

The Nordic Games and the Olympic platform as arena for the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian Union

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Abstract

Throughout their existence since 1896, the modern Olympic Games have seen quite a number of political conflicts and boycotts. They have been an arena for diplomatic controversies between sovereign countries and even internally within state structures. Still today, the political map in some cases does not correspond with the Olympic world map. In this regard, also the historical case of Norway and Sweden is an interesting one.

Formally, both countries had been in a personal union under the Swedish crown since 1815. Nonetheless, Norway participated in the Olympic Games in Paris 1900 in its own right, due to the huge degree of Norwegian self-governance within the union and the subsequent development of its own sports system.

This article examines the role of sport for the Norwegian nation building process and the impact of the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian Union onto the Nordic Games and Norway's early involvement in the Olympic Movement. Being the most important predecessor for the Olympic Winter Games, the Nordic Games are of particular interest also for Olympic history.

Keywords

Norway, Nordic Games, Olympic Games, Nationalism, Boycott, Fridtjof Nansen

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Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, in a climate of social changes and political turmoil in the union with Sweden, new political structures and especially an emerging liberal movement, resulted in a growing sentiment of Norwegian nationality. This implied both the political element of independence and self-rule as a constitutional, democratic principle and a cultural ingredient based on a unique identity as Norwegians (cf. Goksøyr, 1996, p.28).

Because of the Swedish control of the consular services, Norway felt constrained at the international level. The Swedish foreign policy did not serve Norwegian interests, particularly in regard to foreign trade. In the so-called Consular Affair, the Norwegian government claimed freedom to install own consular representation. In 1895, this claim was met with Swedish war threatening. The Norwegian parliament was forced to retreat, marking a painful defeat for Norwegian self-assertion.

In this situation, building a national identity had top priority on the cultural agenda (Goksøyr, 1996, p.28). Around the 1890`s, the formation for a common national Norwegian culture and identity was undertaken on fields such as literature, oral tradition, applied arts, music and even the Norwegian language as a common written language distinct from Danish, which commonly had been used before. Naturally, also the area of sport was affected.

Particularly well-suited in this regard was skiing, since it was anchored deep in the mythical Norwegian past and had been exercised by Norwegians through thousands of years. Also, it was more distinct than for example ice skating, that was carried out in a larger number of nations (Goksøyr, 1996, p.30). Particularly important for the dissemination of skiing not only in Norway, but also over large parts of Europe, was the crossing of Greenland's continental ice cap by the explorer and scientist Fridtjof Nansen in 1888. His report from the expedition, "*On ski over Greenland*", was published in 1890 and soon translated into English, German and French. Its huge success across Europe led to tremendous popularity of Nansen and skiing.

In a dedicated chapter, Nansen described vividly the joy and the positive effects of skiing. Additionally, in these times of demand for distinct national symbols, also a strong national element was injected when he wrote:

“Skiing is the most national sport of all sports, and what a glorious sport it is – if any deserves the name sport of all sports, it is indeed this one.”
(Nansen, 1890, p.78).

The installation of skiing as national sport was supported also by the cultural elites and renowned artists like Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who related Nansen’s achievements to the conflict in the union and the Norwegian strive for independency (Bomann-Larsen, 1993, p.49f.).

Besides shooting and gymnastics, skiing with its clear military value was very suitable in the utilitarian conception of *Idræt*, for the defence of the nation and general public health in opposition to the increasing influence from the competitive British sport. Also in Nansen’s eyes, it was not a goal to beat records or to find winners, but to contribute to the best of the Nation (cf. Bomann-Larsen, 1993, p.145). To him, skiing was primarily a character-forming discipline to “*harden the will and the men*” (Bomann-Larsen, 1993, p.26), rather than a competitive sport activity. To Nansen, physical activity in the outdoors (“*friluftsliv*”) was of major importance for the forming of a strong and healthy people, a conception that still is of importance for today’s recreational outdoor activity in Norway. However, Nansen’s dictum “*Practice Idræt, but avoid Sport and all kinds of records*” expresses the dichotomy of the different sport perceptions of the time in Norway.

Catalysed by Nansen and the nationalistic idealization, skiing was adapted by growing parts of the Norwegian population during the 1890’s. According to Goksøyr (1996, p.32), it was first through the participation of larger parts of the Norwegian population that skiing finally became a “national sport”, while the preceding idealization driven by Nansen and the cultural elites largely had been artificial: “*From being a national idea, skiing became a national activity.*”

Norway and the Inaugural Olympic Congress at Sorbonne 1894

The history of the modern Olympic Movement goes back to a congress at Sorbonne University in Paris in June 1894, when Pierre de Coubertin successfully proposed the re-establishment of Olympic Games in modern times.

The key figure for the early involvement of Norway in the

Olympic Movement was the “Father of Swedish sports” Viktor Balck, who belonged the founding members of the IOC and was one of Coubertin’s supporters in the “inner circle” for many years (cf. Joergensen, 1997, p. 70). Their friendship dated back to a sport congress Coubertin had organized in Paris in 1889 (cf. Coubertin, 1974, p.37).

From early on, Balck wanted to facilitate the Olympic platform for the progress and development of Swedish sport. He asked Coubertin about the possibility to arrange a future edition in Stockholm even prior to the acclamation of the renovation of the Games (Letter Viktor Balck to Pierre de Coubertin, May 28th 1894).

Balck had good connections to the Royal Court and won the Swedish-Norwegian Crown Prince to act as honorary member of the congress (Coubertin, 1974, p.78).

During preparations and apparently following a request from Coubertin, Balck sent a list of what he described to be the main bodies of Norwegian sports: *Det norske turn- og Gymnastikkforbund*, the athletics club Tjalve in Kristiania¹, the sports club *Hamar Idrætsforening*, the *Royal Norwegian Yacht Club*, *Trondheim Skating Club*, the *Association for the Promotion of Skiing*² and *Kristiania Rowing Club* (Letter Viktor Balck to Pierre de Coubertin, March 7th 1894). Interestingly, the official main body of sport in Norway, *Centralforeningen*, was not mentioned by Balck, possibly because of its character of militarization against the Swedish side.

Presumably following Balck’s suggestion, an invitation to the Sorbonne Congress was sent to Norway. Olaf Petersen, president of the Norwegian Gymnastics Federation, answered:

“Unfortunately, occupied by public offices, it is impossible for me to attend the congress, and so I am obliged to renounce the distinction reserved to me - the title of the honorary member of the Congress.”

(Letter Olaf Petersen to Pierre de Coubertin, May 1st 1894).

The Gymnastics Federation announced publicly, that it had received the invitation “*on behalf of all Norwegian sporting organizations*” and Norwegian clubs interested in participation were requested to send a message to “*Mr. Baron Pierre de Coubertin no later than the 10th of June*” (*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol. 12, no. 19). The files in the IOC archives show no evidence of further Norwegian

¹ Norway’s capital city was named Christiania after the Danish-Norwegian King Christian IV since 1624 and until the name was ‘norwegianized’ into Kristiania during the 1870’s. On January 1st 1925, the capital was officially renamed to Oslo.

² At this point, it seems that Balck was not sure if Coubertin was familiar with what skiing was and added the paraphrase “*Patinage sur la neige*” (“Skating on snow”) behind for explanation.

involvement in the congress. Its outcome, the renovation of the Olympic Games, however, was covered extensively in the Norwegian sports press (cf. *Norsk Idrætsblad* vol. 12, no. 29).

In September 1895, an invitation arrived for Norwegian sportsmen to participate in the Olympic Games in 1896 (*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol.13, no. 35) and short time later, the official programme of the Games was announced (*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol.13, no. 36). While Swedish and Danish athletes participated (Denmark participated with four athletes, Sweden with one. cf. *Norsk Idrætsblad* vol 13, no. 12 and 13), the first Olympic Games in modern times went by without Norwegian participation. *Norsk Idrætsblad* commented:

“[...] we have given the very best and most favorable opportunity to advertise our country out of our hands. [...] we should by our presence have reminded the world that we exist and exist in a way that we see ourselves able to join the contest in every regard. [...] But the favorable opportunity to make ourselves visible was missed because of our passiveness this time.”

(Norsk Idrætsblad vol. 14, no. 24)

A Norwegian member into the IOC?

In December 1899, Viktor Balck proposed to Coubertin to take up a member from Norway into the IOC, since the sport system of Norway was independent from the Swedish, which he represented:

“[...] I propose to elect as Norwegian representative of our International Committee Lieutenant Colonel Olaf Petersen Chief of the Norwegian Royal Guard or Captain F. G. Seeberg. Both reside in Kristiania – it will be sufficient as address.”

(Letter Viktor Balck to Pierre de Coubertin, December 27th 1899)

The first was Olaf Petersen, who, as seen, had received the invitation to the inaugural congress in Sorbonne. The second candidate, Frantz Gustav Seeberg, acted as secretary of *Centralforeningen* for many years. Additionally, the Count Clarence von Rosen was proposed as a second Swedish IOC member. While von Rosen was appointed soon afterwards, Coubertin did not follow Balck's suggestion regarding a Norwegian member.

Paris 1900

Already at Sorbonne in 1894, the decision was made that the first modern Games in Athens would be followed up by Games in Paris in 1900. In March 1899, *Norsk Idrætsblad* reported that a Danish committee had been established with the goal to prepare Danish participation. The editor asked: “*Has the Athletics Association spent a thought on this thing yet?*” (*Norsk Idrætsblad*, vol. 17, no. 13) Two weeks later, the inquiry was renewed, this time even more emphatically: “*Has the Norwegian people given up on this matter because it lacks power? Or is it just the Athletics Association that is lacking power?*” (*Norsk Idrætsblad*, vol. 17, no. 15) A sportsman named Einar Pedersen³ reminded of the forthcoming competitions in Paris in a letter to the editor of *Norsk Idrætsblad* and labelled it to be “*a question of honour*” for Norway to be represented. Since Norway had not been participating in Athens, he claimed, “*it would be a disgrace, if we would stay away once again. Sweden and Denmark have already set up their committees.*” (*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol. 17, no.25). Pedersen’s letter shows that athletes began to publicly request Norwegian participation.

Finally, the *Athletic Association* postulated the goal of sending as many Norwegian athletes as possible to participate in Paris. A fundraising initiative was started among its member clubs to cover the travel expenses (*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol. 18, no. 1).

The *Norwegian Gymnastics Federation* and *Centralforeningen* applied for public funding from the parliament (*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol. 18, no 5), but the military committee in charge of sport did not approve (*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol. 18, no. 9). Instead, the participation of a team of six shooters was supported. In addition, private funding was raised for the participation of two athletes (*Fri Idræt*, vol. 1, no. 2), who apart from the shooters formed the first Norwegian athletic troop in the Olympic Games.

The Nordic Games

It had been with Viktor Balck as the driving force, that the Nordic Games as the first internationally marketed multisport event for Winter sports were established in Sweden. About the ideas behind, Balck wrote:

³ Einar Pedersen was an Kristiania-based athlete who competed for the athletics club IF Ørnulf and who had set a Norwegian best in the 110 meter hurdles discipline in 1894. He was active and competing at national level in 1899.

“We agreed, that we in the Nordic countries had the resources in our winter sports to achieve competitive Games as valuable and voluminous as the Olympic ones, and that these would be called Nordic, partly to signify that they would belong to the Nordic countries as a united fellowship, partly also to show to the rest of the world, that the North in itself was a sporting power factor to respect, an independent people with veritable force.”

(Balck, 1931, p.135)

The clear equation to the Olympic Games was certainly not coincidental and was even used on both sides: When Coubertin reported of the first Nordic Games in Stockholm in 1901, which had turned out to be very successful, he described them as «*l’olympiad Scandinave*» and «*Olympiades Boréales*» (*Revue Olympique*, April 1901).

According to the initial ideas, the arrangement should alternate between the two capitals of Stockholm and Kristiania every second year and by this create a counterweight to Norwegian separatist ambitions. But in first place, the Nordic Games were created for promoting Sweden internationally: Sweden was to be advertised as a strong nation and a tourist destination. (Ljunggren, 1996, p.36).

When Norway was to host the second edition in Kristiania in 1903, the organizers acted reluctantly. As Balck recalled, gentle pressure was needed to get preparations under way (cf. Balck, 1931, p.130). Finally, a “Northern Winter Sports Week” was organized in conjunction with the prestigious Holmenkollen skifestival. Despite the Norwegian affront by choosing a different name for the event, Balck and the Swedes were very pleased with the outcome. He glowingly described the positive effect on the relationships:

“The friendship between the Swedish and Norwegian military officers as well as the sportsmen became so heartily, that the authorities who ruled Norway’s affairs were really troubling”

(Balck, 1931, p.130f)

Here, Balck created an image, that the separatist ambitions of the Norwegians were imposed onto people by the government.

Due to the long and expensive journey across the Atlantic, the Scandinavian countries refrained from participation in the next Olympic Games in St. Louis 1904, as was the case for most

European nations. *Centralforeningen* denied to fund participation (Olstad, 1987 p.158). Only a couple of Norwegian emigrants to the USA participated on behalf of their American sport clubs. In Norwegian newspapers, their participation and achievements were explicitly covered and they were regarded as Norwegians (cf. *Norsk Idrætsblad* vol. 22, no. 42).

Norwegian boycott

His popularity and status as a national hero had made Fridtjof Nansen a strong leader of opinion in his home country. On the face of the breakdown in the negotiation in the consular affair, Nansen entered the political debate and took a strong position for that now was the time to act and leave the union.

The first of these actions affected the Nordic Games in Stockholm, scheduled for February 1905. Norwegian sport officials with Nansen at the very top, let the Swedish organizers know:

“It is with deep regret that the Committee finds itself constrained to inform you, that, due to the depression these days problems in the union has created in all social classes in Norway, Norwegians will not this time be able to participate in the sports event in Stockholm.”

(As quoted by Hemstad, 2008, p.323).

This boycott was conceived as a blight on the Swedish nation, especially for the nationalistic circles around Balck. By this, the Nordic Games had become the first in a long row of Nordic events and collaborations that were affected by the political crisis (cf. Hemstad, 2008, p.307).

Olympic honours for Fridtjof Nansen

Fridtjof Nansen's reputation as skiing-pioneer, explorer and scientist was discovered also by Coubertin, who seem to have been impressed by the achievements and – probably even more – by the fame of Nansen. Coubertin tried to bind prominent and influential people to the Olympic Movement in a situation, when the success of the still premature Olympic Games was in danger because the Games in Paris 1900 and St. Louis 1904 had suffered from being appendages to world exhibitions

In November 1904, before Nansen had become a leading protagonist of the boycott of the Nordic Games, Coubertin notified Nansen of the decision to award him, alongside the

American President Theodore Roosevelt and the Brazilian aviation pioneer Alberto Santos Dumont, with a:

“[...] honorary diploma to be awarded on very rare occasions to men whose energy, courage and endurance would place them at the forefront of their contemporaries [...].”

(Letter Pierre de Coubertin to Fridtjof Nansen, November 12th 1904).

This distinction for extraordinary achievements had been proposed by Coubertin in 1901 (cf. Coubertin, 1974, p.134). For the handover of the diploma, Coubertin invited the laureates to the Olympic Congress to be arranged in Brussels in June 1905.

In reply to the notification, Nansen wrote to Coubertin:

“It was a great surprise to me to have your kind letter with the information that the International Olympic Committee decided to award me its diploma of Honour for energy, courage and endurance.

[...] I assure you that I appreciate perfectly the value of this rare distinction, but I feel that I have little deserved it especially when I see that I will come in such good company as President T. Roosevelt and Mr. Santos Dumont.”

(Letter Fridtjof Nansen to Pierre de Coubertin, November 20th 1904).

As the congress approached, Coubertin sent new letters in which he downright urgently begged Nansen to come:

“Doctor, I hope you can come to Brussels. Everyone expects it and it would be a great disappointment to not see you there. [...] I repeat we want to believe again in your arrival! In this hope, I beg you to accept the new homage of my feelings of great admiration and deep sympathy.”

(Letter Pierre de Coubertin to Fridtjof Nansen, May 13th 1904).

Around the same time, the Norwegian Ministry of Defense requested Nansen to act as official representative of the Norwegian government at the congress (Letter Norwegian Ministry of Defense to Fridtjof Nansen, May 13th 1905). In the tense political situation with Sweden, Nansen found it best to follow the ongoing situation from Norway and sent a letter to Coubertin to excuse his absence (Letter Fridtjof Nansen to Pierre de Coubertin, June 8th 1905).

Instead, a military officer named Henrik Angell was sent to

represent Norway in Brussels and to receive the Olympic diploma on his behalf. Angell was known to be a die-hard nationalist, what might well have played a role for why he was chosen to represent a counterweight to Balck on the international floor the Olympic congress in Brussels provided.

On June 7th 1905, two days before the opening of the congress in Brussels, the Norwegian parliament declared the power of the Swedish King out of order. This step was equivalent to denouncing the union.

The dramatic turn of events was reflected in Coubertin's speech during the awarding ceremony of the Olympic diploma in Brussels:

“Please, sir, receive this diploma and transmit it from us to your illustrious compatriot. When we express wishes for your fatherland, we can under these circumstances not forget, that, on the other side of the border, which you are reinforcing, we have friends that we are linked to with close ties, yet nonetheless, trust in it, we wish with all our heart and very sincerely, that Norway in the future will give to the world a lot of Nansen.”

(Congress Rapport 1905, IOC archives).

Clearly, Coubertin tried to avoid to alienate his two Swedish IOC colleagues and surely had in mind, that the Swedish-Norwegian Crown Prince again was lending his name as honorary member of the congress.

First Norwegian IOC-member by accident?

Angell must have left a good impression at the congress in Brussels. A couple of months later, Coubertin wrote to the members of the IOC:

“It seems to me that no one would better represent Norway in our Committee than their official delegate to the Olympic Congress, Captain Heinrik (sic!) Angell, who has won the sympathy of all our colleagues in Brussels. I therefore propose to admit him in this capacity.”

(Circular Letter from Pierre de Coubertin to the IOC members, December 23rd 1905).

The sympathy seems to have been mutually. In his report from the congress, Angell wrote:

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“[...] I need to mention a man who we need to learn to know better in Norway, because we all as sportsmen stand in the greatest gratitude to him. The French Baron de Coubertin, president of the permanent “Comité International Olympique”, who took the initiative for the renewal of the Olympic Games - a man who lives only for sport ... and who during the congress with unfailing sense of tact, knew how to lead and bring it all together. His eloquence seemed literally electrifying. When his name was mentioned, the whole assembly broke out in jubilation.”

(*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol.23, no. 26).

In the light of Angell’s subsequent nomination for the IOC, it could be argued, that Coubertin’s original intention behind getting Nansen to Brussels might have been to win him as the Norwegian member of the IOC. Just as in the case of Englishman William Grenfell, later Lord Desborough, who together with Nansen also was awarded with the Olympic diploma in Brussels and who in the following was taken up into the IOC (cf. Coubertin, 1974, p.134).

While some authors have characterized the nomination of Angell by Coubertin as plain coincidental (R. Andersen, 2000 p.156; Goksøyr, 2005, p.78), there were good reasons to choose him to represent Norway in Brussels:

Firstly, as a military, he was at eye level with his Swedish counterpart Balck. Further, Angell impersonated very much the same values Nansen was awarded for in Brussels, and was also a prominent advocate for what had made Nansen famous: Skiing. During the 1880’s, Angell and Nansen had even been competing to fill the role as Norway’s foremost skiing pioneer (cf. R. Andersen, 2000, p.35ff).

“Intercalated Games” in Athens 1906

During Mai 1905, an invitation to participate in Olympic Games in Athens in 1906 had arrived. At height of the union crisis and on the edge of a possible military confrontation, the Norwegians had other worries than participating in a sporting event and the invitation was initially rejected (cf. P. C. Andersen, 1947, p.46).

When the dissolution of the union had become a fact in June, however, participation suddenly turned into a desirable representation of the now free and independent Norwegian nation.

The committee for the Norwegian participation resumed activity and notified the organizers of the new situation. This time, the parliament granted public funding immediately:

“After the dissolution of the union, to show the country’s colours and to defend Fatherland’s honour on the international sports arena, became a more obvious case for Norwegian sports leaders and the parliament.”

(Goksøy, 2005, p.78).

Being the first appearance as independent nation in an Olympic event, the “Intercalated Games” in Athens gained a special status in the Norwegian history, even though they are not officially recognized by the IOC. The Norwegian participants led by Johan Sverre consisted of five track and field athletes, six shooters and a gymnast troop of 21 men. The almost mythical phrase “Athenfærden” (“The Athens-expedition”) has become a well-known term for the successful mission of representing an independent Norway (Goksøy, 2008, p.77). IOC member Angell, however, did not find the time to attend the Games in Athens. In a letter to Coubertin, he excused his non-attendance (Letter Henrik Angell to Pierre de Coubertin, April 17th 1906).

According to the initial plans to organize the Nordic Games alternately between Stockholm and Kristiania, it would have been the Norwegians turn to arrange the event in 1907. Apparently, Coubertin had the hope that the countries would return to collaborate on the Nordic Games (cf. Jönsson, 2001, p.94) and asked Angell about the status of the preparations. Angell’s answer showed no ambitions to organize the event:

“No, it is true; You do not hear about the Nordic Games in Xiania. There are still political difficulties which separate the peoples of the North, even the men of sport.

[...] For the moment and for the coming years, there is no reason to arrange “meetings” between Scandinavians. Let us let the years go by - and perhaps we will find the Swedish in a good mood and relieved of the loss of the “province” – Norway.”

(Letter Henrik Angell to Pierre de Coubertin, September 26th 1906).

Angell did not intend to act as bridgebuilder. According to his biographer, he realized himself that he lacked interest for the Olympic idea, took the consequence and quit (R. Andersen, 2000, p.161). In April 1907, Angell asked to be replaced as IOC-member:

“I am very sorry, but it is impossible for me to stay longer as a member of the International Olympic Committee. [...]I formally ask you, as president, to have me replaced by another. And I know nobody more skilled in my country than the chief director of telegraphs in Norway Mr. Thomas Heftye, former councilor of state, former military attaché in Paris, chairman of the committee for the Olympic Games in Athens 1906.”

(Letter Henrik Angell to Pierre de Coubertin, April 25th 1907).

In May 1907, the IOC held its annual meeting in The Hague. Due to sickness, the appointed candidate Thomas Heftye did not participate (*Norsk Idrætsblad* vol.25, no.27) but his nomination was approved (cf. *Revue Olympique*, June 1907). In Norway, Heftye’s absence was discussed controversially. It was feared that important decisions could be taken in favour of the Swedes, especially regarding the gymnastics competitions in the upcoming Olympic Games. The *Norwegian Gymnastics Federation* complained publicly (cf. *Norsk Idrætsblad* vol. 25, no. 28).

Heftye’s membership in the IOC became a rather short affair and the only correspondence preserved from him in the IOC archives is his resignation letter, in which he proposed Johan Sverre to become his successor (Letter Thomas Heftye to Pierre de Coubertin. February 11th 1908).

Ahead of the 1908 Olympic Games in London, it had become an important factor, that the Norwegian athletes could bear up with their Swedish opponents. The parliament increased the public funding. The same mechanisms applied in Sweden. It had become a special concern, that Norwegian athletes should not perform better than their Swedish opponents (cf. Goksøyr, 2005, p.78).

Like in Athens, Johan Sverre led the Norwegian team of 58 athletes for the Olympic Games in London and was formally admitted as IOC member at the session that was held in connection to the Games (cf. *Revue Olympique*, July 1908).

Nordic Games 1909

For Balck and the Swedish organizing committee, the question of how to deal with the Norwegians and their boycott in 1905 still was a question of wounded national pride when the Nordic Games were due to be arranged in Stockholm again. In autumn 1908, the Swedish equestrian sportsmen and the skiers, both dominated by military officers, declared they would not accept to compete against Norwegian militaries. The committee and Balck followed this line and used all their power to keep the Norwegians away from the event⁴. They did not conceal their intention to pay the Norwegians back in their own coin, when they referred to the Norwegian boycott in 1905:

“The deepest depression that prevailed at the time in Norway because of the unions relations is now widely spread in Sweden.”

(As quoted by Jönsson, 2001, p.96).

Stockholm 1912

The next Olympic Games were due to take place in Stockholm. The Norwegian government was eager to expose the nation prominently on this occasion and public funding was tripled compared to 1908, even though travel costs were markedly less (Goksøyr, 2005, p.79). Norway participated with 207 athletes, making them the third largest delegation in Stockholm and the largest Norwegian team ever sent to Olympic Games. The Norwegians strived to improve athletic performance as part of the national self-assertion, and even hired foreign coaches for optimal preparation. As many as 24 new Norwegian records were set in athletics during the year of 1912 (cf. Olstad, 1987, p.159).

The Games turned out to be a tremendous success and are today widely regarded as the breakthrough of the Olympic Games after the troubling early years. (cf. Molzberger, 2012, p.7f). Coubertin connoted in his memories, that this success formed

⁴ However, the Norwegian could not be held away completely: The speed skating events had status as World Championships and for this reason, the Norwegians could not be excluded (cf. Lindroth, n.d.).

“the coronation of the Viktor Balck’s work” (Coubertin, 1936, p.132f). Balck had laid the foundation for strong Swedish influence in the Olympic Movement for decades to come, culminating in the IOC presidency of Sigfrid Edström, who had started his career as sport official in the context of the Stockholm Games. On top, Sweden became the most successful nation in the competitions, which by some Swedish sport officials was regarded as a long-awaited revenge for the loss of the union in 1905 (cf. Goksøyr, 2005, p.79). Lindroth has argued, that this outcome largely contributed to a normalization in the relationship between Norway and Sweden:

While the Norwegians were satisfied to have gained independency, Swedish wounds were cured by the successful organization of the Olympic Games and the new status as a leading force in the sporting world. The break-up in the sporting cooperation between Norway and Sweden that had followed the union-crisis now was a thing of the past and Norway participated again as normal in the Nordic Games in 1913 (cf. Lindroth, n.d., p.16).

Conclusion

Sports, the early Olympic Movement and in particular the Nordic Games, provided an important cultural arena for the Norwegian strive for independence and the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian union in 1905. Central Norwegian sports officials under the leadership of Fridtjof Nansen used this platform very consciously for political goals. Sport had become one of the central elements of the newly defined Norwegian national identity, particularly manifested by Nansen and his contribution to the installation of skiing as “the most national of all sports”. Therefore, the platform provided by the Nordic Games, the predecessor of the Olympic Winter Games was an obvious and natural choice for the Norwegians to facilitate in their independence efforts. On the Swedish side, these actions were conceived as a blight on the nation that was hard to digest, especially for the nationalistic circles around Viktor Balck.

The Scandinavian collaboration in sports remained affected from the initial politicization by the Norwegians for many years. On the face of the disgrace of Swedish supremacy, the nationalist circles around Viktor Balck paid the Norwegians back in their own coin when they excluded them to the largest extent possible from the

Nordic Games in 1909. Both the natural lapse of time and not at least, the successful arrangement of the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912 contributed largely to a normalization in the sporting relations.

While the history of the Nordic Games and the impact of the dissolution of the union has been subject to quite substantial research on the Swedish side, only limited research has been undertaken on the Norwegian up to this point. This might well be a long-term consequence of the strong Norwegian dissociation from anything “Swedish” during the chord clamping process from the Union. The resulting research gap provides opportunities for further research from the Norwegian side.

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