

# Tennis and the Olympic Games.

Alan Little.

All England Lawn Tennis Club, UK.

## ABSTRACT

The present article historically documents the involvement of tennis as an Olympic sport, dating right back to the first modern games held in Athens, 1896. The extract from the book, 'Tennis and the Olympics', follows the presence and absence of tennis in the Olympics, from 1896 to present day, and onward to London 2012.

**Key words:** Olympics, Amateurism.

**Received:** 8 August 2010

**Accepted:** 8 September 2010

**Corresponding author:** Alan Little, All England Lawn Tennis Club, UK.

**Email:** [audrey.snell@aeltc.com](mailto:audrey.snell@aeltc.com)

## INTRODUCTION

The Olympic Games, which originated in Greece around 776 BC, were revived in modern times by a French nobleman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Born on the 1st January, 1863 in Paris, he was a brilliant scholar but not an athlete. He always took a great interest in sport and the effect this had on society.

For years he had visualized the inception of sporting championships to include all the world's nations. Healthy competition, where the reward came from the activity, was his aim. Any monetary, material, or business connections would immediately nullify a player's amateur status.



With this vision in mind, de Coubertin invited sportsmen from around the world to participate in a conference at the Sorbonne in Paris in June 1894. At this meeting there were 79 delegates representing 49 organisations from 13 nations. Here the new movement was established as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) with its members being Viktor Balck (Sweden), Aleksei Butorsky (Russia), Pierre de Coubertin (France), Willibald Gebhardt (Germany), Jiri Guth (Bohemia), Ferenc Kemeny (Hungary) and Dimitrios Vikelas (Greece). The

last named was elected President and de Coubertin initially acted as Secretary General, but in 1896 he became President, a post he held to 1925.

Appropriately, the Committee decided that the first Games should be held in Athens in 1896. On the 11th April, King George of Greece formally opened the first modern Olympic Games.

## TENNIS AT THE OLYMPICS

Surprisingly, lawn tennis was one of the nine sports chosen for the first Olympics. There appears to be no record as to why this was so. The lawn tennis programme consisted of Men's Singles and Doubles events, played on three courts in the middle of the Velodrome, at the conclusion of the cycling each day. 13 players from six nations actually hit a ball, with an unknown Irishman, John Boland, winning both titles. A start had been made.

The games for 1900 were awarded to Paris. Ladies were invited to compete in some of the peripheral events. In contrast to 1896, the standard of play of the lawn tennis was extremely high and had on show four Wimbledon Singles Champions — Harold Mahony, Laurence Doherty, Reginald Doherty and Miss Charlotte Cooper — all from the British Isles.

The IOC allocated the 1904 Games to St. Louis in the heart of the United States, no doubt with the thought of expanding the frontiers of sport. St. Louis was hardly in a position to attract competitors to the Games from Europe and beyond, who would have had to devote much time to the lengthy travel involved in those days. The upshot was that the two lawn tennis events, Men's Singles and Doubles, attracted 32 competitors, but all except one were from the home country. This was hardly expanding world competition.

Originally scheduled for Rome, the 1908 Games were reallocated to London, when the Italian authorities were forced to withdraw due to financial problems. King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra opened the Games and gave great support throughout. The participation of ladies was, by now, well recognized. Both indoor and outdoor lawn tennis tournaments were held in well established venues.

The 1912 Games held in Stockholm were regarded as the best organized so far. Led by King Gustav V, the people of the city took much interest in all the events, which were attended to full capacity. For the first time electrical timing equipment was used and an official poster issued. As four years earlier, indoor and outdoor lawn tennis tournaments were staged but the former, played in early May, attracted so few competitors that the idea was abandoned in the future.

After the hostilities of WW1 had ceased, Antwerp was chosen for 1920. On show for the first time was the Olympic Flag, and the Olympic Oath. The number of lawn tennis competitors attending was satisfactory, but some parts of the management of the event were poor.

Four years later, the Games were held in Paris to honour the retirement of de Coubertin. After these Games, feelings in the lawn tennis world ran high against the IOC. Although recognition was given for having attracted double the number of countries and competitors to take part in the tournament, the organization had been in many respects very poor. The hospitality towards the players had been practically non-existent. When they first arrived at the ground the stands were unfinished as were most of the courts and the dressing room accommodation was primitive. However, with the Ladies assigned to a large wooden shed with a tin roof and provided with only one shower, the men suffered more as they had to walk nearly half a mile for their facilities. Reports stated that at times the players' tempers became frayed and in turn the umpiring suffered. The Olympic spirit was very much under strain.



No lawn tennis authority could be blamed for the situation as the officials appointed by the IOC had very little experience in

running a tournament and the International Lawn Tennis Federation (ILTF) was not allowed to take part. Following a string of events related to the definition of amateurism among others, the ILTF and IOC broke away resulting in the absence of tennis as an Olympic event.

No one could possibly have envisaged however, that this disagreement would mean that lawn tennis would not fully appear in the Olympic Games for more than 60 years.

| 2000 SYDNEY    |                               |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| Mens Singles   | Y. Kafelnikov (RUS)           |
| Ladies Singles | Miss V.E.S. Williams (USA)    |
| Mens Doubles   | S. Lareau (CAN)               |
|                | D. M. Nestor (CAN)            |
| Ladies Doubles | Miss S. J. Williams (USA)     |
|                | Miss V. E. S. Williams (USA)  |
| 2004 ATHENS    |                               |
| Mens Singles   | N. A. Massu (CHI)             |
| Ladies Singles | Mrs. J. Henin- Hardenne (BEL) |
| Mens Doubles   | F. F. Gonzales (CHI)          |
|                | N. A. Massu (CHI)             |
| Ladies Doubles | Miss T. Li (CHN)              |
|                | Miss T. T. Sun (CHN)          |
| 2008 BEIJING   |                               |
| Mens Singles   | R. Nadal (Esp)                |
| Ladies Singles | Miss E. Dementieva (RUS)      |
| Mens Doubles   | R. Federer (SUI)              |
|                | S. Wawrinka (SUI)             |
| Ladies Doubles | Miss S. J. Williams (USA)     |
|                | Miss V. E. S. Williams (USA)  |

**Table 1. Olympic Gold medal winners of the 21st Century.**

#### TENNIS, THE OLYMPICS AND THE OPEN ERA

In the meantime, the Olympic Movement went from strength to strength, with over 90 countries and 3,000 competitors, including nearly 700 ladies at the Games. Around 1963, voices were heard making a case for the return of lawn tennis to the Olympic Games. The ILTF put the matter on the Agenda and when the Annual Meeting was held in Vienna on 8th July 1964, the matter was fully discussed. However with the coincidence of the open era, tennis was not fully re-instated until the 1984 games in Los Angeles. The tournament held during August in Los Angeles was a great success, with over 6,000 spectators attending daily at the Los Angeles Tennis Center. There were two singles events each of 32 competitors, from 34 nations, won by Stefan Edberg of Sweden and 15 year old Steffi Graf of West Germany. Later, Korea saw the acceptance of fully professional tennis by the IOC with a number of changes to the format including seedings, wild-cards and the introduction of tie-break sets.



Now looking forward to 2012, the Games will be held in London for the third time. In 1908 the tennis tournament was held at The All England Tennis Club at their old ground situated off Worple Road at Wimbledon, the same club will stage the event 104 years on, still on grass but on the Church Road ground that is well known by all for hosting the modern day Championships, Wimbledon.

## REFERENCES

Little, A. (2009). Tennis and the Olympic games. London: Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum.

## RECOMMENDED ITF TENNIS ACADEMY CONTENT (CLICK BELOW)



Copyright (c) 2010 Alan Little .



This text is under a [Creative Commons BY 4.0 license](#)

You are free to Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format - and Adapt the content - remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially under the following terms:

Attribution: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

[CC BY 4.0 license terms summary](#) [CC BY 4.0 license terms](#)