

# RUGBY: OLYMPIC TACKLES AND SCRUMS



*The oval ball was prized by the renovator of the Games.*

**By Serge Laget**

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It is often forgotten that, like polo, croquet and golf, rugby was once an Olympic sport. It was on the programme four times during the quarter of a century that separated the first Olympic Games in Paris in 1900 from the second there in 1924.

**T**hat year also saw tennis take its Olympic bow. Tennis has since made a comeback, appearing on the programme in Seoul in 1988. So why not also envisage one for rugby? Perhaps at a third Olympic celebration in Paris? Meanwhile, let us take a look at those first Olympic scrums. They are certainly worth it.

Although absent from the first celebration in Athens in 1896, rugby just had to be at the second in Paris in 1900. Firstly, because those frenzied Games embraced virtually every sport, even tug-of-war, and secondly, because the oval ball had always

been a predilection of the father of the modern Games, the good Baron Pierre de Coubertin. When he had discovered it in England, it had been love at first sight. Let us not forget, after all, that it was the Baron himself who had the awesome honour of refereeing in 1892 the first final of the French championships. And when his father painted "The Allegory of Sports", which would soon appear on the cover of the 'Olympic Review', it was to a rugby player rather than a cyclist or a rower that he gave pride of place. The fact that, after the Baron's decision to revive the Games, a new rugby club, which was to become

# RUGBY

French champion in 1896, chose to call itself the Olympic, bears witness to the particularly favourable climate enjoyed by the oval ball in Olympic circles.

So rugby football, like its rival association football, was in the Games. The problem was that, at a time when rugby was starting to find its feet, still not well established internationally and lacking experience of major encounters, the Games too were trying to find their cruising speed. But despite the risks engendered by those early fumbleings on both sides, there was to be Olympic rugby.

The French team, wearing white shirts with the blue and red rings of the USFSA, the body which governed the sport as a whole, was admittedly inexperienced, but nevertheless representative, which was more than could be said of its opponents, two club teams on whom Frantz Reichel and his team inflicted seven tries each.

On 14th October 1900, on the grass of the Vincennes velodrome, the Germans from the Frankfurt Football Club were beaten 27 to 17. The score board, one of the first, marked up in chalk, indicated that the visitors were playing in black and red. At half time, assuming that the scoring would start again from zero, the score-keeper wiped the slate! Since France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870,

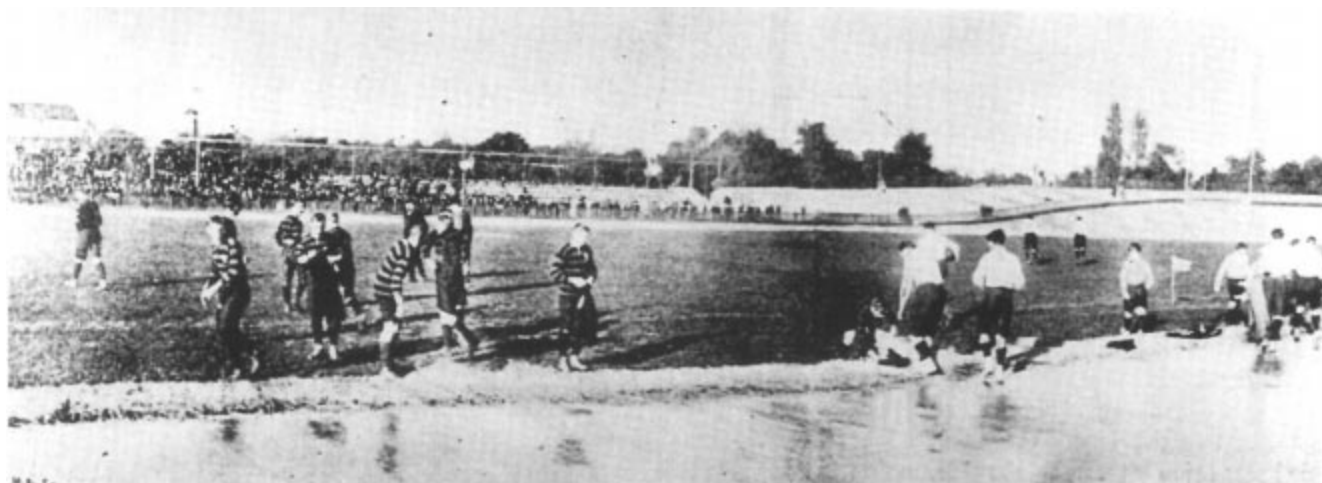
hostility towards our German cousins still smouldered, and there were some spoilsports who objected to this friendly match. Happily, it took place in the best possible spirit and delighted the spectators.

In excellent physical condition thanks to gymnastics and primed by a strict diet and abstinence from tobacco, which was more than could be said of all the Frenchmen, the away team did not flinch until the second half. Two weeks later, at the same spot, the Englishmen from the Moseley Wanderers club, who had played the previous day and travelled all night, were similarly defeated 27 to 8. Nothing to be proud of.

Particularly as improbable logistical problems prevented the logical organization of the Frankfurt-Moseley match. After a start that was, to say the least, laborious, the chief consolation was that things could only get better, for example in London in 1908. In fact, they got worse. New obstacles arose in the form of an exhibition, a tournament and war.

The setting was still that of an exhibition, not universal this time, but Franco-British. It was worse still, as there was not even a match between the two nations. Australia was on tour in the British Isles at the time, and could have given the tournament a great boost. But not a bit of it. The

*The French-German Olympic rugby match in 1900.*



# RUGBY

French did not see why they should help the English, who had not been very forthcoming in 1900, and the English, Scots and Welshmen did not see any point in matches which would be repeats of those they had already played with the visitors from "down under". For them, the aim was rather to preserve the specific nature of the rugby world in relation to the Olympic world. There would be Olympic competitions, and there were, but they were kept to a strict minimum. So as not to provide grist to the mill of a rival movement, the English offered the Australians the Cornwall county team (32-3). The records, which are nothing if not laconic, refer to the English team, but it was nothing of the sort.

With the emergence of the Five Nations Tournament in 1910, the rugby world naturally made no effort to win the favours of Sweden, chosen to host the Games in 1912. The war, which put an end to all its petty calculations, hit the world of rugby particularly hard. Whole teams disappeared in the vortex and it was a miracle that, in 1919, at the Allied Games between

the victors, a tournament held at Colombes was able to bring together Romanians, Americans and Frenchmen.

The French team under Struxiano from Toulouse wiped the floor with the Romanians but received a stern warning at the hands of the Americans. Struxiano alone scored the eight winning points, not without a few thrilling moments, as the Allies' physical play was most impressive. Made much of by the press, it went unsanctioned by the referee.

This experience, which could, on the face of it, have allowed rugby to play a full part at last on the programme of the Olympic Games in Antwerp in 1920, was, alas, just another flash in the pan. Improvisation was needed to stage, in extremis, an "Olympic" match which would not be too much of a disappointment to the Belgians. The match drew 20,000 spectators, and brought together the only teams "interested", namely the United States and France, as the records tell us. In reality, the Americans were Californians and the

*Olympic rugby in 1924.*



French Parisians, in other words two regional teams. However, the score, 8 to 0 for the visitors, was real enough. The warning issued one year earlier had been brought home with a vengeance. The athletic condition and physical play favoured by the Americans had won out over the classical rugby played by the Frenchmen.

## 1924 THE TURNING POINT

From 1900 to 1920, via the soldiers in 1919, there had nevertheless been a progression from club teams to regional ones, so surely 1924 would mark the crucial turning point.

Despite the tournament, friction between the French and the English, the constraints of long tours arranged in advance because of the difficulties of travel, would rugby finally manage to gain its place? For a moment, it seemed like it, despite the small number present, when it became apparent that the American and Romanian teams which were to play the French would be truly representative this time, and that there would be a final, if you please.

But alas, it was worse than a bullfight. At a moment when a low profile was crucial, rugby was the cause of the only disagreeable incidents at the 1924 Games. The final between the Americans and the French was, once again, characterized by the "physical play of the athletic Coca-Cola drinkers". It was the starting point of a public debate into which Montherlant threw the whole weight of his talent and renown. What Jacques Mortane, journalist with the "Petit Journal Illustré" called "a lugubrious and disappointing parody of a match", took on awesome proportions under the famous writer's pen: "I have watched over fifty bull-fights, but I have never seen one in which, in an hour and a half, three men were carried off on a stretcher" (sic). What counted as virility for an informed few was violence for the majority... The French, like Jaureguy and Vaysse, "exploded" under the charges of these powerful opponents, whom our players had completely underestimated. And the inevitable happened. As the score swelled in favour of the exponents of American football, among the 20,000 spectators in the stands, the "hatred of the weaker for the stronger", as Montherlant put it, grew and grew.

Unforgivable and scandalous when "the stronger" is our brother-in-arms of yesterday. For our players, who combined poor physical resources with a total lack of form, due to the fact that their season had already been over two weeks, the ordeal ended at 17 to 3. The damage had been done. It was to be irreversible. The oval ball lost all credibility at the time when it finally had a chance to conquer a place at the Games. The spell was broken. The pre-Olympic tournament for the Games in Berlin in 1936, truncated but successful, involving only Germans, Romanians and French - a further complication was that the British had broken off all relations with us -, was not enough to make up the ground that had been lost. There was an opening at the Games in Tokyo in 1964, but Bill Ramsay, treasurer of the all-powerful Rugby Union, rejected the approach for somewhat petty and unconvincing reasons: "the thirty-day stay is beyond our means and those of the Olympic committee. What is more, imagine the chaos there would be if each country were to send thirty athletes just for rugby" (sic).

So were we going to end up with five-a-side ?

Happily, in 1955, then again in 1979 and 1983, the Mediterranean Games allowed a certain idea of rugby to live on, and in 1993, when they are organized in Languedoc-Roussillon, real rugby country, they should finally demonstrate the authenticity and popularity of a discipline whose merits Coubertin himself was not slow to praise: "Football is, par excellence, the image of life, a lesson in things lived, a pedagogical instrument of the first order".

True, rugby now possesses its own World Cup, and the recent organization of the second edition drew audiences unthinkable in 1900, but football, with which it has much in common, also enjoys a fine place in the "four-yearly festival of human springtime". After the unfortunate misunderstanding at the start of the 20th century, we are convinced that a reunion between the Olympic phenomenon and the much loved game of rugby would be the best thing that could happen to the sport at a time when it is facing a 21st century full of uncertainties. S.L.