

Notes on Nordic Nostalgia

Stockholm 1912 and Helsinki 1952 Revisited

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The Olympic Games is strangely alluring to the collective memory, mostly, of course, because of its special history in ancient times and the fantastic project that Pierre de Coubertin initiated in the 1890s to revive the long-extinct Olympic tradition. To have actually succeeded in this is even more fantastic, and the result is a collection of sporting events of Olympic dimensions, which today numbers 27 completed Summer Olympics (however, 30 Olympiads). And all, or nearly all, have an identifiable nostalgic glow, even the very earliest that today appears quite primitive. The Athens Games of 1896 lasted only one week, had few participants, and did not make much of an impression at the time, but of course it was a sensation that they were achieved at all. One Olympiad later the Olympians gathered in Paris, where the games were characterized mainly by the lack of coherent events. The nearly six-month long contest had no formal beginning or end. Some odd sports were tested, as obstacles swimming and ballooning, some contestants were professionals, and few winners received medals whereas some received prize money. Another four years later, the Games came to St. Louis, USA. That prosperous Missouri city forced a move of the event from Chicago, who originally won the bid for the Games of the third Olympiad. In St. Louis, they became part of the World Fair. The number of participating nations was fewer in St. Louis than in Athens in 1896, 12 compared to 14. Particularly memorable is the St. Louis marathon, which was first won by Fred Lortz by travelling half the distance in a car. He was revealed, but not until he had received the prize and shaken hands with the president's daughter. Instead, the victory was awarded the runner-up, Thomas Hicks, who was able to finish the race thanks to his coach, who travelled beside him in a car and provided him with several doses of strychnine mixed with brandy. —And one can keep this up; follow the Olympics, study the Games, find the interesting details, and summarize the overall impression in a slogan. This year, two historic Games have attracted particular attention in the Nordic countries – in addition to the London Olympics, of course – the Stockholm Games of 1912 and the Helsinki Games of 1952. The former is known as the "Sunshine Olympiad", the latter as "the last real games." The background of these nostalgic epithets, and the question as to whether it is reasonable and appropriate to apply them, was the subject of Erkki Vettenniemi's talk at this year's Sport History Symposium in Stockholm in May. We are pleased to be able to publish a slightly shortened version of his talk.

What is sport? What is the function of modern sport in (post)modern societies? Such fundamental queries can hardly be answered in a definitive manner, no matter how sophisticated theories we might be inclined to employ. For the present purpose, however, I have found John Nauright's (2003, 35–36) musings in the appropriately titled anthology *The Essence of Sport* sufficiently appealing. Modern sport is a “highly nostalgic practice”, and the production of nostalgia “lies at the heart of sport’s cultural role” in our twenty-first century societies, the prominent historian of sport argued.

Nauright's insight seems particularly germane in the context of a Nordic double anniversary. The year 2012 witnessed not only the centenary of the Stockholm Olympic Games; it also marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Helsinki Olympics. True, the grandiose Swedish celebration was in a class of its own, and not even the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki games could match the magnitude of the Stockholm centenary. Yet the nostalgic inspiration was identical in the neighboring countries, providing, I believe, ample support for Nauright's thesis about the function of modern sport. In what follows I briefly probe the historiography of the 1912 and the 1952 games with no pretensions to exhaust the topic of sportive nostalgia.

Cold war, cool games?

Not only athletes but sport events too can attract nicknames. Thus, the 1936 Olympic games have gone down in history as the “Nazi Olympics” and the 1948 London games are regularly reminisced as the “Austerity Olympics” (e.g. Mandell 1987; Hampton 2012). Neither tag is wide off the mark since the Nazis did run the extravagant show in Berlin, and three years after the global conflict initiated by them had ended, the British cobbled together the first postwar summer Olympics without public funding.

For other alluring descriptions I would like to introduce *The Politics of the Olympics*, a scholarly tome edited by Alan Bairner and Gyozo Molnar as recently as 2010. According to the academic duo, the 1952 Helsinki games “are sometimes talked about as the last real Olympics – small-scale and conducted in the spirit of sportsmanship with only limited commercialization” (Bairner and Molnar 2010, 184).

Now, “the last real Olympics” translates as *viimeiset oikeat olympialaiset* in Finnish language, and as any serious student of sport history can easily affirm, those three words feature more frequently than “sometimes” in Finnish Olympic literature. For instance, a veteran journalist and amateur historian published a book titled *Viimeiset oikeat olympialaiset* to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki games (Raevuori 2002). Yet he never paused to reflect on the exact origins of the titular claim – but then, neither did Bairner and Molnar discuss the genealogy of their “last real” statement. Instead, they took the tagline for granted.

Looking into still earlier Olympic history, this is what the two academics had to say about the 1912 event: “Subsequently described as the ‘Swedish masterpiece’, the Games of the V Olympiad were hailed by Avery Brundage for the efficiency of their organization.” As opposed to the “last real” conjecture, then, Bairner and Molnar (2010, 235) at least acknowledged that the “Swedish masterpiece” tag is a latter-day invention. Granted, Brund-

age participated in the Stockholm games as an athlete, but he is immensely better known as the fifth head of the International Olympic Committee (1952–72) in which position he probably sang the praises of all Olympic games he witnessed, excepting the 1972 Munich Olympics. (He famously ordered the German games to go on despite a terrorist attack that claimed the lives of eleven members of the Israeli team.)

It can nonetheless be true that the Swedish games garnered heaps of contemporary praise, but why should academic authors honor any Olympics with a term that was coined after the event? Besides, even “the last real Olympics” slogan was devised “subsequently”, i.e. decades after the conclusion of the Helsinki games (in the course of which Brundage assumed the IOC presidency). What might account for such a belated appreciation of the only Olympics ever held in Finland? In an exemplary contribution to Olympic historiography, Pekka Honkanen (2004) of the Finnish Sports Museum dated the origins of the key term to the 1970s. Troubles such as boycotts, the 1972 bloodbath and the skyrocketing costs of the games that endangered the very existence of the quadrennial cycle, persuaded influential Finnish observers to reconceptualize the Helsinki games. They simply decided among themselves that an Olympic paradise had been lost, and where else to place the pinnacle of a golden age than on Finnish soil?

As far as I can judge, Honkanen’s train of thought is cogent and convincing. It only needs to be complemented with a note on the contemporary reception of the 1952 games. Instead of being venerated for their ostensibly “small scale” and the suspiciously abstract concept of “sportsmanship”, the Helsinki event could be recognized as “the first real Olympics” in terms of political tensions and the massive number of participants. That the Soviet Union became a member of the so-called Olympic family in 1952 immediately turned the ambulatory games into a sportive hotspot of the Cold War. Since the Olympic summer ushered in the era of Coca-Cola in Finland, the criticism and scorn for blatant commercialism should come as no surprise either. (Kokkonen 2007, 166–172.)

Sunshine over Stockholm

That aggressive nationalism intruded on the supposedly peace-inducing games in 1952 was by no means an unprecedented development. While the exceptionally quarrelsome 1908 London Olympics have been repeatedly subjected to academic scrutiny, most recently by Matthew Llewellyn (2011), the similarly unsavory aspects of the 1912 Olympics have tended to escape scholarly attention. Presumably, the discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that two superpowers, Britain and the United States, clashed in London, and globally recognized newspapers such as *The Times* and *The New York Times* closely followed and commented on the Anglo-American skirmishes. As regards the 1912 games, historians would have had to decode Olympic reports published in Finnish and other more or less marginal languages.

Not unlike in 1908, barbs and insults reverberated across the Olympic stadium, especially but not exclusively during the wrestling matches. The Swedish members of the jury were allegedly biased if not plain corrupt, and since they constituted an absolute majority in the jury, the odds appeared to be stacked against non-Swedish participants. A protest let-

ter signed by eight nations was flatly ignored by the IOC and it did not raise the curiosity of the Swedish media either. (Kokkonen 2012; Tikander 2012.) The august members of the IOC refused to dwell on the seedy underside of modern Olympism, and the Swedes were not an iota more eager to let irksome complaints tarnish the image of their games. Crucially, the Swedish parliament debated state subsidies for sport in the wake of the Olympics, a coincidence that effectively ruled out honest reckoning with the perceived refereeing irregularities. (Molzberger 2012, 212–219.)

Small wonder subsequent generations of historians have failed to come to grips with the controversies that littered the 1912 Olympics. In Sweden, of course, the acclaimed “Swedish Masterpiece” is known as the *solskensolympiaden* (Sunshine Olympiad) although scholars have yet to excavate the origins of the enchanting tag. Symptomatically, the four heavy tomes that celebrate the centenary of the Stockholm games nod to the notion of *solskensolympiaden* either on the title page (Jönsson 2012; Erséus 2012), the preface (Isaksson 2011) or the back cover (Bolling and Yttergren 2012). As if by mutual decision, the academic and non-academic authors alike abstain from revealing the precise evolution of the key term. When was it invented and by whom? Did it initially refer to the nearly tropical weather conditions alone? Today, any mention of *solskensolympiaden* implies that harmony and goodwill reigned supreme in Stockholm. By what means and how smoothly did the connotation undergo a fundamental change?

As long as such basic issues remain unsolved, we are entitled to conclude that *solskensolympiaden* is about as anachronistic appellation as “the last real Olympics” in reference to the Helsinki games. Indeed, Christian Widholm whose dissertation *Iscensättandet av solskensolympiaden* is obviously worth acknowledging in this context believes that the invention of *solskensolympiaden* occurred towards the mid-twentieth century. (This was Christian’s reply to my query.) In that case the sunshine narrative could have been launched almost literally on the eve of the Helsinki games which, for their part, were plagued by torrential rains instead of Mediterranean heat.

To cap a story of scholarly oversight, *The Politics of the Olympics* that I quoted twice at the outset seeks, according to the preface, “to look beyond the façade... and debunk some of the myths of kudos, glory and tradition” that accompany the saga of the modern games. Noble intentions notwithstanding, the same book ends up promoting nostalgic assumptions about the 1912 and the 1952 Olympics without the academic authors being aware of their myth-making proclivities.

Limits of revisionism

While the observations above concern the modern Olympic experience, I am not suggesting that Olympic games were exceptionally vulnerable to nostalgic daydreams. Baseball is a prime example of a non-Olympic sport suffused with myths and legends that may well constitute the very essence of “America’s pastime” (another appellation awaiting an autopsy). Besides, baseball scholarship has taught precious lessons for academics bent on radical revisits of sport history. In his marvellous monograph *Imagining Baseball*, David McGimpsey (2000, 52–53) argues that “revisiting the same legend, even in the hopes of

debunking its authority, often ironically reinforces the details of that which was meant to be discredited”.

In other words, no matter how fervently we would love to reinterpret an event like the 1912 Olympic games, the nostalgic (mis)reading prevails. The same holds true for earnest attempts to challenge the hegemonic representation of the 1952 games. Surely no scholar of sport should cherish illusions about his or her myth-debunking capacities; we are simply not in the business of redressing popular perceptions of history. It is one thing to point out dubious claims and expose plain errors, but quite another to actually substitute time-honored stories with a more sober understanding of the sporting past.

That stated, nothing prevents us from casting critical light on the uses of sportive nostalgia, starting with trivial-looking terminology. Where do nationalistic fantasies in which the sun never dips beyond the horizon spring from? How can mythical narratives about the “first” or “last” genuine games gain a foothold in Olympic historiography, including academic accounts of history? As my succinct essay has hopefully demonstrated, disentangling seemingly innocuous appellations can pave the way for more systematic analyses of sportive mythologies.

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in Stockholm, May 10–11, 2012.*

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