



Olympism in Mexico



On 23 April 1923, a group of thirteen men met in a formal session to sign a text which they had begun drafting early in the year. That document finalized the establishment of an institution known as the Mexican Olympic Association.

One by one, they signed at the bottom of the page: Carlos B. Zetina, a famous politician, Professor Rosendo Arnáiz, Director of the International Sports Club, Alfonso Rojo de la Vega, a well-known basketball coach ¹, Ignacio de la Borbolla, José E. Peralta, Moisés Sáenz, José Escobar, Eduardo Gabucio, Alfonso Pruneda, Francisco Contreras, the distinguished polo player Jorge Parada ² and Lamberto Alvarez Gayou.

The Mexican Olympic Committee was created, but a lengthy preparation had preceded its formation.

In the late nineteenth century, Mexico City was home to an exclusive Jockey Club. Accused of elitism by many, the institution was nevertheless highly reflective of its time. The Jockey Club organized a broad programme of sports events among its gentlemen members, who practised automobile racing, sailing and polo. In keeping with the spirit of the day, the members of the Jockey Club were part of aristocratic competition at its purest: as sporting gentlemen or “sportsmen” ³.

It was the custom among members to exchange the lessons of their youth in sportsmanship, and schoolboy stories from their years at Stoneyhurst, an austere British public school run by Jesuits. These wistful, nostalgic discussions were generally led by the Escandón-Barron and Rincón-Gallardo brothers. While this was the environment of

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sports activities in Mexico, in Europe Baron Pierre de Coubertin made an historic announcement. On 25 November 1892, he delivered a lecture at the Sorbonne in Paris on physical education in the modern world, announcing his plan to re-establish the Olympic Games. Two years later, in the same university auditorium, the project was unanimously approved, the International Olympic Committee was created, and Athens was chosen as the site of the first modern Olympic Games.

Together with Coubertin, a group of some 20 persons formed the nucleus of the early Olympic leadership. The Americas were represented, with Dr Zubiatur, an Argentine, as one of the pioneers.

Two members of the Jockey Club settled in Europe: Manuel and Eustaquio Escandón became part of French high society in Paris, participating in several large-scale sporting projects, including the founding of the Bagatelle Polo Club, which is situated behind the Longchamp race track.

In 1900, the Games of the II Olympiad took place. Manuel Escandón took an active part in the events as a member of the organizing committee for the Olympic polo tournament. From January to June, the Mexican polo player worked with his friends Robert Fournier, Jean de Ganay, and Charles de la Rochefoucault, who happened also to be a childhood friend of Pierre de Coubertin and served as president of the Organizing Committee of the Games in Paris.

Mexico shared in the success of polo. Manuel and Eustaquio Escandón, to-

gether with their brother Pablo and Mr William Wright, took part in the events, placing third in the “Exhibition Grand Prix” tournament ⁴.

In 1901, four members were coopted by the International Olympic Committee: Prince Edouard de Salm Horstmar of Germany, Commandant Reyntiens of Belgium, Sir Howard Vincent of Great Britain and Miguel de Béistegui of Mexico ⁵.

In Mr Béistegui’s country, the new century brought an unprecedented sports boom. Cycling became a mania, forcing the governor of the Mexican capital, General Pedro Rincón-Gallardo, to pass a law prohibiting bicycle races on the Alameda Central.

The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) was founded in 1902, at a time when baseball was becoming popular in Veracruz. A velodrome was inaugurated in Mexico City as well as a new Hippodrome called La Condesa, which also housed the Polo Club. The great event of 1910 was the first Mexican derby and then, armed revolution broke out.

In Europe, the situation was no better, and Coubertin himself said that, “the revived Olympic Games must give the youth of the world the chance to have a happy and brotherly encounter, which will gradually erase people’s ignorance of things which concern them all, an ignorance which feeds hatred, creates misunderstandings and hurtles events along a barbarous path towards a merciless conflict”.

Baron de Coubertin was again ahead of his time, but his work was overshadowed by the Bolshevik revolution and World War I. Nevertheless, in 1919 he had rebuilt the Movement and con-



Carlos Rincón-Gallardo and Jorge Gómez de Parada with a group of polo-players

vened a Session of the IOC. Henri de Baillet-Latour, a Belgian aristocrat and polo player, began to emerge as a new figure in the IOC leadership. Although Mexico had been invited to the Games in Amsterdam in 1920, it did not participate.

Moving forward in time, one finds this statement, made by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1924: “‘Latin’ sport is inspired by a different spirit. Its dominant tendency is toward a [contest of the fittest] with a view to the result to be obtained, the victory to be won [...] we are on the verge of an Anglo-Latin rivalry in which the numerical and moral forces will be on the Latin side”.

One year earlier, Baron de Coubertin had appointed Count de Baillet-Latour as a special envoy to various games to be held in Brazil. On his way, Count de Baillet-Latour visited Miguel de Béistegui to ask his advice on whom he should see in Mexico. Béistegui mentioned a well-known sportsman, Carlos Rincón-Gallardo y Romero de Terreros⁶.

Baillet-Latour met Rincón-Gallardo at his home on 5 February 1923. The meeting was fruitful, as the two men had many things in common: they both loved sport, played polo, belonged to the aristocracy, acted as social leaders

and... wore a monocle. Rincón-Gallardo promised Baillet-Latour that he would arrange a meeting with the head of state, General Alvaro Obregón. The meeting took place on the 7th and was also attended by the Minister of Education and well known writer José Vasconcelos.

With the General’s support, various other meetings were arranged with the Mexican sporting community. However, only the last was as productive as hoped for. On the night of 13 February, a group of sportsmen met at the Bersin fencing club, a well-known Salle d’armes. On that occasion, Count de Baillet-Latour delivered a stirring speech, of which an excerpt appears below.

“...All sports, for all, on an equal footing: that is our motto. Friendship among different social classes and among peoples: that is our objective as expressed by our emblem [...] the sportsman is a responsible citizen in times of peace and, in times of war, a soldier capable of defending his home [...] I cannot emphasize enough what a pleasure it is for me to be here and to perform the mission with which [I have been entrusted] on behalf of our illustrious President, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who is detained in Europe owing to his poor state of health.”

Following de Coubertin’s example, during his visit Baillet-Latour sought to reach the social leaders who would be able to help the Movement take root. Before the end of the evening, he therefore explained that it was necessary that Mexico should have another member in International Olympic Committee. The choice was Carlos Rincón-Gallardo.

Once the arrangements had been made, Count de Baillet-Latour announced that it was time for him to leave. As a farewell, the Marqués de Guadalupe and his friends organized a *charreada* (a demonstration of Mexican-style riding) in honour of the Olympic envoy. For two months, the Rincón-Gallardo household became the headquarters of the Olympic Movement in Mexico. On 23 April 1923, his efforts came to fruition and the first (official) Mexican Olympic Committee was created.

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¹ *The coach who enabled Mexico to win the bronze medal in the first official Olympic basketball tournament at the Olympic Games in Berlin.*

² *IOC member in Mexico from 1924 to 1927.*

³ *The English word ‘sportsman’ (‘el sportsman’) was used in Mexico at the time to refer to gentlemen athletes, i.e. businessmen, politicians and members of the Hispanic aristocracy who practised physical activity as competition.*

⁴ *An Olympic event which was officially recognized by the International Olympic Committee.*

⁵ *The first IOC member in Mexico (1901-1931). He was a diplomat, and served as secretary of the Mexican embassy in Brussels.*

⁶ *Carlos Rincón-Gallardo had the title of Marqués de Guadalupe, Duque de Regla, Marqués de Villahermosa de Alfaró. A member of the military, writer, journalist and specialist in equestrian sport, he is considered in Mexico as the father of Mexican-style horse-riding. He was IOC member in Mexico from 1923 to 1924.*