

A historical review of the foundation of the IAAF

by August Kirsch

1 Introduction

It has long been accepted as fact that the International Amateur Athletic Federation was founded in Stockholm, Sweden on 17 July 1912. The series of three souvenir books published by the IAAF to commemorate the foundation do little to contradict this. In his preface to the first book, which appeared in 1982, the IAAF President Dr Primo Nebiolo wrote:

'On July 17th, 1912, 27 delegates, representing 17 countries, met in the 'Riksdags' House in Stockholm to found the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF).' (IAAF, 1982)

Five years later, in the preface to the second book produced on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the IAAF, he restated:

'They gathered at the Riksdag (Parliament House) in Stockholm for the purpose of forming an International Amateur Athletic Federation.' (IAAF, 1987)

While these two extracts do not state that the Federation was *definitely* founded on the day mentioned, Dr Nebiolo was much more categorical in the introduction to the leaflet accompanying the video film 100 Golden Moments:

'History records that it was on July 17, 1912, in Stockholm, that the International Amateur Athletic Federation was founded' (Rome 1987, preface)

The third book in the series gives no details which alters this view of the foundation of the IAAF. Preparation for its publication began in the early summer of 1991, and, because of the short time available, a planned sport history congress which would have

August Kirsch is a member of the Honorary Editorial Board

Translated from the original German by Jürgen Schiffer

examined the question of the exact foundation date could not take place. Yet, as this article will argue, a study of the historical documents of the period suggests that the IAAF was not founded in Stockholm on 17 July 1912 but rather in Berlin on 21 August 1913.

2 Journalists versus historians

The sport historian H. Bernett, in his study 'Leichtathletik im geschichtlichen Wandel' (Athletics through the ages), has identified a trend to which the IAAF commemorative books conform. According to Bernett, the history of international athletics has so far been examined mainly by journalists and statisticians (Bernett, 1987, 12). The editing of the individual chapters of the commemorative books has been undertaken by journalists, confirming the trend.

Bernett's observation was not meant in any derogatory sense. On the contrary, in his view, many of the presentations are vivid and appealing to the reader, their only fault is that they often lack 'historical quality.' To resolve this fault is a task for the international fraternity of sport historians!

The journalists who played a leading role in editing the books did not concentrate on the exact sequence of events leading to the foundation of the IAAF. Bernett, on the other hand, has looked at the historical records and reached a different conclusion:

'Sigfried Edström, the organizer of the Games, and Carl Diem, (the German) Chef de Mission in Stockholm, made preparations so that the IAAF could be founded in the Prussian Parliament in Berlin in 1913. Edström was elected President, Carl Diem became a member of the Executive Committee.' (Bernett, 1987, 133)

Bernett does not mention the meeting of 17 July, 1912, although it must have been known to him if only for the reason that Carl Diem took part in it. Since his book deals only marginally with international develop-

ment, Bernett just mentions the foundation year, which in his view was 1913 and not 1912. Let us turn now to the historical events that led to the IAAF's foundation.

3 The international sport movement at the turn of the century

At an international congress at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1894, the Frenchman Baron Pierre de Coubertin gained the necessary support for his idea of re-establishing the classical Olympic Games. This led to the organization of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896. From the start athletics was a major part of the Olympic programme, but its organisation caused greater difficulties in each succeeding Games. Since an international federation did not exist, the Olympic organisers had to fall back on national federations and their rules.

During the Olympic Games in London in 1908 it became obvious that an internationalisation of the competition rules was an absolute necessity: there had been disputes between British and the Americans about the design of the planting box for the Pole Vault and whether athletes should be allowed to be spurred on by judges from the inner room (J. A. Cooper, cited by Krüger, 1980, 540). Furthermore, it became necessary to standardise the programme of athletics at the Olympic Games, to publish a definite list of world records, and to discuss the wording of the paragraph dealing with amateurism. Bearing all this in mind, it is astonishing that initiatives for the foundation of an athletics federation were not taken sooner.

A total of 11 international sport federations were founded before the IAAF, three of them before the IOC itself was founded in 1894 (gymnastics in 1881, rowing in 1892 and ice skating in 1892). A further 11 federations were established after the first Olympic Games: cycling in 1900, football in 1904, aerosport in 1905, shooting and sailing in 1907, swimming, ice hockey and underwater diving in 1908, and wrestling, fencing and tennis in 1913.

In the first official IAAF handbook, which was printed in New York in 1922, the first IAAF President Sigfried Edström (Sweden) stated that the Swedish athletic federation had been contemplating the idea of founding an international federation since 1910. This eventually led to the official invitation of all nations to London in July 1911 in order to prepare a congress to be held in Stockholm in 1912. However, this meeting in London did not take place as several nations did not regard it as necessary.

4 Stockholm 1912

The meeting in the Riksdag House in Stockholm took place on July 17, 1912, three days after the end of the Olympic Games. (This meeting was not yet called 'congress'; it was given that name only at the beginning of the twenties). 17 nations were represented. Edström was elected Chairman of the meeting, and he formulated the following agenda:

- to draw up and agree to rules and regulations for international competitions in athletics;
- to register World, Olympic and National Records;
- to draw up a common amateur definition for international athletic competitions (IAAF Handbook 1922, 15).

However, these topics were not discussed (this task was given to a provisional committee headed by Edström). Instead, the discussion focused on the establishment of an international federation. In the vote, a group of nine nations led by the German representative Diem took the position that the federation should be founded immediately. Three nations declared themselves against this proposal whereas five other nations did not see themselves in a position to decide. Although the nine nations of the first group represented a majority, the unanimous view was that the vote should be regarded as provisional and a definite decision was put off until the next Congress. Because the foundation of an

international organisation was such an important step, it was felt that any decision to do so had to be made unanimously.

Because of its central position and its role as organizer of the VIth Olympic Games, Berlin was decided on as venue for a second meeting.

5 Berlin 1913

This meeting, which was explicitly called 'Inaugural Congress', took place in the Manor House of the Prussian Parliament with the participation of 16 nations. Edström was again elected Chairman of the meeting and in his account he wrote:

'The motion supported by Mr Schofield (UK), as well as by Messrs Kirby and Sullivan (USA), was carried unanimously, and the Chairman, amid applause, declared the new Federation formed.' (IAAF Handbook, 1922, 21)

After the approval of the statutes, Edström was elected President, and K. Hellström (Sweden) was elected Treasurer. The presidential committee was formed by F. Reichel (France), C. Diem (Germany), S. Stankovits (Hungary), P. E. Fisher (GB) and J. E. Sullivan (USA). Committees were formed to establish unified rules and acknowledge World Records, to standardise the Olympic programme and to address questions of amateur sport. These were requested to report to the 3rd meeting in Lyon on June 10-11, 1914.

6 Conclusion

Without any doubt the legal foundation date of the IAAF is August 21, 1913. This fact is not only supported by the quoted passages from the foundation meeting, but also by the closing remarks of the recently-elected Edström:

'The Congress has happily resulted in the formation of the Federation.' (IAAF Handbook 1922, 26).

Subsequent documentation exists to show that this view of the events was shared, at least by some. The 10th IAAF Congress on June 20-21, 1930, which was organised by the German Athletic Federation, took place in the Manor House of the Prussian parliament. The federation's official periodical, 'Start und Ziel' (Start and Finish), emphasised that this venue had been chosen deliberately in memory of the foundation of the IAAF almost 17 years earlier.

Eight years later, the March 1938 issue of the official German periodical, now called 'Leichtathletik' (Athletics), carried an article on the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the IAAF on August 21, 1913, with the note that the Swedes would have liked to have counted the preparatory meeting in Stockholm in 1912 as the occasion in order to secure the foundation for Stockholm. However, some pages earlier, the correspondent reporting on the XIVth IAAF Congress, between 28 February and 1 March 1938 in Paris, once again wrongly stated that the IAAF had been founded in 1912 on the occasion of the Olympic Games in Stockholm!

A reconciliation, and an astonishing solution to the problem, is presented in the historical overview in the IAAF Handbook 1988/89 and 1990/91: the years 1912, 1913 and 1914 are seen as 'the three foundation years'.

According to this view, the meeting in Stockholm in 1912, which was later called Congress, had, strictly speaking, only been an informative meeting. In Berlin, in 1913, the constitution was approved, 34 nations were put on the first list of Members, and the President was elected. In Lyon, in 1914, the first technical rules for international athletics competitions were approved.

At the 38th IAAF Congress in Tokyo in 1991, the year 1992 was declared a jubilee year. Apart from the publication of the souvenir book already mentioned, there were two representation jubilee events: a gala to celebrate 80 years of the IAAF, held on the day before the IAAF Grand Prix Final in Turin on September 3; and a second gala that was held in Riksdags house in Stockholm on November 25.

There will be no celebration in memory of the actual, legally secured foundation day 80 years ago in the still existing former Prussian Manor House in Berlin on August 21, 1993, because this will be the penultimate competition day of the IVth World Championships in Athletics in Stuttgart. However, a minute's silence in memory of the foundation of the IAAF could be observed, or a reminiscent sentence could be included in one of the speeches which will be made in Stuttgart.

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