

Waving the Green Flag: Athens, 1906

Something we always tell our children, in an effort to try and encourage them to get involved in sports, is that it's not the winning of the game that matters, but the participation in it. Similar sentiments were expressed by the Frenchman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic games, when he said that the value of the games is not to win but to take part.¹

The Olympic games originated in ancient Greece over two thousand years ago. No one is sure when exactly the games began, but it is believed that they began about 776 B.C. Originally they were part of a religious pagan festival dedicated to the Greek god Zeus. The festival, which included the games, was held in a purpose-built stadium, lasted over a period of five days, and was held every four years.² The first event was for the sprinters and the games were named after the winner unlike today's games which are named after the cities in which they are held. The sporting events then were much more dangerous than they are today: one could be beaten to death in boxing, have an arm pressed against the throat and suffocated in wrestling, or trampled to death if one fell from one's chariot.³ The coming of Christianity within the Roman empire, of which ancient Greece was a part, brought about the downfall of pagan worship in the fourth century A.D. Under the Roman Emperor, Theodosius 1st., Christian religious uniformity became the official policy of the empire, which put an end to pagan festivals. As time went by, an earthquake and silt from floods covered the original site of the games. Although rediscovered in 1776 by the British scientist, Richard Chandler,⁴ it would be another 100 years before any work to uncover the remains began. This work was done between the years 1875 and 1881 by the German, Ernst Curtius and his archaeological team.⁵

Since he had been a young boy, Baron Pierre de Coubertin had been fascinated by the ancient Olympic Games and took a great interest in the archaeological excavations in Greece. In later life, as an educationalist and historian, he had studied the impact of sport on society. During his research, he had become convinced that physical exercise had to be the foundation of sensible education.⁶ In this he was influenced by two Englishmen, the educationalist, Thomas Arnold, who was headmaster of the famous British boys school Rugby, and also by William Brookes. Arnold's idea of combining sports with education to create boys of



Cornelius (Con) Leahy at Shepherds Bush, London, 1908

by Des Ryan

"character" greatly appealed to Coubertin. William Brookes was the driving force behind the annual "Olympian Games" which had been held in Shropshire since 1850. Although Brookes' "Olympics" was a village fete, it had become a significant athletic pageant and attracted a lot of international attention. The Shropshire games had their own ceremony and rituals – laurels were awarded to the winners, especially composed music was played and flags with ancient Greek mottos were erected. Although Coubertin had never attended the Shropshire games, he did visit Brookes in October 1890. After his visit, Coubertin wrote: "If the Olympic Games, that modern Greece has not been able yet to revive, still survived today, it is due not to a Greek, but to Dr. Brookes."⁷

It was in 1892, during a lecture, that Coubertin first mentioned the idea of reviving the Olympic games. Although the idea of revival fell on deaf ears, he persisted with it, going so far as to invite delegates from all over the world to take part in a sports congress which was to be held at the Sorbonne in Paris in June, 1894. Those attending gave him their full support and a resolution calling for the revival of the Olympic Games was passed.⁸ After the meeting an International Olympic Committee was set up to organise and co-ordinate the games. Coubertin, who initially acted as secretary-general to the

committee,⁹ wanted to have the games held in Paris¹⁰ but it was felt that the first Olympic Games of the modern era should be held in Athens in the spring of 1896.

Athens 1896

After the opening of the games in Athens, the plan was that all future games would be held in different capital cities around the world, and in the spirit of the past, every four years. George I, King of Greece, opened the games on 6 April 1896 at the newly-restored Panathenaic Stadium. Eighty thousand people filled the stadium, while athletes from twelve nations, from as far away as Australia and the United States, waited to compete.¹¹ Irishmen were there from the start, and as Ireland was governed by Great Britain at the time, they competed as part of the British team. The first Irish-born winner of an Olympic gold medal was John Pius Boland, who won the tennis singles and then went on to win a second gold medal in a partnership in the doubles.¹² Over 100,000 spectators packed the stadium for the closing ceremony on 12 April to watch the athletes receive their medals and laurel wreaths. The King closed the games with the words: "I proclaim the ending of the first Olympiad." The games were such a success that the King suggested holding them there permanently. Most of the athletes were in favour of this but Baron de Coubertin was opposed to the idea, as he had already lost the premiere for Paris and he was not content, after all his

efforts, to lose the games as well. The underlying reasons why Coubertin wished to see the games held in a different country every four years was that he wanted to bring the youth and nations of the world closer together, thus encouraging internationalism.¹³ Thus the second Olympiad was held in Paris in 1900, and four years later the games were held in St. Louis, Missouri, in the United States. In contrast to the Athens games, both the Paris and St. Louis games were a disaster for the fledgling Olympic movement, due to the fact that both were overshadowed by World Fairs.

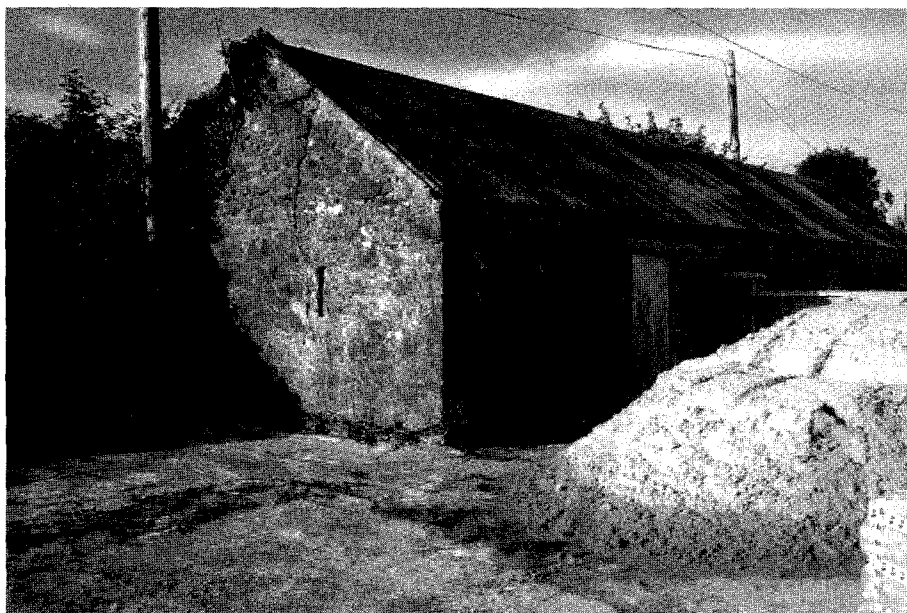
1900 Games

The games of the second Olympiad began in Paris on 14 May as part of the Exposition Universelle (World Fair). They were spread out over a period of six months, ending on 28 October. There was no opening or closing ceremony for the games. Women were, for the first time, allowed to take part in the sporting events. Problems arose for some of the athletes over having to compete on Sundays, which, unlike today, was a day of rest and religious observance.¹⁴ Another aspect was that some of the winners were given cups or trophies instead of medals.¹⁵ Prior to the games Coubertin had tendered impressive designs for the creation of a Grecian-style atmosphere for the games, including statues and temples. Alfred Picard, director of the Exposition Universelle, believed that sport was a "useless and absurd activity"¹⁶ took the plans and nothing more was heard of them. On top of that the International Olympic Committee lost control of the games to a new French committee who took over all the sporting activities connected to Exposition Universelles.¹⁷ While the International Olympic Committee listed twenty-four countries as having sent competitors, many of those who were to compete pulled out rather than deal with the new committee. Sporting events held in Paris during the World Fair were rarely referred to as Olympic events.¹⁸

Disappointed that the Games in Paris had been overshadowed by the World Fair, the International Olympic Committee decided to give the Greeks their wish by granting them a series of intermediate games that would be held permanently in Athens, also every four years. Although Coubertin was opposed to this move, and the fact that they would be classed as Olympic, the difference was that his idea of holding the games in different countries would, he felt, make the Olympic Movement more international. These new games in Athens, known as the Intercalated Games, and the question of their Olympic status, would in the future cause problems which still reverberate in today's sporting world.¹⁹

1904 Games

The 1904 Olympic Games were scheduled for Chicago in the U.S.A., but the



The Leahy house at Cregane, Co. Limerick, it is now a ruin

American organisers of the World Fair, also known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, objected to another international event being held at the same time. The organisers informed the Chicago Olympic Committee that the Exposition would hold its own sporting events unless the Olympics were moved to St. Louis. Coubertin, rather than see the Olympics eclipsed altogether by the Exposition, gave in.²⁰ The games in St. Louis compounded the errors made in Paris. The President of the Louisiana Exposition, David Francis, failed to invite anybody else to open the games and, on 1 July 1904, did so himself in a short, dull, monotonous ceremony. Here, again, the games were spread out over a period of five months. Sporting fixtures were reduced to the status of side-show events and visitors to the Fair were more interested in seeing the popular cultural displays. While there were sporting events held every day, what is actually or officially recognised as Olympic sports were held from 29 August to 3 September 1904. These were the first games at which gold, silver and bronze were awarded for first, second and third place.²¹ Two of the winners of gold on the American team were Irish, Martin Sheridan and Tom Kiely. Only twelve countries competed at St. Louis.²² Tension in Europe due to the Russo-Japanese war and the difficulty in getting to St. Louis prevented many of the world's top athletes from attending.²³

1906 Games

The 1906 Olympic, or Intercalated, Games opened on 22 April in Athens. Twenty countries, comprising 903 athletes (883 men and 20 women) took part in the games. These games in which athletes had to register through their National Olympic Committees; it was also the first time that those competing marched into the stadium in national teams carrying their national flags. It was at these games that the closing ceremony and the raising

of the national flags for the victors were given a place of pride and which are now part of the Olympic tradition.²⁴

In 1906 Ireland did not have an independent Olympic Committee. However, three Irish Athletes were entered by the Irish Amateur Athletic Association and the G.A.A. One of these was the high jumper, Cornelius Leahy, from Co. Limerick. Leahy was born in Cregane on 27 April 1876. He was the eldest of six brothers and two sisters. All of them were involved in sports.²⁵ In the early months of 1906, Leahy and two other athletes, Peter O'Connor, who was living in Waterford, and John Daly, from Co. Galway, were entered for the Olympics in Athens by the Irish Amateur Athletic Association and the G.A.A.²⁶ Although they travelled to the games at their own expense, they were provided with green blazers with gold braid around the sides, cuffs, collar and lapel, and a gold shamrock on the left breast-pocket. They also carried with them green flags emblazoned with gold harps and the words "Erin go Bragh." The flags measured six feet by four. They left Ireland on 15 April, travelled by rail and ship via London, France, Italy on to Corfu and from there to Patras in Greece, arriving in Athens on 20 April, after four days and three nights of being confined in a train. As the competitions were opening on 22 April, they had very little time to rest or train.²⁷ On registering for the games, Leahy and his fellow athletes found that they were listed as United Kingdom, and not Irish, team members.²⁸

In an effort to counteract this, the intrepid Irishmen presented the Irish flag to the King of Greece, but he refused to recognise Ireland as an independent nation. In a further move and on the advice of the President of the American Athletic Association, Peter O'Connor wrote a letter of protest to the King's son, Prince George, who was president of the Greek Olympic committee, objecting to the fact that they, Leahy, O'Connor and Daly, were described as being British in

the published programme of athletic events and stated emphatically that they represented Ireland, that their expenses were paid by themselves, and that they strongly objected, if successful, to any wins being recorded as points for England. Their letter was put before the board of the Olympic Committee, who sided with England, while some of the Greek delegates supported the Irishmen in their claim that Ireland was a conquered nation.²⁹

In the final of the long jump on Friday, 27 April, O'Connor, then 32 years old, was pitted against the world-record holder, the American Myer Prinstein. Unfortunately, there was only one judge for the competition, Matthew Halpin, who was also manager of the American team. O'Connor had already been warned that he had no chance of winning with Halpin in charge. He protested strongly to Halpin and also to Prince George, but got no satisfaction.³⁰ At the jump offs, he got Leahy and Daly to keep an eye on things. He later said that only for his wife being present, he would have beaten Halpin to a pulp.³¹ In the final result, Prinstein was declared winner, with O'Connor second and another American, Thomas Cronin, in third place. When it came to the ceremony, of giving the medals and the raising the flags, O'Connor was furious to see the British flag being raised in his honour. He climbed up the flagpole, unfurled one of the green Irish flags that he had brought with him and waved it about. Below him, Con Leahy and John Daly stood guard, with Leahy also waving his green flag, defying every effort by the officials to prevent the demonstration, which caused a great sensation.³² Two days later, Peter O'Connor won the gold in the hop, step and jump (treble jump) with Leahy coming second and taking the silver medal.³³ At some stage during the games – maybe it was after the hop, step and jump – O'Connor asked Prince George to hoist the Irish flag. The Prince in reply said: "When Ireland has a parliament of its own, you can hoist the flag, but not before", he said with a laugh.³⁴

John Daly was a long distance runner. At Athens, however, he decided to enter the marathon. He had just run two miles when his running shoes began to give him trouble. He kept going for another 3 to 4 miles before he finally took his shoes off. After competing 18 miles with badly blistered feet, he dropped out and had to be taken to hospital.³⁵ Canadian Bill Sherring, who had spent two months in Athens getting used to the climate, won the marathon, with Prince George running with him on the final lap.

It was on 30 April that Con Leahy, then aged 30, made his bid for Olympic gold in the high jump. In order to facilitate the Greek officials, the bar was set at a height of 4ft. 6ins., and at each jump it was moved a fraction of an inch. This led, in addition to the very hot weather, to the competition being drawn out over a period of two days. The jumping began at 6 o'clock in the evening and stopped at 9.00 p.m. Out of a field of 57 competitors, Leahy had jumped

18 times that evening and by 9.00 p.m. his feet were roasting. Later on that night some of the American team members took him to their headquarters where they let him have a bath and then they covered him with olive oil to ease the strain of the evening's jumping. They also gave him a bottle of stout.³⁶

The final jump off began at 6 o'clock the next morning. After three hours, the bar had only been raised to 5ft. 7¾ ins. Out of the eighteen competitors that had started that morning, only seven remained: Con Leahy, Henry Kerrigan, the American high jump champion, Leo Gonczy, a Hungarian and winner of the bronze medal at Paris, who also came fourth at the St. Louis games, two Swedes, Bertil Sonderstrom and Ronstrom, the Norwegian, Hekke Bjolgerund, and Diakides of Greece.

Following discussions among the seven competitors and officials the bar was raised by five centimetres. At this point Sonderstrom and Bjolgerund were knocked out of the competition. At a height of 5ft. 8 ins. Ronstrom was eliminated. As the remaining four, by now tired, competitors carried on, Kerrigan and Diakides failed in their attempts to clear the bar at 5ft. 8⅞ ins., leaving the field open to Leahy and Gonczy.³⁷ After five hours of competition the bar stood at 5ft. 9¾ ins. Both of them cleared it easily and then they agreed to have the bar raised to 5ft. 9⅞ ins. Leahy cleared it on his first try, but Gonczy, who took almost thirty minutes to complete his three jumps, was finally eliminated. Although Leahy had won his gold medal, he was asked by local officials to carry on. Tired and against his better judgement and trying to please the officials, he asked to have the bar raised to over six feet; after two attempts, which failed, he decided not to try again.³⁸ During the two days of the competition, which had lasted eleven hours, Con Leahy had jumped thirty six times.³⁹

Aftermath

Several years later, Baron de Coubertin vetoed the results of the 1906 Games, thereby withdrawing their Olympic status, even though he had listed them as official in his 1906 *Olympic Review*. It is generally accepted that the 1906 Games were a great success and brought about a renewed interest in the Olympic movement. A request by a member of the International Olympic Committee in 1948 to have the 1906 Games reinstated as official games was, at the instigation of the American vice-president of the I.O.C., Avery Brundage, rejected without even being discussed. In 2003, another attempt was made by the International Society of Olympic Historians, which submitted a well documented case calling for the restoration of the 1906 games: as in 1948, it wasn't even put to a vote.⁴⁰

Con Leahy went on to take part in the 1908 games in London, where he was one of three to take second place in the high jump and won a silver medal. In 1909 Con

and his brother, Pat, who was also an athlete, emigrated to America. Con Leahy died there in December, 1921.⁴¹

Ireland took part in its first Olympic Games as an independent nation in Paris in 1924.⁴²

Con Leahy is not forgotten in Limerick. Last year a memorial seat, which now stands on Thomas Street, was erected to his memory and to commemorate his achievements at the 1906 Olympic Games.

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