

Foundations of Managing British Olympics

Institutions through Time

Alex Gillett & Kevin Tennent



Foundations of Managing British Olympics

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Edited by: Dr Alex G. Gillett, University of York, UK; Dr Kevin D. Tennent, University of York, UK

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Foundations of Managing British Olympics: Institutions Through Time

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Skylar, Griffin and my family (A. G. G.)
To Leah and my family (K. D. T.)

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List of Abbreviations

AAA	Amateur Athletic Association (England)
AAC	Amateur Athletic Club
AAU	Amateur Athletic Union (USA)
AFA	Amateur Fencing Association
AGA	Amateur Gymnastic Association
ARA	Amateur Rowing Association (England)
ASA	Amateur Swimming Association (England)
BOA	British Olympic Association
BOAC	British Olympic Association Council
CoE	Church of England
FA	Football Association (England)
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
FNOC	French National Olympic Committee
IFAB	International Football Association Board
IPB	International Peace Bureau
IOC	International Olympic Committee
LAC	London Amateur Athletics Club
LCC	London County Council
MCC	Marylebone Cricket Club
MWOS	Much Wenlock Olympian Society
NCAA	Northern Counties Athletic Association
NCU	National Cyclist's Union (England)
NOA	National Olympic Association
NOC	National Olympic Committee
NPRS	National Physical Recreation Society
NSA	National Skating Association
OCOGs	Organizing Committees for the Olympic Games
RFU	Rugby Football Union
SAGB	Swimming Association of Great Britain
USFSA	Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques (Union of French Athletic Sports Societies)

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About the Authors

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Main Themes

This book sets out to chart how the British contributed to the development of the Olympic Games as an institution and how they did this through the development of competitive sport through the 19th and early 20th centuries. Starting from the 18th century, the ‘Grand Tour’ to Europe awakened a new interest in classical Greece and Rome which reawakened interest in the concept of the ancient Olympic Games as a show of physical strength and prowess. This came together in the 19th century with the developing ideology of muscular Christianity, originating from the playing fields of England’s public schools, stressing the physical as well as mental development of the young men who would enter public life. These men, once they moved into university and into employment in a range of professional and clerical roles, from the military to banking, continued these values through the organisation of amateur sport, which in time became a regularised system for competition. Sport was cleaned up and pursued for its own sake, with monetary prizes banned, and the ethical problems arising from betting sidelined, although this did not prevent business-like values from entering the system in terms of governance. This structure and moralising ethos partly inspired the French man Baron de Coubertin to form the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a move he finally undertook in 1892. We demonstrate that the British remained involved in this process which involved building and reinforcing what became known as ‘the classic Olympic system’ (Chappalet, 2023, pp. 785–786), a structure of interlocking distributed responsibility based on the collaboration of the Organizing Committees for the Olympic Games, National Olympic Committees, and National and International Sports Federations. This structure started to form and settle in the mid-1900s where this volume concludes, with the British on the verge of hosting in London.

The early Olympiads were ambitious projects which aimed to serve as pacifist meeting places for young people from a range of nations. From the start, they emulated the established World’s Fair, or exposition movement, building on a 19th-century tradition of entertainment based on the grand spectacular. Even at Athens in 1896, the stadium was refurbished at great cost, and a new velodrome was constructed. The World’s Fairs saw governments, including the British, sponsor official pavilions, and fostered a sense of peaceful international competition – the Olympics embraced this concept and would in time eclipse the World’s Fairs.

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This book attempts to explore the British contribution among those of other nations and place it in historical context, one which it is tempting to dismiss as ad hoc. For instance, the British missed competing in St Louis 1904, and at Paris in 1900 competitors had not even realised they were taking part in an Olympic Games. Nevertheless, the organisation of multi-sport tournaments involving unpaid athletes with only (mostly) steam railways, ships, post, and telegraph as the available transport and communication technologies was an impressive undertaking which required organisational skill on an international scale. Britain was among the world's most developed countries, and its amateur sporting enthusiasts collaborated with those of other countries and contributed with aplomb. They were self-organising and though having political connections, participated without government funding and attempted to avoid drawing on philanthropy or patronage. This book is the management and organisational history of Britain's participation in that process which created lasting structures that continue to have a meaning that resonates in the 21st century.

As we discuss what we consider to be key influences and milestones in the journey towards 1908, we make no apologies for the Anglo-centrism in our choice of events and influences, but wherever possible we have couched these in the broader geographic context. For example, our account would not be complete without some details of what are now regarded as being the first three editions of the Games in Athens, Paris, and St Louis, the Intercalated Games also in Athens, of the earlier 18th-century Greek games (and smaller-scale events elsewhere in Europe) and pseudo-Olympics in the United States, nor the great influence of France and particularly of French aristocrat Pierre de Coubertin. However, throughout the respective chapters we relate this to the British experience, context, and sporting institutions, and to the folk-history and Victorian history of Olympic revivals in England. We do not seek to deny the existence nor the influence or importance of traditions and institution elsewhere on Olympic history, but we hope that our readers also understand that to compile a complete geographic account of the genesis of the modern Olympic Games, it would require a book of its own and would be a diversion from the what this book is trying to achieve: A long range narrative of the background to the Olympics hosted in the British Isles, against a backdrop of international movements.

Sources and Methods

The research was conducted using an interpretive archival approach, in which we looked for traces of the British Olympic past from an eclectic range of sources. Our aim was to construct a narrative organisational history (Popp & Fellman, 2017) of the precursors to and formation of the British Olympic Association with the emphasis on building a historiographical contribution (Tennent, 2021) emphasising historical integrity over theoretical veracity on this occasion (Maclean et al., 2016; Tennent & Gillett, 2024) but with the potential to illuminate future theory building. Following Tennent and Gillett (2023), we considered carefully the organisations and personalities that we would need to research and used the CLUMOP mnemonic to identify useful collections. We present the results in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. CLUMOP Archival Repositories Consulted.

Category	Repository	Purpose	Coding
Corporate	IOC Study Centre, Lausanne, Switzerland	BOA-IOC Correspondence, Rome and London 1908 files	IOC
Local authority	Buckinghamshire Archives, Aylesbury, UK	Correspondence of Lord Desborough	BA
	Hertfordshire Archives and Libraries, Hertford, UK	Correspondence of Lord Desborough	HALS
Universities	University of East London Library Archive, London, UK	British Olympic Association Collections – BOA Council minutes and correspondence	BOA
	University of Birmingham (UK) Cadbury Research Library – archive and manuscript collections	National Athletics Archive - Amateur Athletic Association minutes, financial records, and rulebooks	AAA
Museums and libraries	National Football Museum Archive, Preston, UK	Football Association Council minute books	FA
Others	N/A	N/A	N/A
Public	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Tennent and Gillett (2023, p. 110).

Consistent with the approaches of Nix et al. (2023) we also consulted several digital archives including Gale's Primary Sources for national and regional newspaper sources – not just high-profile papers such as the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post* but the many regional and local titles now held by the British Library Newspapers collection, which carried syndicated reports of events and give us an insight into what ordinary people read. The House of Commons Parliamentary Papers and Foreign Office reports were also useful. The reports, official and unofficial of the 1896, 1900, and 1904 games held by the LA'84 Foundation, were helpful for organisational details about those competitions. Similarly valuable were the reports published by the Royal Commissions who organised the official British presence at the various World's Fairs. Published travelogues and memoirs by people such as Baron de Coubertin, Theodore Andrea Cook, and Burton Homes gave a sense of what it was like to beat the events and we have drawn on these where appropriate – we approached these as primary sources, and as such they appear in the footnotes.

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When constructing our narratives we were careful to do so in a reflexive way, thinking carefully about issues of change over time, causality, context, complexity, and contingency (Andrews & Burke, 2007). To do so, we attempted to be historically conscious, and thence be reflexive of method in both the first and second orders, considering carefully not just the institutions and practices of sporting figures and organisations but also our relationship to them by carefully identifying and questioning narrative silences (Decker, 2013; Tennent et al., 2020). The narrative was inherently international and took us across many countries and settings – not just the United Kingdom and the complex identities within but also Greece, the United States, and France, among others, as well as throwing up questions about the relationship between *fin-de-siecle* Europeans and the rest of the world. As British authors ourselves we were conscious of the dangers of constructing a hagiography and were mindful to evaluate historical actors by weighting them against the standards and constructs of the period.¹ In building a managerial and organisational history, we have therefore attempted to evaluate the story with contemporary standards of ethics, governance, and organising in mind, unlocking these constructs for a contemporary perspective.

¹As is usual in historical writing we have not provided contemporary conversions for monetary amounts because these figures generally make more sense in their historical context. We recommend [measuringworth.com](https://www.measuringworth.com) if you wish to generate modern equivalents.

Chapter 2

On the Shoulders of Zeus: Ancient Olympia, ‘Modern’ Revivals, and an Embryonic Olympic Movement

Abstract

We first briefly introduce the origins of the Olympic Games in ancient Greece, as they emerged from earlier funeral games which existed from at least the 13th-century BC. A four-year cycle of games known as ‘The Olympiad’ which ran for nearly 1,200 years evolved, and which symbolised the rise of a new ethic centred around leisure. Our narrative then moves to Britain in the early-modern era, where folk sports and entertainments had already emerged, and from the 17th century the term Olympic started to be applied to festivals which involved sports, sometimes with other classical allusions, the earliest case perhaps being the Cotswold Olympics held from about 1612 to 1642. We then explore other international attempts at Olympic revivals before considering the origins of formalised sports in Britain’s public schools and elite universities through the ideology of muscular Christianity, which also emphasised classical revivalism. Finally, we consider the emergence of the Shropshire-based Much Wenlock Olympian Class, which would prove to be perhaps the most inspirational precursor event, organised by Dr William Penny Brookes.

Keywords: Ancient Olympics; classical Greece; Grand Tour; Olympic revivalism; sport history

Introduction

In this chapter, we chart the background to the ‘modern’ Olympic movement. We agree with MacAloon (2006a, p. 339) who wrote that tracing the early history of the Olympic Games is ‘delightful and compelling, but also rather complicated’, crossing ‘the boundaries of various academic disciplines: history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, literary criticism and classical studies’. Synthesising the

complex literature and primary sources relating to the historic roots and emergence of the 'modern' Olympic movement is difficult and presenting it in a compelling but honest narrative is not easy. The chronology is important, but events and the individual's interconnect. Important ideas and influences appear here and there, disappear, and then re-emerge in a different time or place. This makes a strict chronology tricky without losing the thread and it is not always possible to 'prove' links or causalities between events in, for example, Britain, Greece, the United States, and France. However, we explain similarities and influences, the evidence for relationships between these where they exist.

We begin by identifying the roots of the Olympic story as first emerging in ancient civilisation located in what is now Greece. We discuss the trend for 'Olympic' revivals in western Europe, particularly in 19th-century England, which coincided with shifts in society, perhaps all though not entirely due to innovations in transport and the industrial revolution, and by the 'discovery' (for Britain) and later excavation (mainly a German initiative) of the original site of Olympia. We discovered a great volume of scholarship on these subjects as well as on some of the key individuals and organisations involved, the intersecting and evolving histories of global politics, sport, culture, science, and humanity.

Ancient Roots

Our culture and leisure behaviour, in part, are rooted in the past. They are founded on a history of what people in the past have done, and on customs and traditions handed down over the centuries. (Torkildsen, 2005, p. 11)

Sports are often associated with the past; our sports heritage is made up of instantly-recognized names. (Torkildsen, 2005, p. 44)

The above quotations are taken from Torkildsen, who did much to establish the profession of leisure centre manager in the United Kingdom through the late 20th century. He was concerned not just with practice but with the pedagogy of leisure management, and in his explanation of sport and leisure, charts a grand narrative which ties it fundamentally to the evolution of society.

A formational era in the history of Western society was that of ancient Greece. Many city-states hosted local sports events, often through a civic gymnasium, the place where citizens would exercise to promote good health, alertness, and physical fitness (Spivey, 2005, p. 32). The first recorded events, written in Homer's Iliads, were the Mycenaean funeral games, which can be traced to the 13th-century BC and involved combat sports such as chariot race, boxing, wrestling, a footrace, and spear-throwing, between warring Greek societies (Dickie, 1984). Perhaps the best know local events are the later Panathenaic Games of Athens, which began after 566 BC, in which young men nominated by their voting wards, were judged on appearance and on physical and equestrian activities (Spivey, 2005, p. 65).

More significantly, in terms of scale and of date established were the Olympian or Olympic Games that took place cyclically every four years, this cycle being

'The Olympiad'. An important part of political, religious, and cultural life, the Games were held in the summer, at the development known as Olympia. The first recorded instance was the 776 BC edition (Spivey, 2005), but it is thought that they likely began earlier and ran to at least 393 AD, a period of around 1,200 years. The cycle of the Olympiad began with the Pythian Games, held in Delphi and dedicated to the God Apollo. In the second year were held the Nemean Games, at Nemea and dedicated to Zeus. Thirdly, the Isthmian Games were held at Corinth and dedicated to Poseidon. Year four was the culmination; Olympic Games (Polley, 2011).

These early Olympic Games were thus one part of a religious festival, dedicated to Zeus, King of the Gods (IOC, 2021a) or Jupiter as he was known to the Romans, who would eventually conquer the Greek empire in the second-century BC. The site of Olympia, situated near Elis, had been developed to include religious temples and sports facilities with the areas for spectators. But it had been a religious centre since at least the Bronze age, perhaps even Neolithic times (MacAloon, 2006b; Polley, 2011).

Until the Roman era, all free Greek males were allowed to take part, regardless of their social standing, although many were soldiers. Contrastingly, women could neither compete nor attend the Games. Events included combat sports such as boxing (but without weight divisions/classifications), wrestling, pankration (a hybrid of boxing and wrestling), as well as chariot racing, long jump, javelin and discus, and running (IOC, 2021a). In contrast to the modern Olympics, ball games were absent, being considered of relevance only to children and women, and 'had no role in the classical conventions of male athleticism, itself shaped by military needs and the adoration of certain forms of fitness' (Walvin, 1994, p. 12).

The emergence of the original Olympic Games coincided with the rise of a 'leisure ethic' which Torkildsen (2005, p. 12) defines as 'the intelligent use of free time was the purpose of life. The natural life of man was collective, life in the community. The ideal was the perfection of civil life and political life'. The 'proper life' was good citizenship and good citizens were created out of leisure and education. However, this leisure ethic also presented an opportunity for commerce and sport, public entertainment and competitions were increasingly commercialised or even professionalised; as Van Nijf (2004) states, any claims that Greek Olympic sport was purely amateur is an inaccurate claim made by 19th and early 20th-century revisionists.

Prior to Roman occupation, those who were victorious in their sports received non-monetary recognition, usually an olive branch or a statue of themselves dedicated within the site. However, in later centuries, competitors arrived from across the Roman Empire. Many had been sponsored to train and compete, with the incentive of being rewarded with wealth and status if they were successful in their events. Participation in the games was still only available to free men, and they were not open for participation nor for spectating of women, slaves, or those who were disrespectful to the Gods. Despite the competitive, in some regard violent nature of the sports, which were based on activities useful for war, peace was an important principle: The Olympic truce required for 'all wars and disputes within the Hellenic world be suspended, and all competitors granted safe passage to Olympia' (Polley, 2011, p. 13).

During Roman occupation, ceremonial life (contests and festivals) initially continued to be a major preoccupation of city inhabitants (Van Nijf, 2000). Events were also important for networking or displaying status; professional associations were present at banquets and processions and had reserved seats in the stadia of the cities. Professional associations can thus be seen as taking their place in the hierarchy of status groups which made up the Greek cities under Roman rule (Van Nijf, 2023). Olympic Games thrived under Roman occupation, being symbolic of Hellenic culture, and although athletics were not an important part of Roman life, upon contact with the Greek world, Romans were attracted to Olympic Games as spectators and participants and Emperors positioned themselves as benefactors or protectors of this aspect of Greek culture. At the end of the first century, Domitian established Greek Games in Rome, and Hadrian, during his reign 117–138 AD, re-established the Panathenaic Games to Athens, introduced others, and tuned the city into his conceptualisation of Greek cultural identity (Van Nijf, 2004).

Despite being a culturally significant ritual lasting several hundred years, it is understood that the ancient Olympic Games were eventually discontinued in 393 AD by the Roman Emperor Theodosius the Great, a Christian who banned Greece's pagan landmarks and ceremonies, including the Zeus dedicated Olympic Games and Olympia development (Baker, 2008) although other Greek sports festivals continued. Olympia was burned down by decree of Theodosius the younger, and thereafter suffered natural disasters, looting, and dismantling (Polley, 2011).

The Written Word, Folk Sport, and British Interest in Olympia

For many years much of what we might think of as education was an activity of monasteries (Ferzoco, 2000). The ability to read and write was the preserve of the very wealthy and powerful, or those occupied by religion, such as monks who hand-wrote religious documents such as bibles. However, medieval universities began to resurrect classical education in the 12th and 13th centuries, including Latin and Greek languages. Latin was internationally used and served as a common language for society's leaders.

In the aftermath of social upheaval caused by the Black Death of 1349, the feudal and clerically dominated Middle Ages gradually gave way to the renaissance, the reformation, and the age of enlightenment. Society became more secular and greater emphasis was placed on appreciation of the arts and of logic and reasoning. The Olympics had been mentioned explicitly in certain classical literature, by philosophers, poets, geographers, and historians, whose lifetimes coincided within the age of the Olympics (Spivey, 2005 names Pausanias and Philstratos as examples). The invention of the printing press in the 1400s had been an important innovation and must have stimulated interest in the written word, as well as making more books and now pamphlets more widespread and relatively affordable. Increased demand led to, or at least coincided with, translations into English (and other European languages) of some works hitherto only available in editions handwritten in Greek or Latin.