

THE NORDIC GAMES
and
THE ORIGINS OF THE OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES

by Ron Edgeworth

The Olympic Winter Games formally began in 1924 at Chamonix, although they were originally known as the *Semaine internationale des sports d'hiver*. Prior to that time, winter sports events had been held during the Summer Games of 1908 (figure skating) and 1920 (figure skating and ice hockey). But there existed an earlier international winter sports festival, the Nordic Games, which began in 1901. The Nordic Games were presented in *Revue Olympique* as the "Scandinavian Olympiads."⁶ Many years later, *Olympic Review* wrote that "The intensive focus of Scandinavian sport, they can be regarded as a precursor to the Winter Games which were to come."⁶ But were they?

Early History of the Nordic Games

Suggested by Professor E. Johan Widmark,⁶ the initiative to hold Nordic Games was taken in 1899, the first ones being arranged in 1901.^{2,5,6,7,8,15} After this inaugural event in Stockholm, Nordic Games were held in 1905, 1909, 1913, 1917, 1922, and 1926, always during February.^{2,5,6,7,8,15} The Games were arranged by the Sveriges Central Förening för Idrottens Främjande [SCFIF] (Swedish Central Association for the Promotion of Sports).^{6,7,15} In 1903, a Nordic Winter Sports' Week (*Nordisk Vinteridræsuge*) was also contested in Kristiania (Oslo), but the organization was apparently different.⁶ As that name suggests, the Nordic Games lasted for a week.

The SCFIF was led by Viktor Balck, the leading figure in the early Swedish sports' movement, and it had been founded in 1897 at Stockholm's Royal Palace. Balck, Sven Hermelin, and Clarence von Rosen, all high-ranking military officers and well-known nationalists on the political right, were behind its founding.¹⁵

Why were the Nordic Games established? Two partly related motives have been expressed more often than others, nationalism and commercialism.^{7,15} Balck clarified the motivation behind their establishment: "Above all we placed the national goal of rendering a service to the fatherland and bringing honor to our country. The Nordic Games have now become a national concern for our entire people."^{10,15}

The impetus for the beginnings of the Nordic Games were thus primarily nationalistic. *Ny tidning för idrott* wrote in 1901, "It is in the winter season that Scandanavians are able to achieve a sport week as no other people in Europe, and we should hold our banner high where we are able; we should make the Swedish name known and respected. That has thus been a fundamental idea with the arrangement of the Nordic Games."^{11,15}

Was the purpose of the Nordic Games to establish Olympic Winter Games? The sports history literature suggests that there may have been such intentions: Lindroth has noted, "The

goal was to thus create something for winter sports to correspond with the Olympic Games for summer sports.”^{4,15}

But several factors argue against the attempt to link the Nordic Games with the origins of the Olympic Winter Games.¹⁵ According to *Ny tidning för Idrott* (the SCFIF publication), Swedish support was essential: “The most fundamental implications of the Nordic Games have been, in addition to the fostering of a hardy species, the rallying of the Swedes around something really national. It had long been a weakness among us that we have not had something acceptably national, which could assemble the entire people.”¹⁵

It was not simply the idea of furthering nationalistic pride but also of creating publicity for Sweden in other countries. Sweden was to be showcased, as a nation and as a site for tourism. The purely nationalistic ambitions were thus complemented by commercial motives.

When one understands these motives, the structure of the Nordic Games becomes comprehensible. The Nordic Games were not simply sports competitions but they also included theater, gala performances at the Opera and Grand Theater, excursions to the archipelago, parades, celebrations, and visits to Skansen - an open air museum in central Stockholm which was inaugurated in 1891 for the purpose of preserving Swedish countryside farms, houses, churches, and schools.

The Nordic Games were meant to promote Skansen as a microcosm of Sweden. At the great World Fairs which were held in various parts of the west beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, industrial capacity and innovative potential were the primary focus. But folk culture was also discovered to be capable of attracting an audience. Consequently, nations began to promote their folk culture. In Sweden, both ancient nordism and the peasant style, via Skansen, were mobilized to promote the Nordic Games.

Viktor Balck and His Influence

The leading figure in the administration of the Nordic Games was General Viktor Gustaf Balck of Sweden (1844-1928), a pioneer in sports development and a charter member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) from 1894- 1921.^{2,8,12,15} Balck was the second President of the International Skating Union (ISU), serving from 1894-1925. A career officer in the Swedish Army, rising ultimately to the rank of Major General,¹³ Balck was also a leader in the sport of gymnastics, as well as in the Olympic Movement.¹³ He was a close personal friend of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, and a man of great influence in international sport.

The ISU nearly disbanded in 1893-94. Because of a lack of uniform international rules, the principal officers almost resigned over a disputed result in the 1893 Men's European Figure Skating Championships.¹³ Balck was elected President by a mail vote to fill the vacancy and one of his first actions in becoming President was to obtain the adoption of proper rules for the conduct of the competitions in both figure and speed skating at the next Congress.¹³

Thereafter, Balck did much to unify and strengthen the ISU as well as expand it beyond Europe, with members from North America and the Far East joining the organization during his time. After the First World War, he delayed the post-War reorganization of the ISU until 1921 so that the national associations from the defeated nations, principally Germany and Austro-Hungary, could reorganize themselves and be returned to membership with full rights.¹³ As a result, the ISU Championships in both disciplines were not revived until 1922, 3½ years after the end of the war.

For the same reasons, Balck opposed the inclusion of figure skating in the 1920 Olympic Games at Antwerp, since they were not open to competitors from the defeated nations.¹³ Initially, the ISU threatened the suspension of all the participants in the events, but

eventually relented and permitted them to take place without penalty to the participants, but without the official sanction or participation of the ISU.¹³ As a consequence, the figure slotting events were somewhat “chaotic” and disorganized (according to a competitor), due to the inexperience of the local organizing committee from Belgium.

It was Balck who established World Championship events in figure skating for ladies and pairs, although they did not arrive in speed skating for ladies until much later.

Retiring in 1925 as ISU President after the longest tenure (30 years) of any President before or since, Balck was elected the first honorary President of the ISU in that year and passed away in 1928 at the age of 84.¹³ He had maintained an active interest in the ISU and its events right up to the end.¹⁵ Much of the credit for the longevity and durability of the ISU as an international federation, the oldest in winter sports, is due to him.¹³ Much of the impetus for the Nordic Games is also due to him.

The Program of the Nordic Games

The Nordic Games included all the popular winter sports, such as ski jumping, downhill racing, cross-country skiing and nordic combined, skeleton, ice yachting, skate sailing, speed skating, figure skating, ice hockey, curling, bandy, sled-dog racing, and even other non-winter sports, such as fencing (including, in 1901, foil fencing with both hands), a long-distance equestrian ride from Enköping to Stockholm (ca 80 km.), and swimming in different years.^{2,6,8,15} Other unusual winter sports contested were skeleton sleighing behind horses, hunting with horses, skiing behind reindeers, different forms of military sports, car racing, motorcycle racing, ballooning, kick-sled and pulka racing. In the 1901 skiing behind reindeer competition, prize money was awarded to three Laplanders, but not to a military officer. The Nordic Games were mostly held in or around Stockholm, although twice [1905 and 1913] they were moved, for lack of snow, to Östersund.^{6,15}

Throughout their existence, various world and European championships were held in conjunction with the Games, especially in speed and figure skating. In fact, the Nordic Games have a significant place in the early history of international championships. In turn, the skating championships raised the international appeal of the Nordic Games. In 1901, the World Figure Skating Championships (for men only at that time) had been announced and scheduled for London.⁶ However, due to the death of Queen Victoria in January, the Championship was hastily moved to Stockholm as part of the first Nordic Games in February.* Only two competitors took part, Ulrich Salchow of Sweden, who defeated Gilbert Fuchs of Germany.^{8,14} The 1901 World Championships in Speed Skating (again for men only) was also held in Stockholm on the two days preceding the figure skating event, with Franz Fredrik Wathén of Finland being declared the champion, by winning three of the four races (500, 1,500, and 10,000 metres).^{6,8,14}

The 1905 World Figure Skating Championships for men were held in Stockholm as part of the second Nordic Games,⁶ with Salchow winning his fifth title in a field of three competitors from Sweden, one from Austria, and one from Germany.⁸ The European Speed Skating⁸ Championships for men was also held in Stockholm just a day before the figure skating.

The third Nordic Games followed in 1909, and included World and ISU title events for men and pairs (the ladies' event was held in Budapest that year).⁸ Salchow continued his dominance among the men, winning his eighth title, while Phyllis and James Johnson of Great Britain won the pairs. (Both ladies' and pair events at this time carried the title of Championships of the ISU. It was not until 1924 that both events were recognized as World Championships.¹⁴) No ISU championships in speed skating were organized in Stockholm in

1909, although the World Championships for men was held in Kristiania (Oslo) three weeks later.

At the 1909 Nordic Games, about 2,000 athletes took part. Of these, more than half were shooters, mostly military men, and nearly 300 took part in horse racing. The foreign representation consisted of only 32 athletes from 8 countries. The Games were thus primarily an event by and for the Swedes. They did not at all have the same international stamp as the Olympics.¹⁵

In 1913 the World Championships in ladies' and pairs' figure skating were contested as part of the Nordic Games. Opika von Méray Horváth of Hungary won the ladies' championship, while Helene Engelmann and K. Meijstrick of Austria won the pairs.

The World and European Championship events organized in conjunction with the Nordic Games added greatly to their prestige. Consequently, the Scandinavian countries, and especially Sweden, repeatedly resisted the call for separate Olympic Winter Games under the auspices of the IOC. They obviously feared that not to do so would mean only the end of their established Games, but also of the general Nordic dominance in winter sports in Europe as well.

Thus, despite the fact that no World or ISU Championships in speed skating and figure skating were held between 1915 and 1921 due to World War I, and the economic unrest that followed it in Europe, the fifth Nordic Games were again staged in 1917 in Stockholm as scheduled, with the legendary Gillis Grafström of Sweden winning the title in men's figure skating.

In 1920, following the close of World War I, figure skating was placed on the Olympic program for only the second time at the Antwerp Olympics. Ice hockey was also introduced as an Olympic sport with great success. The movement for separate recognition of winter sports on the Olympic level began to increase rapidly internationally as a result.

The next Nordic Games were delayed one year and rescheduled from 1921 to 1922, in order to occur between the Games of the Olympiads.⁸ The sixth Games included ISU recognized championship events in figure skating for men and ladies,⁶ with Gillis Grafström winning the first of his three world titles, and Herma Plank-Szabó of Austria winning the ladies' championship, the first of five altogether.⁸

As an appeasement to the pressure being exerted from several countries, the IOC finally endorsed a Winter Sports Week to be held in 1924 in observance of the VIIth Olympiad planned for Paris. Scandinavian fears were indeed realized when that highly successful week at Chamonix-Mont Blanc in the Haut de Savoie was recognized, after the fact in May 1926, as the first Olympic Winter Games, with the second Winter Games scheduled for Saint Moritz, Switzerland in 1928.

The seventh Nordic Games were held as planned in 1926 (6-14 February)¹², with only the World Figure Skating Championships for ladies as an official international event. Herma Plank-Szabó repeated as the ladies champion for the last time and would relinquish the title the following year to Norway's Sonja Henie.

Political Problems Surrounding the Nordic Games

The Nordic Games were predominately contested by people from the Nordic countries. Today this consists of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, and Norway. It should be remembered, however, that Iceland was a part of Denmark until 1918; Finland was a subordinate of Russia until 1919; and Norway was part of Sweden until 1905. It should also be noted that Finland was not included in the Nordic community in that era. Finland's exclusion was probably due to the language barrier and its relationship to Russia.¹⁵ The

strongest foreign (i.e., non-Swedish) participation at the Nordic Games occurred in 1922 when Norway, Finland, France, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania provided 126 competitors.

No significant political confrontations marred the first Nordic Games. Actually a voluntary organization, *Brödafolkens väl* (The Well-Being of the Brother Peoples) was formed between Sweden and Norway in an attempt to use sports to promote international understanding. Founded in 1903, the group planned to arrange smaller sporting events between the two Scandinavian countries.

The Nordic Games of 1905 were held from 4-12 February. At about this time, Norway was also gaining its independence from Sweden. Negotiations regarding this political division fell apart on 7 February 1905 because of disagreements over whether the two nations should have separate consulates in other nations. The Norwegian press then advocated that Norway withdraw from the Nordic Games, unless the political problems were resolved. The leading figure among the sports leaders who sent this message to their Swedish colleagues was Fridtjof Nansen, the famous Norwegian explorer and ski runner, who played a very active role in the separatist movement.

The Swedish organizers were surprised by the Norwegian decision to not attend the 1905 Nordic Games, but they should not have been. Viktor Balck had been informed by Norwegian sports officials that the press was calling for Norway's withdrawal should negotiations concerning the consulate issue fail.

A revenge motive in sporting politics was then seen in later sporting negotiations between the two Scandinavian countries. When Sweden and Norway discussed common Nordic sports regulations in 1906, the majority of the decision-making leaders in Sweden voted against such regulations, and implied that the negotiations should not be continued. The official explanation of this rejection was based on the argument that Swedish athletics had reached a higher level than Norway's and that Sweden should concentrate on international regulations and competitions without risking Nordic isolation. A Danish sports leader was likely correct in stating that the basic reason was the negative attitude in Sweden towards everything connected with Denmark and Norway.

In planning the 1909 Nordic Games, skiing and equestrian sports officials stated that they intended to exclude Norwegian athletes. The organizing committee approved this exclusive position. However, Norwegian participation could not be completely eliminated, since the skating events included World Championship competitions. Because the Swedish organizers had no formal rights to exclude them, Norwegian skaters did participate in the 1909 Nordic Games, but no Norwegians competed in other sports.

At the 1913 Nordic Games, Norway sent a complete team. Long forgotten were the boycotts and the political bickering between Sweden and Norway. This was partly because of the lapse of time, as eight years had passed since the troubles of 1905. Another reason was Sweden's great success at the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games. Sweden was the top nation in the competitions and the organization was superb. Also, in 1913, Norway was satisfied with its status as an autonomous nation, while Sweden was satisfied with its status as a strong sporting nation.

In 1922, however, some of the athletes voiced their opinions more directly. These were the skiers from Norrland (the northern part of Sweden) who felt that they had been unfairly treated and therefore protested, threatening to leave the Swedish Skiers' Association and form an independent association for Norrland. According to the protesters, skiing had been placed in the background in favor of other "so-called winter sports events," sledding for example. What especially irritated the skiers was the fact that the sled riders had received better prizes.

The Beginnings of the Olympic Winter Games

Despite the success of the Nordic Games, major difficulties occurred in establishing Olympic Winter Games. It took great persuasion and diplomacy on behalf of the French, Italian, Swiss, and Canadian members of the IOC to obtain IOC patronage for Olympic Winter Games, despite the reservations of Pierre de Coubertin. If anything, the Nordic Games, which had hardly been established as a “pseudo Winter Olympics,” made it more difficult for the IOC to establish Olympic Winter Games.

This was in part due to the fierce Swedish nationalism of Viktor Balck, who has been termed the “trumpet of the fatherland.” In addition, both Sweden and Norway opposed the introduction of Olympic Games for nationalistic reasons. In fact, Norway almost did not compete in the 1928 Olympic Winter Games, even after they had been established in 1924.^{9,15}

Skating was included among the sports listed at the 1894 Olympic Congress at which de Coubertin re-established the Olympic Games. After that, the first known proposal that winter sports be included in the Olympics came on 18 May 1899 at the meeting which established the Czech Olympic Committee. The proposal was made by Josef Rössler-Orovský, a Czech sportsman and sport official. He suggested that skiing competitions be conducted in the Czech Giant Mountains as part of the 1900 Olympic Games. Correspondance then ensued between Rössler-Orovský, de Coubertin, and Dr. Jirí Guth-Jarkovský, but the winter events did not materialize in 1900.¹

At the 1909 IOC session in Berlin, a commission including the two members from Sweden (Balck and von Rosen) had prepared a provisional standard program for future Olympic Games. Balck presented the report and among the sports deleted was skating, the only winter sport to have been represented in 1908.⁶

At the 1910 session in Luxembourg, Reverend Robert de Courcy-Laffan (GBR) asked Balck whether winter sports were on the 1912 Olympic program, but was told that none were planned because the Nordic Games were scheduled for early 1913. Following harsh protests, Balck declared that if the IOC desired, he could prepare a winter sports program for 1912 and present it at the following session.⁶

At the 1911 meeting of the IOC in Budapest, Count Brunetta d'Usseaux of Italy asked Balck if the Committee had planned a winter sports program.^{6,8,12} Colonel Balck answered curtly: “An Olympic winter sports program could not be considered, as the Nordic Games had already been scheduled for 1913.”² Brunetta d'Usseaux was not satisfied by Balck's statement and asked that the 1913 Nordic Games be changed into Olympic Winter Games and that the IOC fix the Olympic Year as from 1 June 1912 to 31 May 1913.^{2,6,8} This would mean that the Summer Games would have preceded the Winter Games. This motion prompted a lively debate between Brunetta d'Usseaux, Balck, Lord Desborough (GBR), Count Clarence von Rosen (SWE), and William M. Sloane (USA). No agreement was reached and the motion was tabled until the next day.²

The next day Brunetta d'Usseaux repeated his motion to “annex” the Nordic Games of 1913 to the Games of the Vth Olympiad. Another lengthy discussion ensued, which was now joined by de Courcy-Laffan (GBR), Jirí Guth-Jarkovský (Bohemia), Count A. F. Sierstorpft (GER), and Prince Leon Urussov (RUS).² Balck remained unbending, however, and as one of the most influential members of the IOC as well as chairman of the Organizing Committee for the Stockholm Olympics, his influence swayed the day. Balck's opposition to Brunetta d'Usseaux's plan to include the Nordic Games in the Olympics was understandable as it would likely have seen the end of his beloved Nordic Games.² On 27 May 1911, it was decided that the Nordic Games could not be annexed to the Olympiad and no winter sports would be on the 1912 program. The Swedish Olympic Committee, led by Balck, rejected the idea on the theoretical basis that all events could not be held in the same place at the same time.⁶

The next step towards establishment of a separate Olympic Winter Games occurred at the Congress of the National Olympic Committees, which was held in Paris in June, 1914. Pleas for the introduction of Olympic Winter sports were raised by various participants.

Oddly, a representative of the Norwegian Skiing Federation suggested the inclusion of skiing competitions in the program of the Olympic Games, which was a departure from their previous intransigent policy opposing that idea. Norway was the cradle of skiing. As early as 1892, the Holmenkollen ski races were created near Oslo, preceded in 1883 by the Huseby races. Up until World War II, the Holmenkollen were considered even more prestigious than the FIS (Fédération Internationale de Ski) championships.

Other countries also made similar proposals at the Paris Congress. The Austrian Olympic Committee submitted the motion to officially adopt ice sports in the Olympic program, after the Austrian Skating Union had notified all European national governing bodies of the ISU of this proposal. Germany, Switzerland, and Canada submitted similar ideas. In the end, it was agreed to allow ice skating, skiing, and ice hockey on the Olympic Program. The minutes of this 1914 Congress were not published, however, until November 1919, because shortly after the conference, World War I broke out and brought the Olympic Movement to a standstill.

At the 5th Ski Congress in Kristiania (Oslo) in 1914, Germany's Dr. Frei suggested that skiing should be included in the Olympic Program. The representatives from Austria, Hungary, and Norway were in favor, while the delegate from Sweden opposed the idea.

In 1916 a Skiing Olympia on the Feldberg in the Black Forest of Germany was planned to be conducted as an adjunct to the 1916 Berlin Olympic Games. The following program was planned: 12 km. cross-country skiing, 50 km. cross-country skiing, nordic combined, and ski jumping. World War I ended those plans as well as the 1916 Olympics.

In 1920 at Antwerp, figure skating and ice hockey were contested at the Olympics.^{3,8} Canada, represented by the Winnipeg Falcons (actually a team made up mostly of Icelandic nationals), narrowly defeated the United States in ice hockey, and the two dominated the other teams. In figure skating, Gillis Grafström won the men's event, Magda Julin-Mauroy of Sweden won the ladies, and the pairs were won by the Finnish pair of Ludovika and Walter Jakobsson.

The 1921 Olympic Congress was held in Lausanne and the discussion of inclusion of winter sports in the Olympics was again taken up. By this time, Norway was no longer in favor of the idea, and the Norwegian Ski Association declared, "If the Olympic Congress takes this step against our wishes we announce to the congress that they may not count on participation from the Nordic countries."

At the 1921 Olympic Congress, France's Marquis de Polignac forwarded the following proposal:¹² "The congress suggests to the International Olympic Committee that in all countries where Olympic Games are held and where it is possible to organized winter sports competitions, such competitions should be put under the patronage of the IOC and arranged in accordance with the rules of the international sports associations concerned." The congress accepted this proposal,^{2,12} against the wishes of Pierre de Coubertin, and the door was open for the Winter Olympics.

At the 1922 International Ski Congress, the delegates accepted the decision of the Olympic Congress and set about designing competition rules and began the formation of an international ski federation.

In 1924, from 25 January to 4 February, a winter sports week was contested at Chamonix, France. The week was originally called the *Semaine internationale des sports d'hiver*. There were 258 athletes competing in five sports from 16 countries.³ Less than three months after the last Nordic Games, on 6 May 1926,¹² the IOC decided retroactively to name the 1924 *Semaine internationale des sports d'hiver* in Chamonix as the 1st Olympic Winter Games. At the 25th IOC session in Lisbon, 23 of the 24 IOC members voted on this proposal,

with only two voting against it (Baron Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Colonel P. W. Scharoo, both of the Netherlands).

The Demise of the Nordic Games

Viktor Balck died in 1928, and this should not be underestimated as a cause of the demise of the Nordic Games.⁸ The Games were largely his and Alexander Lindman's work, with Balck the idealist and Lindman the administrator.^{6,9,15}

In 1930 a decisive organizational change occurred in the arrangement of sports in Sweden. The leading sports organizations, *Sveriges Riksidrottsförbund* (SR) and SCFIF, reached an agreement according to which SR took control of active sports. SCFIF withdrew and assumed a clearly passive role as a promoter. The agreement also meant that SR took responsibility for the Nordic Games.¹⁵

The eighth Nordic Games originally announced for 1930 eventually were cancelled (on very short notice because of the weather)^{6,15} and the Nordic Games as such ceased to exist as a major international event, although tentative plans for Nordic Games in 1934 were made.

In 1933 it was decided that no Nordic Games would be held in 1934 out of consideration for the FIS competitions being held in Sollefteå that same year.¹⁵ During the middle of World War II, a group of leading Swedish sportsmen, with Sixtus Jansson, Bo Ekelund, and Ernst Breberg at the head, again tried to arrange the Nordic Games in Stockholm in 1942.^{6,15} After the organizing committee submitted its request the government determined that it would not be fitting to arrange Nordic Games during the war. After the government's negative reply, the organizing committee cancelled their plans for the Games, and no new efforts to revive them have been made.¹⁵ However, annual Nordic Championships in speed and figure skating between Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden have continued to be held annually to the present day.*

Following the successful second Olympic Winter Games of 1928 and in view of the increasing popularity of the Olympic Movement in international sport, interest in the Nordic Games waned. In addition to the Olympic Winter Games, the FIS Championships, first held in 1926, also contributed to diminishing the importance of the Nordic Games. Indeed, in 1926 17 countries participated in the Nordic Games skiing events, primarily because they took place only one week after the FIS competitions at Lahti, Finland, showing that the FIS competitions were already a greater attraction than the Nordic Games.

Summary

The Nordic Games took place between 1901 and 1926, mostly in Stockholm, Sweden. They began, and were perpetuated, largely by the work of the influential Swedish sports administrator, Viktor Gustaf Balck. The Nordic Games were not without political problems, nor were they originally planned as precursors to the Olympic Winter Games, as often stated. In fact, despite Balck's influential status on the IOC, he and other Swedish and Norwegian sporting leaders opposed early suggestions to start Olympic Winter Games. The Olympic Winter Games themselves began only after several heated IOC debates concerning their merits. The Nordic Games ended after 1926, partly because of the growth of the Olympic Winter Games, partly because of Balck's death and the loss of his leadership, and partly because of the growth of the Fédération Internationale de Ski.

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