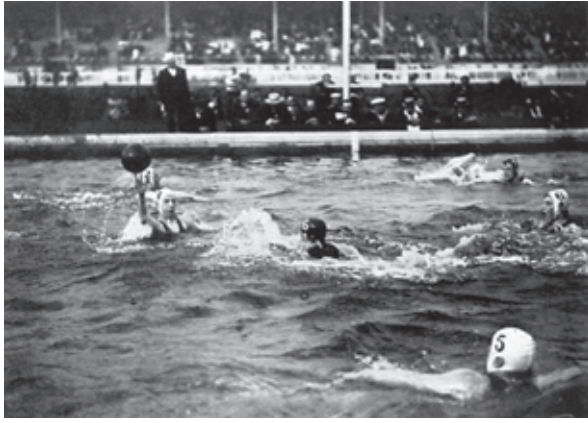
parent in the post's article on the marathon, headed 'Englishman's poor show' which simply listed the 27 men that completed the race (none of whom came from Wales, nor is there any evidence of any Welsh participants in any of the trial races).²⁰

The publication's separation of Wales from Britain was not universal. Its edition of 1 August defended those attacking British physicality and its apparent decline following the marathon race, (where the first Britisher home came in 12th position), calling it 'unadulterated balderdash.'²¹ It argued that American athletes had only been so successful because of 'superior science, determination and training' and believed the British failure came because 'our crack runners exhausted themselves in the initial ten miles; is a glaring object lesson in the folly of ignoring brain and relying solely upon brawn.'²² This sentiment was commonplace in the British press, following a race where the home athletes failed to get the expected victory.²³ The article also made a subtle reference to Welsh physicality as it stated that 'the Anglo-Celt and Scandinavian races have been easily first; Dorando Pietri has been practically the only Latin to champion effectively the prowess of the Mediterranean race.'

Pietri was the Italian who won the Olympic marathon but only to be disqualified afterwards for the help he received from the officials in crossing the finishing line. This kind of reference had more in common with the coverage of the 1905 Wales versus New Zealand rugby match, with the emphasis upon different physical characteristics between English and Welshmen. The article was also the only time when 'Celtic' is used within the Welsh coverage found.

The efforts of Welsh athletes at the Olympic Games featured strongly within the Welsh press. When her athletes came to the fore, the press changed from a British to a Welsh perspective. For example, the *SWDN* was the only British newspaper identified that took an interest in the visit of the Prince of Wales to the White City.²⁴ The paper often referred to the performances of Welsh athletes in its Olympic Games articles, such as 'Walters of Cardiff, in the Hurdles',²⁵ referring to David Walters victory over Lemming in the first round of the 110 metre hurdles. Some notable achievements are missed, such as after the gold medal success of rower Albert Gladstone in the 'Eights',²⁶ but there was a desire to feature the success of Welshmen within the Welsh press.

The most comprehensive 1908 Olympic coverage in the Welsh press came in the pages of the *Western Mail*. Its coverage was more comparable to the English dailies than the Welsh publications previously referred, with regular results and descriptions of the actions



Action from the 1908 men's water polo final between Great Britain and Belgium

which evinced pride in the British performance. On 20 July for example, it carried a story headlined 'British still advancing in points' and in the body of the article proclaimed, 'Great Britain and Ireland successively carried off the 5,000 metres cycle, the 200metre breast stroke, the tug of war.'

It approached the subject of the spirit in which the Olympics, (at least the athletics events) had been played out in a number of editorials. One such suggested that

*"Olympic contests are very admirable in their way. They are great agencies for promoting international concord. But we wish they could be a little more sportsmanlike. The etiquette of sport differs in different countries, and this may account for more than one unpleasant incident which has marked the progress of the exciting contests in the Stadium. It is no spirit of vanity that we say it, but we think Great Britain can claim to have set before herself a high standard of sportsmanship. Sometimes we may fall short of it: but, with all the shortcomings, it remains a standard that deserves to rule and that other nations would profit by copying."*²⁷

The tone in this article, comparable with others found in this publication features British morals and sense of superiority. Although it is different to English editorials upon the same subject in that it admits to the British falling short upon its own moral standards (presumably in reference to the incidents in the 400 metres and tug of war). Despite this feeling, it still indicates a feeling that British sportsmen are superior to those of other nations.

The failure of the British athletes in the marathon was a blow to its belief in its physical superiority. In the aftermath of the race, other British qualities were promoted, such as Britain's apparent good sportsmanship:

*"If anything could prevent that it would be the graceful act on the part of Queen Alexandra on Saturday, when she presented the courageous Dorando, who came so near to winning the Marathon Race, with a special cup. In doing so her Majesty gave practical expression to the sporting instincts of the British people. On more than one occasion during the week of the games that the spirit of sportsmanship has made itself felt in the stadium. It reached its highest expression, perhaps, at the close of the great Marathon race, when Britishers cheered every arrival, whether Italian, American, or any other nationality, with splendid impartiality. The spirit of sportsmanship triumphed over the natural feeling of regret that the English representatives were nowhere in the race. With this spontaneous demonstration before them, the detractors of British sportsmanship might have been expected to change their opinions, or, at any rate, their tone. But there is little sign of that yet."*²⁸

Throughout this article in the Western Mail, there are references to apparent positive British sportsmanship, particularly during the final lines. Interestingly it portrays the British athletes in the marathon race as 'English', perhaps in an attempt to separate Wales from this English failure. This editorial was not the only one in this publication concern the race to separate the rest of 'Britain' from the English failure, as two days previously its initial article on the previous days' marathon race it wrote; *'to Englishmen it is a great disappointment, because, with all the advantages of climate in their favour, the British runners fail miserably, to approach the expectations they inspired.'*

The Western Mail's 'London Letter' (a daily editorial featuring short articles of a Welsh interest from London), also separated Wales from England. It began with the comment; 'the poor display of the English runners in the marathon race is due not so much to bad general ship as to the excessive heat.'

A similar tone was expressed later in the same article, when it was described that 'the Englishmen started as though running a sprint. Ten miles in fifty minutes, and under a burning sun! No wonder they fell out and let their opponents pass them.' Despite the failure, there was some sympathy.

Despite the failures, the majority of articles in the Welsh press demonstrated a pro-British sentiment, and a pride in the nation's achievements. A prime example of this appeared in the *South Wales Daily News*:

"The superiority of the British athlete is freely and fully admitted; he has the physique and the opportunities for training. This country has shown the way in open-air sports and has revived the spirit of emulation of the

classic days of Greece and Rome. The Olympic Games this year have demonstrated that, after all, Great Britain is not, physically at least, on the down grade!"²⁹

This editorial came under the title of 'the Moral of the Stadium' and focused primarily upon the international reaction to the Olympics. It believed that international sport 'instead of leading to international friendship leads to international war.'³⁰

Aside from the examples above, there was little evidence of negativity within the Welsh press. The only other notable example of Olympic related negativity came after Alfred Yeoumans, the Welsh Champion walker was unable to compete in London because 'he could not get his expenses paid to compete in the walking matches at the Olympic Games.'³¹ No further comment was made about this, but the frustration was apparent, and one comparable to that felt within the sporting press of the North and Midlands of England, whose athletes suffered similar problems.

Throughout their coverage of the Games, both the *Western Mail* and *SWDN* wrote about all the men of Britain when they were competing and demonstrated pride in their victories. Comparable to what was seen in the majority of the British press, those in Wales offered a retrospective upon the Games immediately after their conclusion a British perspective was presented. An example of this came in the *SWDN*; it wrote of 'Olympic Amenities',³² and presented a standpoint frequently seen in the English dailies. It believed that at the Games the British had demonstrated superiority in its organisation, abilities and sporting manners.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Welsh presses coverage of the Olympics came in its representations following the marathon defeat, when it spoke of 'Englishmen' rather than the 'British'. This might be example of interchangeable use of the words English/England and British/Britain that was commonplace in the British press at this time; although this is not something seen within the Welsh press sources analysed here. If it is not, then it could be argued that this was an attempt by the Welsh press to see its nations failure, which was a blow to ideas of the supposed physical prowess of British/English athletes.

Concluding their coverage of the Olympic events of late July, both the *Western Mail* and the *SWDN* took a British outlook and wrote with pride in the performance of the nation. An editorial from the former believed; 'Great Britain has every reason to be proud of her achievements in the Stadium, where her victories



Paulo Radmilovic

far exceed in number those of the United States or any other country'.³³ The *SWDN* also wrote from a similar perspective stating; 'It may be added that England is holding her own against the world; her champions have won the majority of events: which is some answer to the cry of British degeneracy.'³⁴ This article adds to the list of numerous Welsh articles that used the terms both British and English, but significantly, it mocked the cry of British degeneracy.

Paulo Radmilovic

The gold medals won in swimming and water polo at the 1908 Olympics made Paulo Radmilovic the most successful Welsh athlete. Perhaps no athlete embodied the 'new' industrial Wales better than Radmilovic. His father was a Croatian immigrant who had moved to Cardiff in the 1860s, his mother was Cardiff born, but to Irish immigrant parentage. His parents were publicans, running the 'Glastonbury Arms' pub in Bute Street, a career which Radmilovic would pursue in his adult life.

A national champion in the 100m freestyle at the age of 15 in 1901 (a title he would win 15 times), Radmilovic moved to Weston-Super-Mare in England at the age of 18. After joining the town's water polo club, he helped it to become one of the major forces in the sport, as they became English Champions four times. They were also runners up on four other occasions between 1906 and 1925.

His international swimming career began at the 1906 Olympic Games in Athens, known in Britain as Intercalated Games.

Following this, he competed at every Olympic Games from 1908 to 1928, becoming the first British athlete to compete at five Olympics.

Primarily, he competed in the water polo, but in 1908 and 1912 he featured in swimming.

time. Rob Cole, trustee of the Welsh Sports Hall of Fame, has called him 'arguably Wales greatest ever sportsman'.⁴⁰ Despite his success, Radmilovic's story remains largely untold.

Coverage in the Welsh Language Press

Along with the coverage offered by newspapers published in English, there was some limited Olympic related comment in the Welsh language press. Typically, during this period, the interest in sport within these publications was extremely limited and this is reflected in the coverage offered in *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* and *Y Gwyllydydd*, with only three Olympic related articles appearing across these two publications, although they do give some insight into their perspective on the Games. The first of these articles appeared on 22 July, when *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* reflected on the performance of two athletes the publication believed might be Welsh:

"It is not easy to guess how much fascination we should feel in the Olympic sports that are now being carried on in the French-British Exhibition in the capital. They have contact points from almost every country under the sun. We saw one Welsh name among those successful for running 'the five-mile flat race' -E. Owen but, from where, we do not know.

Ben Jones of Wigan, too, is probably a Welshman of blood, if not tongue in cheek. He was competing on his 'bike'. Bad we haven't succeeded. He was defeated by a German. He left that to him an advantage that he should not have given him at all. We see that E. Owen lives in Manchester."⁴¹

As the first sentence of the article suggests, the publication is unsure how much interest it should demonstrate in the Olympics. This is further shown by the fact that despite the athletes mentioned had typically Welsh surnames, they had no discernible Welsh connection. Edward Owen was born in Manchester and competed for athletic clubs in the city, before going on to manage both the Belle Vue (Manchester) and Crayford & Bexleyheath Greyhound tracks. Like Owen, Ben Jones also had no apparent Welsh connection and originated from Wigan, England and despite the remark here, did enjoy a successful Olympics, winning 2 gold medals and a silver from the 5 events he competed in.

Reflecting on the Marathon race, the same publication made fairly extensive comment. It began by stating that 'we don't know how much humility our readers took in the Olympic Games...one thing is certain,

namely, that the scene at the end of the great twenty-six-mile run will never be forgotten'.⁴²

The report continued; 'nothing more painful and distressing has ever been seen as an example of humanity having exhausted its strength; and distressing as an example of official folly'. It also remarked that the treatment of the Dorando after he was disqualified after he received help in the closing day, was 'appalling' and explained in some its beliefs that the race should not have taken place in such hot conditions. The sole Olympic article in the pages of *Y Gwyllydydd* also reflected on the marathon race, and also took a dim view of the event:

"No one is prepared to speak out against the naturalistic practices, given that they are kept within reasonable limits, but I wonder, in fact, that some of the competitions that took place in London during the days were not run to excess. last? What practical, or at least, what good, purpose would be achieved in getting men running for the first for a distance of twenty-six miles? Didn't creativity see one of the runners falling three times short of strength, and then being helped to finish the ride by his fans? Hopefully, this inhuman scene will be outlandish for such feats of character to exercise greater prudence and display more humanity in the future."⁴³

Both the articles from the Welsh language press seen here demonstrated a negative perspective of the Olympic marathon. Both focused on the brutality and physical effort and conditions of the marathon race. As demonstrated in this article and others from across the British press, there was undoubtedly a negative response to the running of the marathon race. The lack of coverage of the Games in the Welsh language press might be seen as an indication of the divisions in Welsh society, and that not all of Wales was necessarily interested in this 'British' venture.

Conclusions

Welsh athletes made some significant contributions at the 1908 Olympics. It was the first Olympics at which the principality provided a significant number of athletes, including its first female (four years later Irene Steer was to become Wales's first female Olympic medallist) and its first Olympic medals.

Paulo Radmilovic was one of the outstanding athletes of the Games by winning medals in two different disciplines. Despite living much of his life in England, he was always a proud Welshman. In 1951, he was interviewed by BBC Radio.

*"I'm the only man in the world today - not the only Welshman but the only human being in the world today - that ever represented in six Olympic Games. I'm the only man in the world that's won the sprint and the long distance [Amateur Swimming Association] championship, nobody in the world has ever won a sprint and a long distance, but Radmilovic as a Welshman I did it for Wales."*⁴⁴

(n.b. Radmilovic's claim to being in six Olympics refers to his participation in the 1906 Intercalated Games)

Such a comment demonstrates Radmilovic's pride in competing not for Britain, but for Wales and the same could be true of the coverage of the 1908 Olympics across the Welsh press.

Wales and the Welsh press were undoubtedly proud of the successes of the British team, but when a Welsh athlete was at the fore, there was special pride. This fits in with the historiography of this period from a political and economic perspective; Wales was proud to be part of the success of Britain and its Empire, while also being delighted about the accomplishments of Welshmen.

The consequence of this was that the tone of the articles is always positive when reflecting on the performances of Welsh athletes. The only time which the English-language Welsh language press was negative came when writing of a British perspective, and within this it was clear to separate Wales and Welsh athletes from this, seeing the failures depicted as being 'English'. In 1909, an article in the *SWDN* once again referred to the traits of Welsh physical superiority and sport making Wales a nation:

"Wales is a very small country. The success which has attended her efforts in athletics is therefore a sort of miracle. It has been attained by the exercise of those qualities in which critics of the Welsh declare us to be deficient-hard work, self-control, discipline. The game has been intellectualised by our players. Whatever may happen in the future, Wales is signalised."

Such a comment furthers the concept of sport playing a pivotal role of forming its new identity, seen in the Welsh coverage of the 1908 Olympics. Wales was undoubtedly proud to contribute towards British success, but wanted also whenever possible to highlight the achievements of Welsh athletes.

Acknowledgments

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