Alumni

Let the Games Begin

By
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|
Summer 2012

Prince Constantine of Greece, in his martial mustache and uniform, was easy to spot on the dusty terraces of Argos. The archaeologist approached with characteristic eagerness: he had a mission. It was April 1894.

The archaeologist was Charles Waldstein 1873CC, a classical scholar of astounding range. He had written books on psychology and sculpture, and even a study of John Ruskin. Born in New York in 1856, Waldstein went on from Columbia to earn a doctorate at the University of Heidelberg before beginning a career teaching classical archaeology at Cambridge University. It was there, in 1886, while also serving as director of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum, that he met the Baron de Coubertin, of France. The two men, fused by a passion for education and athletics, became friends.

In early 1894, Coubertin asked Waldstein for a favor. For several years, Coubertin had been promoting the creation of a new, international Olympic Games in the model of those staged in ancient Athens. But support had so far been lukewarm: Coubertin had scheduled an International Athletic Congress for Paris in June, but virtually no delegates had yet consented to attend. Coubertin asked Waldstein to intercede with the Greek royal family on his behalf. Waldstein, who had temporarily relocated to Athens to become the director of the American School of Classical Studies there, agreed to seek out the prince.

As Waldstein and his colleagues excavated the great temple at Argos, Prince Constantine and other members of the Greek royal family toured the site. Waldstein buttonholed the prince and described a plan for Greece to host a competition of the world's best athletes on the site of the ancient games. By the time the royal family concluded its four-hour stay in Argos, the prince had promised to serve as an

honorary member of the Olympic Congress.

Though Coubertin would earn rightful credit as the founder of the modern Olympic Games, it was Waldstein's intervention in Argos that was the project's turning point.

In the end, Waldstein, too, became an honorary member of the Olympic Congress. In Athens, at the inaugural 1896 games, he helped to organize the gymnastics event and refereed cycling and tennis. Ever the man of action, Waldstein was also a member of the US Olympic delegation, a distinction that guaranteed him a list of firsts: Columbia's first Olympian, New York's first Olympian, and America's first Jewish Olympian.

He competed as a marksman, joining John and Sumner Paine, brothers from Boston who would become Olympic champions. Waldstein's event was the 200-meter military rifle, at the shooting range at Kallithea. Forty-two shooters from seven countries competed in the event, but only the scores of the top twelve finishers were recorded, and Waldstein was not among them.

Just where Waldstein learned to shoot is unclear. He was unlikely to have done so growing up in New York City; more likely he practiced as an adult on his farm and estate in Newton Hall, near Cambridge, England. Nor is there a record of how he made the team; probably he asked Coubertin, who found a spot. Of the fourteen members of the American shooting team, Waldstein was one of only two who did not win medals.

Waldstein returned to Cambridge in 1895, where he would teach, off and on, for the rest of his career. He was knighted in 1912 and changed his name during World War I to Walston, perhaps to distance himself from his family's German heritage. He died of a heart attack in 1927, at the age of seventy, while on a Mediterranean cruise, not far from several of the archaeological sites that he had uncovered.

This summer, the Olympics are being held fifty miles from Waldstein's Cambridge, in London, with the shooting events to take place at the Royal Artillery Barracks. There are nine events: three apiece for rifle, shotgun, and pistol.

Waldstein would likely be surprised at the growth of the sport. The US national team alone has fifty members, and nearly half of them are women.

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