It was during the summer of 1833 that an association was founded in Helsingborg, a little village in the province of Skane, on the southernmost tip of Sweden, which gave itself the name “Olympic association”. It is probably the town’s oldest sports association.

The initiative had been taken by Gustaf Johan Schartau (1794-1852), a gymnastic and fencing teacher at the Royal Carolinska Academy in the town of Lund. He was a disciple of P. H. Ling, the founder of Swedish gymnastics, whom he replaced in 1814 when Ling moved to Stockholm to found a gymnastics institute there, the famous “Gymnastika Centralinstitutet” which was held in very high repute throughout the 19th century.

Schartau wrote proclamations and articles which he had published in the Helsingborg and Lund newspapers. He also managed to gather round him a good number of well known people in the region, including amongst others the cavalry general Bror Cederström, Professor David Munck af Rosenschöld, and the owner of Ramlösa (a mineral water bottling plant), Colonel Carl von Dannfelt.

In 1834 and 1836, the association organized what the newspapers of the time called either “Olympic Competitions” or “the Olympic Games” at Ramlösa, a well-known thermal spa and bathing resort, close to Helsingborg.
The Association’s announcement, which was signed by Schartau and published in the “Nya Helsingborgsposten” of 28th June 1834, reads in part, “the Olympic Games have long been buried in centuries of oblivion, but we hope that one day, Scandinavia’s strong sons may be able to take part in a rejuvenated form”.

The programme included the following events: running, gymnastics, wrestling and pole climbing. At that time, gymnastics meant not only the high jump and the pole vault but also acrobatics, that is, vaulting over a real or wooden horse, throwing and balancing exercises, etc. In short, more or less the same events as in modern athletics.

For these two years, the competitions were linked to horse racing. Helsingborg was at that time the centre of equestrian sports and the location for these “Olympic Games” was in fact the Ramlösa racecourse. Nowadays this former arena/racetrack is used for more profane purposes. It has become a warehouse for Swedish Railways with tracks, unloading bays and goods depots. The only traces of the past are the name of the streets and the quarters, “Race Street”, “Fencing Master Street”, “Olympiad Quarter”, the “gymnasium”, “Wrestling”, etc.

For the 1836 Games, a competition in literary composition on the theme of the “Ancient Games compared with the chivalric jousts and tournaments of the Middle Ages and the relevance and usefulness of reviving these contests” was added to the programme.

The press and the public gave the Olympic association an enthusiastic welcome. The Helsingborg newspapers, rather surprisingly, devoted lots of space in their columns to it in the form of editorials, articles, accounts, etc.

These competitions drew thousands of spectators, while the number of participants was comparatively low – about forty.

Naturally, these “Olympic Games” at Helsingborg cannot in any way be compared with those of today but as far as the original idea and form was concerned, they were near enough. They were sports competitions of the same nature and inspiration as the Ancient Games. The “games” of Helsingborg took as their model the Olympic Games of the Classical age. That great French sports enthusiast, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was to live in a later era, and in a bigger country with better international contacts than those of Schartau sixty years before.

THE INVESTIGATORS

With a few exceptions, the preceding data was practically unknown to our sports historians up until now. In the memoirs and encyclopedias published in the 19th and 20th centuries there is not a word to be found on the Helsingborg “Olympic Games”.

The first man in Sweden to have taken note of the “Olympic Games” at Helsingborg was John Pape, a lawyer and scholar who in March 1939 introduced them to an astonished public in a speech given at “Gillet Gamla Helsingborg”.

Curiously, it was in Germany that he had the idea of undertaking research into these Games.

During the Olympic Winter Games at Garmish Partenkirchen in 1936, at which Pape was present, a German newspaper published an article under the title “Olympische Spiele in Schweden schon vor 100 Jahren” which indicated that in 1833 in the south of Sweden a so-called Olympic Association had been founded with the aim of reviving interest in Sweden and Norway in
Bror Cederström, the legendary cavalry general, one of the “protectors and friends” of the Olympic Association. He distributed the prizes at the 1834 games.

The information in this newspaper came from an article in another German newspaper, the “Magazin für die Litteratur des Auslandes”, in 1836. In it was written that the Swedes had in fact been the first to revive Olympic Thought and even to express it in concrete form.

FROM THEODOSIS THE GREAT TO COUBERTIN

The Emperor Theodosis is generally shown in the encyclopedias as having been responsible for the closing down of Olympia and the banning of the Games in 393. However we have no formal proof of this. It is highly probable that the Games continued for some time afterwards. In 426 in Constantinople, Emperor Theodosius II proclaimed the destruction of all pagan temples, which led to the burning of the temple of Zeus at Olympia. Sometime in the 600’s came the final catastrophe. The river Kladeos, swelled by winter rains, broke its banks at Olympia and the entire site was buried under a layer of sand more than four metres deep. The town remained buried for centuries, completely forgotten. It was rediscovered in 1766 by the Englishman, Richard Chandler. But it was only in 1829 that systematic excavations were undertaken, when the French government, sending troops to the Peloponnese, equipped a scientific expedition. Researches were abruptly discontinued but the layer of earth which covered the Temple of Zeus had been cleared away and several fragments of sculptures were discovered, which were taken to France and exhibited at the Louvre.

After a gap of about fifty years, work was begun again but this time by German scholars.

It was still a long time before anyone thought of giving new life to the ancient Olympic Games. The games which took place in Ireland during the first millenium A.D. may be strictly considered as a Western offshoot of the Ancient Games.

The “Olympic Games” which were founded in 1604 by Captain R. Stower (died 1641) may also be qualified as offshoots. They were banned in 1644 by the Puritans, but under the reign of Charles II they were revived once more over a period of about 60 years. Stower’s games took place every four years, during the week of Whitsuntide. In addition to horse racing they included hare coursing, wrestling, running, hammer throwing, expertises with pikes or lances, a form of handball, a game with crude sticks and folk dancing.

But the advent of the present day Olympic Games is linked above all to the independance of Greece, reconquered in 1830. Having thrown off the Turkish yoke, a wave of nationalism surged over Greece.

In 1838, the authorities of the little town of Letrinon, situated close to Olympia in the Peloponnese, suggested that Olympic Games should be organized which should take place every four years in the town of...
Per Henrik Ling, “maître d’armes” at the Lund University from 1805 to 1813. He was replaced by Gustav Johan Schartau.

Pyrgos, but the proposal fell on deaf ears. The idea was later realized thanks to a Greek patriot living in Bucharest, Evangelos Zappa, who donated a sum of money in 1858 and in 1859, and in 1859, 1870 and 1875 Greek national sports festivals were held under the name of “Olympic Games”.

About 40 years before the Greek commune of Letrinon had suggested the organization of Olympic Games, the Swede Fredrik Bogislaus von Schwerin (1764-1834), a Count, politician and rector of the small town of Sala, had drawn up an ambitious plan for the physical education of the Swedish people, which amongst other curious proposals, included the revival of the Olympic Games. Schwerin proposed that each town and village in Sweden should build a sports ground. Sport would be organized by teachers trained at the university and “when this system had operated long enough, each province would, in a new era, possess a public meeting place for the celebration of the Olympic Games, with great pomp and ceremony”. To bring the Olympic Games back to life in little Sweden! This foolhardy idea – coming from the rector of a small town in the Far North and more than a hundred years before Coubertin – takes one’s breath away.

CONDITIONS AND ORIGINS

The members of the Olympic Association, with Schartau at their head, were not working in a vacuum. They were men of their time, and their work can only be understood and evaluated within the context of their epoch.

At the end of the 18th century, an interest in physical education was awakened in Sweden. At the university, for example, studies recommended swimming and the “Swimming Association”, which still exists today, was founded at Uppsala in 1796.

Between 1770 and 1780 King Gustav IIIrd organized magnificent “Equestrian Games”. They may be described as dressage contests combined with “arms handling” competitions. They attracted spectators by the thousands and the newspapers published long accounts.

The first competitions known of until now in Sweden were organized at Falun between 1792 and 1794 in “swimming, running, throwing and other physical exercises” ("Fahlu Weckoblad" newspaper, 12th October 1792). Between 1808 and 1812, P. H. Ling devised a new kind of gymnastics, “free gymnastics”, at Lund.

The Lund Swimming Society was founded in 1823.

On 24th May 1827, in the Ramlösa park, before a large public, the professional runner Philip Israel, a German Jew born at Altona in 1802, gave a demonstration of running. He began his tour at Gothenburg, and continued on to Malmö, Stockholm and Gävle. His races drew large crowds, and his exploits were published in the press.

The KSSS, “Yachting Association of Sweden” was founded in 1830, “to awaken and nourish the spirit of seafarers and at the same time love of one’s country”.

756
All this goes to show that gymnastics and sport were far from unknown in Sweden towards 1830. In addition, during the long years after the loss of Finland in 1809, the spiritual climate of our country was favourable to the activities which the Olympic Association tried to encourage. The strongly patriotic mood and the evocation of the glorious days of our country in certain cultural strata within the country, as for example at the University, are at the origin of the work of Schartau and his collaborators.

For P. H. Ling and his companions, and of course for Schartau, their hopes for an advanced system of defense (obligatory military service) converged with the desire for a more democratic and egalitarian society than that which existed in Sweden at that time.

“OLYMPIAD” 1834

In the proclamation published on 28th June 1834 by Schartau, in the newspaper “Nya Helsingborgsposten” under the title “Olympic Association”, from which we have already quoted extracts, it was announced that the association would “organize” the following events on 14th July:

1. Wrestling, and exercises of suppleness and balance;
2. High jumps with and without pole;
3. Rope and pole climbing;
4. Long and short distance running

This 1834 programme seems very modest in comparison with the programme of the modern Olympic Games. But the events chosen by Schartau – running, high jump, pole vault, horse vault – were precisely those practised by the young people of Sweden in the popular village festivals. It must also be recalled that the programme for the competitions had to be carried out in one day. The first “Olympic Games” took place very punctually on Thursday 17th July. The newspaper “Nya Helsingborgsposten” of 22nd July gave an account of the competitions. I quote, “at the meeting of the above-mentioned association, gymnastics, wrestling, and running competitions were held which, given the brief training period of which most of the participants could avail, were an unparalleled success. If prejudice, timidity and pride had not prevented many young people from turning up at the arena, we would no doubt have witnessed a most interesting spectacle. The impression made on the crowd was of incalculable use for the association. We hope that other results will be obtained following a year of reflection by those for and against.”

The winner of the gymnastics event, E. Krumlinde, a student at the “Royale Carolinska” University, received the association’s First Prize – a gold ring engraved with the inscription, “O. A. to the winner, 17th July 1834”.

Twenty athletes were entered for the races, which were divided into five series and run over a track of 400 ells. The winners in each series then met each other on the 850 ell track (author’s note: about 505 metres). The association’s Second Prize, a ring bearing the same inscription as the first, was won by Olaf Jónsson of Glumslöf in 1’54”. At the finish, the winner was so exhausted that he had to be supported and given something to drink in order to bring him round, while his most dangerous opponent, the musician Olaf Olofsson of Raa, who would certainly have beaten him on a 1,000 ell track, arrived with energy to spare and...
INDEPENDENT VIEWS

could well have played a “polonaise” on his violin to bring his victor to his senses. For the wrestling event there were 7 participants. The winner, Nils Lamberg, won the association’s Third Prize, a small silver cup with the inscription: “Jo the winner of the Olympic competitions on 17th July 1834.”

Having drawn lots, the 9 participants in the pole climbing events scaled a pole 17 ells in length, which had been previously rubbed with soap, and at the top of which was placed the association’s Fourth Prize. It was won by the fourth climber, the stable-boy, Hakan Isaksson of Ellinge.

It will be noted that the “reporter” was a little disappointed by the small number of participants. The horse racing which had taken place on 13th, 14th and 15th July, before the “Olympic Games” had had a much higher number.

Schartau had hoped that many young soldiers in the region (there were three cavalry regiments) would have come to these games. But he was wrong. The blue-eyed cavalry officers with their superb horses and their gleaming uniforms were quite happy to compete with their peers on either side of the Strait (Sund, the strait which separates Sweden from Denmark, t.n.) but the idea of wrestling and racing with stable boys, blacksmiths’ apprentices and village musicians certainly did not appeal to them.

Schartau’s teacher and model, P. H. Ling, had proclaimed that “the difference between the high and the low would disappear” on the sports field. But in this rather special case Ling’s disciples were too far ahead of their time. Many years were yet to pass before the equality of the classes in sport was to become reality. This equality on the sport field only came about at the beginning of the next century.

“OLYMPIAD 1836”

There were no “Olympic Games” in 1835. “The Second Olympiad” took place very promptly on 4th August 1836, once again at the race course. As in 1834, they were preceded by horse racing and a horse fair.

The “Olympic Games” of 1836 were the last. Equestrian sport, with its royal splendour, and the spick and span uniforms of the Hussars, proved too much competition for them. Behind the scenes in the world of equestrian sport there many more financially powerful people than those the fencing master G. J. Schartau had been able to muster. But the main reason for the Olympic Association’s short life was of course that the time had not yet come for Olympic Thought to be made fact, even in the narrow context of a small provincial town.

The “Olympic Games” at Ramlösa in 1834 and 1836 are an integral part of the history of sport and it is quite proper that they should hold a place of honour in the sports museum of the province of Skane, which is currently under construction.

* Ells: ancient measure of length (1 18 m then 1 20 m) abolished in 1840.