

BASKETBALL'S LONG JOURNEY INTO THE OLYMPIC PROGRAMME

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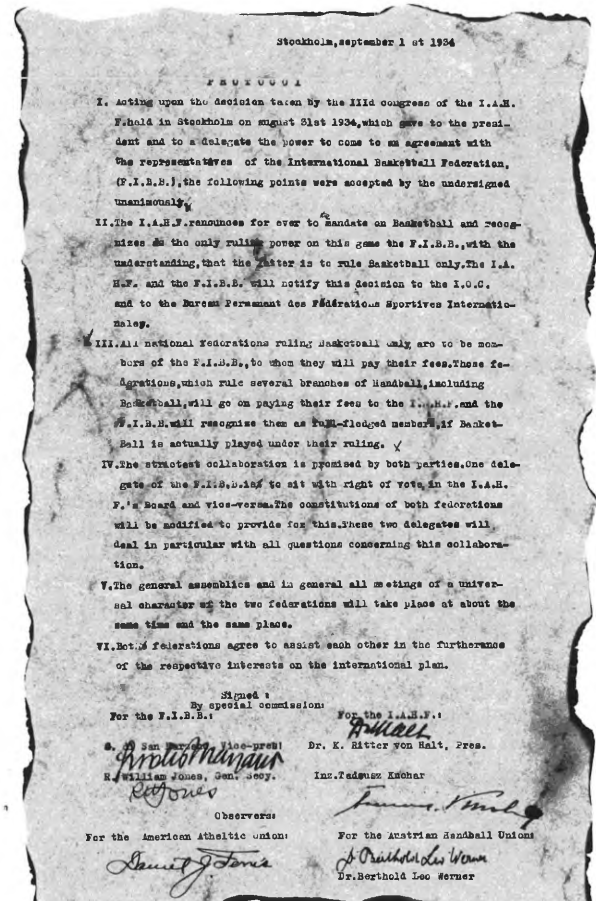
Basketball today is a popular worldwide sport and undisputedly forms part of the Olympic programme. Nevertheless, it was a long and winding road that led to the first Olympic tournament for men in 1936 in Berlin, and women even had to wait another 40 years until they were granted equal rights under the basket in Montreal. Most scientific work on basketball has so far made only brief reference to basketball's journey into the Olympics,¹ but recent publications, along with this author's research, promise to offer a more detailed description of the struggle for inclusion into the Olympic programme and the first Olympic competition.²

The Canadian, James Naismith, had invented basketball in 1891,³ but it was not until 1932 that an independent international federation was formed. Although the game was a demonstration sport by teams from the US at the 1904 Olympic Games and was also included in the programme of the Jeux de l'enfance of 1924 in Paris, the athletics world federation of the time (IAAF) as of 1926 governed all ball games played with the hand, i.e. handball, volleyball and basketball. This first organizational approach did not hold long, however, because the International Handball Federation (IAHF), founded in Amsterdam in 1928, claimed control over basketball as well as field-handball and court-handball. Yet the Technical Commission for Basketball remained practically idle and therefore ineffective throughout its existence. Upon proposals by the Argentinian federation, the IAHF at least achieved the recognition of basketball as an Olympic sport at the 1930 IOC Session in Berlin, but the 1932 Olympic Games in the motherland of this game, the USA, still did not include an Olympic basketball tournament since no efforts had been made to organize one.⁴

In 1932, the Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBB) was founded in Geneva as an independent body for the sport. Three years later, in 1935, its name was changed to Fédération Internationale de Basketball Amateur (FIBA) in order to comply with the amateur ideals of the IOC.

When the FIBB claimed in 1932 sole jurisdiction over basketball and contacted the IOC to apply for membership in the association of Fédérations Internationales Sportives (FIS), the IAHF, which had hitherto remained inactive, stated its objection. This resulted in an ever-fiercer battle between the world handball federation and the FIBB for legitimate representation of basketball. The IAHF even described the foundation of the FIBB as an act of 'unkindness toward the IAHF'.

For all that, the decisive factor for participation in the Olympic Games still was the recognition by the IOC that had been granted solely to the IAHF. The two organizations now fought a silent duel over who was and would be the actual representative body for Olympic basketball. The FIBB lobbied the IOC, which, after all, regarded it as a partner, and took a first stage victory with its *de facto* recognition as an 'autonomous w federation'. The IOC demanded an agreement between the two disputing bodies



The protocol of the 1934 IAHF congress: the 'declaration of independence of international basketball'

as a condition for a basketball tournament at the games in Berlin.⁵ Due to the aggressive policy of its secretary general, R William Jones, the FIBB regarded an Olympic tournament as a given even before the organizing committee in Berlin had granted approval. Meanwhile, the IAHF tried to defend its jurisdiction over basketball and this was one of the topics to be discussed at their Third Congress held between 31 August and 1 September 1934 in Stockholm. Although the IAHF had not invited any representative of the FIBB to its congress, the young federation sent their vice president, Count Giorgio di San Marzano, and their secretary general, Jones, to Stockholm at the federation's expense. They either (according to the IAHF minutes) participated without objection from the delegates or (according to Jones) were only allowed to stay after a vote had been proposed by the representatives from the US, Avery Brundage and Dan J Ferris.

Karl Ritter von Halt, the IAHF president, suggested that two representatives of the FIBB be accepted into the IAHF commission for basketball and that the IAHF should remain the governing body for this sport. Jones roundly rejected the proposal. For him, the only acceptable outcome was the recognition of the FIBB's independence.

IAHF secretary general Hasler introduced the baseless

argument that France was opposing the FIBB due to differences in the rules, which may serve as an example of how uninformed the IAHF was about its counterpart, the FIBB. In fact, the French federation had initially stood apart but it had reached an agreement with the FIBB by March 1934.

Finally, on the night of 1 September, a special commission formed of representatives of both federations and two observers⁶ produced a protocol whose six paragraphs without much debate achieved the unanimous approval of the IAHF congress⁷.

The 'declaration of independence of international basketball' of 1 September 1934 states in Paragraph II that the IAHF 'renounces for ever to the mandate on Basketball and recognizes as the only ruling power on this game the FIBB., with the understanding that the latter is to rule Basketball only. The IAHF and the FIBB will notify this decision to the IOC and to the Bureau Permanent des Fédérations Sportives Internationales.' The promised 'strictest collaboration' between the respective executive committees of IAHF and FIBB was never realized and the intention to hold concurrent general assemblies of both federations materialized only once, in 1936 in Berlin. The sixth and last paragraph of the protocol, which reads 'Both federations agree to assist each other in furtherance of the respective interests on the international plan' was also carried out only once when the two secretary generals, Adam Nothhelfer (IAHF) and Jones (FIBA), wrote, in vain, a joint letter to convince IOC president Baillet Latour to include handball and basketball in the programme of the (cancelled) 1940 games in Helsinki.⁸

Jones' view that the number of FIBB members had automatically augmented to 17 with the Stockholm agreement had been generally accepted without validation. Yet, this assumption was wrong with respect to Germany, because the organizer of the Olympic games – and this was a paradox – did not have an official body to represent its few basketball teams. The first unofficial contact with the FIBB from Germany is dated 24 May 1935.

Soon after the Stockholm agreement, the way was paved for the first Olympic tournament in Berlin in 1936. Uncertainties remain about when exactly Carl Diem, who was secretary general of the Berlin organizing committee and had been Jones' teacher in Berlin, expressed a basic willingness to include basketball in the programme. On 19 October 1934, the IOC executive commission gave its approval and on 31 October the organizing committee announced the inclusion of 'Korbball' (literal translation of 'basketball' to German) through its press office.⁹

The 23 members of the IOC Session on 28 January 1935 in Oslo gave their final approval and thereby recognized what already become a reality of sports politics: 'The programmes presented by the world federations for equestrian, weightlifting, bobsleigh and luge, boxing, shooting, rowing, handball, and basketball; and by the International Cycling Union were accepted'. This rather general phrasing contained, in fact, the baptismal

certificate of the FIBB as an independent federation with equal rights.

PRIEBE defends the thesis that basketball was accepted into the programme of the 1936 games to create a counterbalance to the advocates of an American boycott, but he does not corroborate this claim with convincing arguments, let alone specific references.

During the preparations for the tournament in Berlin, Jones closely cooperated with the organizing committee. He visited the tennis courts that were to be converted into outdoor basketball courts and from mid-1935 kept himself informed on the spot about the ongoing implementation of the plans. The German-Canadian Robert W Duis was in charge of basketball on behalf of the organizing committee and was also one of the two civilians who, with eight soldiers, formed the German team.

Since the USOC did not have funds to support travel expenses, James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, would have been unable to attend the Olympic premiere but for the sponsors. He took an active part on two occasions: he threw the jump ball to the opening match on 7 August 1936 between France and Estonia, and after the rainy final between the USA and Canada (19:8) he awarded the medals. When the decorations for one further athlete were left over, FIBA secretary general Jones quickly seized the unique opportunity and – against Olympic conventions – gave the last medal to Naismith, after which a German girl crowned the 75-year-old with an oak wreath. 'A mystical experience', Naismith would later recall. ■

Notes and References

- 1 COLBECK, A Leslie, JONES, R William, BUSNEL, Robert, SZERMATA, Witold & MARTIN, Luis A (ed.): *The Basketball World. Munich 1972* and STRÖHER, Manfred, KREBS, Hans-Dieter: *R William Jones*. Karlsruhe 1998.
- 2 ARNOLD, Melanie: *Der Olympische Werdegang des Basketballspiels – Eine quellenhistorische Analyse unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des IOC-Archivs in Lausanne*. Diplomarbeit (Master's thesis) University of Mainz 2008 and PRIEBE, Alexander: "Wie das amerikanische Basketballspiel im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland olympisch wurde", in: *Sportwissenschaft* 4(2008), pp. 380-390.
- 3 NAISMITH, James: *Basketball. Its origin and development*. London 1996.
- 4 Cf ARNOLD: *Werdegang*, p. 26.
- 5 Minutes Session of 1933 (Second year of the Xth Olympiad). Vienna. Session of Thursday, 8 June 1933 (September 1933, p. 10) IOC archive.
- 6 Members of this special commission were Dr Karl Ritter von Halt and Tadeusz Kuchar (IAHF), Count di San Marzano and R. William Jones (FIBA), as well as Dan Ferris (AAU) and Dr Berthold Leo Werner (Österreichische Handball Union [Austrian Handball Union]) as observers.
- 7 'Protocol, Stockholm, 1 September 1934', in: STRÖHER/KREBS: *Jones*, p. 57.
- 8 Jones/Nothhelfer of 31 May 1939 to IOC president Count Baillet Latour. FIBA archive. Baillet Latour's negative reply in separate letters to IAHF and FIBA of 10 June 1939 was criticized in the

official German magazine *Handball* 8(1939) in an article with the title 'Vergeblich' (in vain). According to the article, the negative attitude shown by the Finnish organizers would 'cause substantial

damage to the Olympic idea.'

9 Cf PRIEBE: *Basketballspiel*, p. 386.