

Rugby football in the Olympics

Moseley website received a query recently from Nigel Trueman who runs a rugby history website - www.rugbyfootballhistory.com/index.htm - and had discovered a reference that "...Great Britain was represented by Mosley, Moosley or Moseley Wanderers RFC in the 1900 Olympics." He asked whether this was anything to do with Moseley. The answer is YES – **Peter Woodroffe and former Moseley chairman Ken Birrell** wrote an article about this a few years back. Now read on...

Rugby Football was in the Olympic programme at the Paris Games in 1900. It was introduced by Baron Pierre de Coubertain. The Baron's man claim to fame is that he revived the idea of the ancient Olympic Games in Greece and founded the modern Olympic movement.

The first modern Olympiad took place in Athens in 1896 and because of the Barons influence it was natural that the second should be held in Paris. His links to rugby union were that he refereed the first-ever French Rugby Union Championship Final in 1892 and France's first International, on New Year's Day, 1906 at Parc des Princes.

In the 1900 Olympics, rugby football was represented by France, German and Britain represented by Moseley Wanderers. The Games lasted from May 20 to October 28 and even as long as to May 1901 such was the random nature of organizing events not clearly defined from the Paris Universal Exposition. Baron de Coubertain was a dreamer rather than an organiser.

The team representing Great Britain – Moseley Wanderers – probably did not even know they were taking part in the Olympic Games. The Birmingham Daily Gazette reported on October 28, 1900:

England v France

Sunday football is neither popular nor frequent here but it is one of the latest diversions that help to make the French Sabbath so much unlike ours.

On Sunday an English fifteen will meet the French Rugby Union at the Paris Exhibition Grounds. The following players representing the English Union left London late last night for the purpose.

H.A. Loveitt (Coventry) back; H.S. Nichol (Old Edwardians), L. Hood (Rosslyn Park), C. Wittindale (Aston Old Edwardians), three-quarter backs; J.H. Birtley (Moseley), J. Cantion (London Irish), half-backs; J.G. Wallis (Old Edwardians), C.P. Deykin (Moseley), V. Smith (Old Edwardians), A.J.L. Darby (Cambridge University), M.L. Logan (London Scottish), F.H. Wilson (Old Crusaders), M.W. Talbot (Moseley), F.C. Bayliss (Moseley) forwards.

On the next day the following appeared in The Times (October 29, 1900):

Football in Paris, October 28

A rugby football match was played today at the Velodrome Municipal at Vincennes between Moseley Wanderers and a team representing the full strength of France. A crowd of 10,000 persons was present. The French team held the advantage from the first and ultimately gained victory by 27 points to 8. The defeat of the Moseley team which was a strong one may be attributed partly to the fatigue of the journey. They only arrived in Paris this morning and have to leave again this evening. – Reuters.

The fatigue of the team is indisputable as at least five – Birtles and Deykin for Moseley v Coventry and Nichol, Wallis and Smith for Old Edwardians v Leicester had played for their clubs the day before. This was in pre-Bleriot days, the possible itinerary in the 24 hours before kicking off in Paris could have been: Saturday: matches in the Midlands, train to London, train to the coast. Sunday: cross-Channel steamer, train to Paris.

A.J.L. Darby was the most illustrious player in the team winning his one and only international cap in 1899 against Ireland in Dublin, a Barbarian and a Cambridge Blue in 1896/7/8. The only current county player was C.P. Deykin who experienced a heavy week playing for the Midland counties v East Midlands on October 24, for Moseley v Coventry on October 27 and for Great Britain v France on October 28. An under-strength team in the circumstances, though France did not play full internationals until 1906.

A fortnight earlier, France defeated the only other entrant, Germany, 27-17, so France won the gold medal and probably on the strength of the fact that Germany scored nine more points than Great Britain they were awarded the silver medal and Moseley Wanderers the bronze.

These matches have been recorded in The Encyclopaedia of the Olympic Games compiled by Eric Kamper, the world's leading historian of the Olympics.

There are several unanswered questions. How did Moseley Wanderers gain the invitation to represent Great Britain? Who selected the team and made the arrangements? The team appeared to be Birmingham-based and could have been organised by Old Edwardians – Nichol was their captain in 1899-1900 and Wallis their vice-captain in 1900-01. J.H. (Henry Birtles) was one of three brothers who played for Moseley, the other two being George and Spencer. He was a 'personality' and a lucid raconteur, just the sort to organize such a casual adventure by amateurs. And one other question to be answered – Who has the bronze medal or did they all get one? Where is/are it/they?

Rugby football was not played at the 1904 Games at St Louis, but re-appeared in the London Games of 1908 when the touring Australian Wallabies beat Britain represented by the County Champions Cornwall 32-3.

Rugby had no appeal for the Swedes in Stockholm in 1912 and only two teams entered the Antwerp games in 1920 – USA represented by Stanford University and France, the Americans causing a shock by defeating France 8-0. In 1921, the International Olympic Committee Congress decreed that rugby should be placed on the definite programme so that 'hereafter both association football (amateur) and rugby would be a positive part of the Olympic programme'.

At the 1924 Olympics in Paris, three teams entered. France beat Romania 61-3, the USA (Stanford University again) beat Romania 37-0 and in the final the USA beat France once again, 17-3 to win the gold medal. The match finished in uproar when Gideon Nelson, one of the American reserves, was flattened by a walking stick and the American anthem was jeered.

The 1921 IOC decree was short-lived and rugby union ceased to be an Olympic sport. The reasons were: the uproar in 1924; the IOC wanted emphasis on individual sports; women's athletics had increased the number of competitors taking part and rugby did not receive the backing it should have done from the British entries. Britain certainly knows about the competition in 1924 as the Australians played three warm-up games in England. But, most of all, Baron de Coubertan had retired as President of the IOC in 1925.

The IOC turned down requests to stage rugby at the 1928 Amsterdam Games and requests by the Soviet Union in 1980 and South Korea in 1988 were also rejected, but south Korea came desperately close to achieving their aim. No rugby in Sydney 2000! Thus six nations only have taken part in rugby football at the Olympics – France, Germany, Great Britain, Australia, USA and Romania, the gold medallists being USA (2), France and Australia. The silver medallist were France (2), Germany and Great Britain (Cornwall) and the bronze medallists were Romania and Great Britain represented by **Moseley Wanderers**.

"Moseley continued to be one of the UK's top club sides. Still in the top 40 English sides, a major revival is underway with a move to a new ground in their native Birmingham in 2004. For more details see <http://www.moseleyrugby.co.uk>