
Avery Brundage and Racism

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As the twentieth century nears its end, we may profit from a consideration of Avery Brundage, the evangelist of the modern Olympic “religion”, and “racism”, a word which has been used by politicians, publicists, and pundits to describe the causes of the crises and carnage of our century and explain collective and individual guilt and innocence. Brundage is well known to students of the Olympics, so it is appropriate to begin with the context for twentieth century racism before discussing Brundage’s general position and specific controversies.

While “racism” did not appear in Webster’s unabridged dictionary, “racialism” is defined as “racial characteristics, tendencies, prejudices, or the like; specifically, race hatred.” This definition was broad enough to cover “pro” and “anti” views with respect to a race. A sense of racial superiority is implied in viewing another race as inferior. The encyclopedia article on “race” discussed skin colors, head conformations, and hair types, and concluded that most of these characteristics are found in all races. “Racism” and “racists” are major political and ethical targets and “everything about” these subjects “is controversial.” The anti-Semitism and “final solution” of the German Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s for instance, have made racism a very pejorative term.¹

Individual racists are identified by their actions and writings. Collective actions are designated as institutional racism. In sports, national Olympic committees, schools, institutions of higher education, urban athletic clubs, corporations, military departments, and professional franchises have been responsible for forms of racial discrimination. Few participants in public discussions have devoted much time to the social, political, and economic bases of racial problems. Fewer still have concerned themselves with the context for racist beliefs in families, personal associations, the media and, membership organizations.

The International Olympic Committee’s *Fundamental Principles* state that “no discrimination is allowed against a country or person on grounds of race, religion or political affiliation.” Rule 24 provided that only National Olympic Committees can enter competitors in the Olympic games and “organize and control the representatives of their” countries. The NOCs also must conduct their activities in accordance with “the high ideals of the Olympic Movement.” I.O.C. founder, Pierre de Coubertin, wrote of bringing “sportsmen of diverse nationalities” together to create international respect. “The young of all the world” would “prepare the way” by perfecting “a human race.” Though they represented an internationalist approach, the Olympic Games, from their origin in 1896, have been filled with nationalist imagery and wrangling.²

Twentieth century racial and ethnic hatred have long historical roots. The ancient Greeks did not invite 'barbarians' to participate in the original Olympics. Religious scriptures reinforced ethnic and group loyalties. Two hundred years of nationalism and conflict have sharpened racial distinctions. With the help of the Volkish Movement and Friedrich Jahn's gymnastics and fraternal movements, German nationalism became a fertile breeding ground for anti-Semitism. The Turner movement had reluctantly participated in the 1896 to 1912 Olympic Games. Jewish groups gradually formed their own sports organizations. In 1912, after tutoring by Viennese anti-Semites Dietrich Eckart, Leopold Pötsch and Karl Lueger, Adolf Hitler moved to Munich to launch his career. Works like his *Mein Kampf* contributed to racial hatred and strife. The cancellation of the wartime Berlin Olympic games of 1916 and the German defeat in World War I, which resulted in the banning of German participation in the 1920 and 1924 games, further weakened the cause of international sports in Germany. In 1922, Berlin was the site of "a national German Olympics" "in conscious opposition to the "internationalist" Olympic Games." In 1932, the Jewish Olympics in Tel Aviv were held "to demonstrate a solidarity that went beyond national borders."³

A study of the years before the Berlin Games of 1936 noted that "almost everywhere distrust of the political left was stronger than distrust of the National Socialists." The 1917 Communist revolution in Russia and the 1925 International Workers Olympics in Frankfurt alarmed I.O.C. members. The million member International Workers League for Sport and Physical Culture sought peace and proletarian unity. The I.O.C. was composed of an assemblage of titled nobility, military men, sportsmen turned officials, and business leaders. As the economic depression became worldwide, another Workers' Olympics was held in 1931 in Vienna and a third was scheduled for Barcelona in 1936.⁴

In the nineteenth century, the political and economic bases of racism were augmented by scientific racism based on eugenics and the incorporation of racist teachings in educational materials. Many children learned about races in their geography books. Experience in neighborhoods and schools, and especially in family conversations, supplemented this information. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television. and public entertainment events further shaped understanding and attitudes about race. Generalizations, categorizations, and stereotypes were readily available. Information about races guided actions and behavior. Educational and social experiences resulted in love, understanding, tolerance, discrimination, and hatred.⁵

Born on September 28, 1887, Avery Brundage learned about racial and ethnic diversity on the streets of Chicago. His parents were of British origin. His father was a building contractor in Detroit, but left the family in 1892, soon after they arrived in Chicago. Avery attended school and took part-time employment, while his mother worked as a clerk. As a youth, he delivered and read the Chicago newspapers. When he was thirteen two thirds of Chicago's population was foreign-born. Of the 1,155,664 residents, Germans, Irish, Poles, Swedes, and Bohemians were the leading nationality groups. There also were 30,150 Negroes and 4,842 Jews. At Illinois, he joined the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity. By 1918, he belonged to the Masonic order in Chicago. In 1921, he was president of the Chicago Sigma Alpha Epsilon alumni chapter. He was the subject of fraternity magazine articles in 1921, 1923, 1957, and 1960. The 1923 article hailed his role in building the Bahai Temple which symbolized "the oneness of God and the oneness of man." In 1931, the fraternity's National Laws stated that "any male member of the Aryan race" was eligible for membership, and provided that no person who has a parent who was "a full-blooded Jew" was eligible. In 1949, this section was replaced by a proviso that members should be "socially acceptable throughout the fraternity."⁶

In interscholastic and intercollegiate track and field events, Brundage competed with persons belonging to other ethnic and racial groups. At the Stockholm Olympic games in 1912, he was converted to the Olympic creed as stated by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the architect of the modern Olympic games. He continued his sports work with the Amateur Athletic Union and became its president in 1928. A member of the American Olympic Association in 1921, he became its president in 1929. In that capacity, he welcomed the foreign teams at the Los Angeles Olympic Games of 1932. He gained experience at the international level and encountered more ethnic and racial diversity.⁷

In a November 29, 1929 speech to the Chicago Association of Commerce, Brundage provided the strongest evidence of his racism.

Perhaps we are about to witness the development of a new race, a race of men actuated by the principles of sportsmanship learned on the playing field, refusing to tolerate different conditions in the other enterprises of life; a race physically strong, mentally alert and morally sound; a *race* not to be imposed upon, because it is ready to fight for right and physically prepared to do so; a race quick to help an adversary beaten in fair combat yet fearlessly resenting injustice or unfair advantage; a race of free independent thinkers accustomed to the democracy of sport; a race disdaining sharp practice, tolerant of the rights of

others and practicing the Golden Rule because it believes in it; a race of athletes imbued with the virile dynamic philosophy of sport, brought up to the best traditions of the code of sportsmanship, playing the game of life for the sake of the game itself.⁸

On January 30, 1933, the National Socialist German Workers Party gained power in Berlin and launched a national anti-Semitic campaign. In April, they sponsored an anti-Jewish boycott day. Jews were dismissed from major professional positions and dissidents were imprisoned. Discriminatory laws were promulgated which eventually led to the 1935 Nuremberg laws, which deprived Jews of German citizenship.⁹

From 1933 to 1936, American groups campaigned for a boycott of the Berlin Olympic Games to protest the Nazi racial policies. As a dedicated Olympic internationalist committed to the exclusion of political issues, Brundage opposed the boycott movement. The campaign was especially strong in New York and included many Jewish supporters. The boycott movement turned into a struggle for control of the Amateur Athletic Union. In 1933, Jeremiah Mahoney, a New York lawyer and politician, succeeded Brundage as A.A.U. president. There was a wide ideological basis for the A.A.U.-A.O.C. controversy in November 1934. I.O.C. member Charles Sherrill was an admirer of military sports and Dietrich Wortmann was a German-American contractor in New York. On the other side, New York hotel manager Charles Ornstein was president of the Jewish Welfare Board and Jeremiah Mahoney was a mayoral candidate and practicing lawyer in a city with a Jewish population of one million. Deeply committed to Olympic ideals and the continuation of the games, Brundage was non-military, non-German, non-Jewish and non-New Yorker. He relied on German promises to A.O.C. Secretary Frederick Rubien and Murray Hulbert's compromise resolution to put pressure on the Germans to proceed with the games. On August 18, 1935, Rubien reported that Dr. Theodor Lewald, Carl Diem and the German Olympic Committee staff denied that there was any discrimination against Jewish or Catholic athletes. Germany seemed "prosperous and contented." Brundage agreed that there was "more commotion on the German-Jewish question in New York City" than in the "rest of the world". As the argument became more heated, Brundage's letters to friends began to include anti-Semitic references to Jews, promoters, and radicals. Brundage recaptured the A.A.U. presidency, defeated the boycott groups and was elected to I.O.C. membership in 1936. The anti-Semitic references continued until 1939.¹⁰

Brundage was committed to American participation in the Berlin games. Only a confrontation with major violations of Olympic principles might have prompted him to reevaluate his position. The deciding factor was the effective public relations work of Reichssportführer Hans von Tschammer und Osten, Diem, and Lewald. They dispatched German athletes to A.A.U. meets, announced conciliatory policies at critical times and supplied information to Brundage and A.O.C. leaders. Reports of German terrorism and anti-Semitic activities often came from unofficial and less credible sources. While the 1936 boycott campaign failed, Brundage's struggles with political boycotts continued. The 1956, 1968, and 1972 Olympics experienced boycotts or bans on national participation in which racial conflicts were contributing factors¹¹

In business life, Brundage was associated with members of other racial groups in the building construction, banking, investment, and property management businesses. He was a political and economic conservative. He detested communism and President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. A champion of America's "true democracy", he also admired the results of Mussolini's fascist sports program and Hitler's efforts to save "western Europe from communism." He read *the Chicago Tribune* and participated in the America First movement to keep the United States out of World War II. He and his I.O.C. colleagues were impressed by the Nazi government's promotion of sports and physical fitness.¹²

After World War II, he worked with Sigfrid Edstrom to rebuild the I.O.C. and hold the 1948 games in London and 1952 games in Helsinki. In 1950, when Spain excluded the Israeli team from the Mediterranean Games in Barcelona, the *Daily Worker* and Jewish organizations launched a major attack on Brundage and the I.O.C.. The Spanish organizing committee faced a boycott threat from Egypt and Arab countries. Brundage declared that the I.O.C. had no authority to dictate admission policies for regional games to host countries. Although he welcomed Israel to the Olympic Games in 1952 and maintained that the I.O.C. adhered to its position that "there shall be no discrimination because of race", the attacks continued until 1967.¹³

In the 1960s worldwide protests against racial discrimination and the emergence of the new black African states created problems for the I.O.C.. In an April 28, 1966 speech to Pope Paul VI, Brundage affirmed that "true sport does not...recognize any...discrimination based on the color of skin." Implementing this policy was more difficult than stating it. In 1963, the I.O.C. suspended South Africa for racial discrimination and Brundage attended the Friendship Games in Dakar. In 1965, he represented the I.O.C. at the first African Games in the Republic of Congo. In February 1968, the I.O.C. invited a multi-racial South African team to the Mexico City games. The newly-emerging African states through the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa urged a boycott to protest South African Apartheid policies. The Soviet Union and American black athletes followed with boycott threats. Worldwide reaction to the assassination of Martin Luther

Ring and major riots in American cities added to I.O.C.s problems. In a statement to the I.O.C. Executive Board, Brundage declared that they had “tried to burn down” Chicago and concluded that “we have plenty of discrimination “in” the United States. Under pressure from the Mexican organizing committee, the I.O.C. withdrew the South African invitation in May. The same process was reenacted in 1972 to ban South Africa and Rhodesia from the Munich Olympics.¹⁴

In 1967, California sociologist Harry Edwards proposed a black boycott of the 1968 Olympics and accused Brundage of being “a devout anti-Semitic and anti-Negro personality.” Martin Luther King added four demands relating to the New York Athletic Club, Cassius Clay, Negroes on the Olympic coaching staff and the I.O.C., and the refusal to compete against South Africa. Brundage’s response appeared in the December 29 issue of *American Jewish Life* He rebutted the “libelous statements made by those irresponsible publicity seeking agitators.” Referring to Edwards as “an unknown negro agitator”, he labeled the accusations as an “ignorant and misguided” “attack on the Olympic Movement.” As to anti-Negro bias, Brundage cited his removal of the 1920s track and field championships from New Orleans, which “would not accept negro entries.” In rebutting charges of anti-Semitism, he mentioned that he had a Jewish private secretary and listed his Jewish Olympic associates - Charles Ornstein, Harry Henschel, and Pincus Sober. He also cited the 1935 German promises to avoid discrimination, their removal of the anti- Semitic signs at Olympic facilities, and the I.O.C.’c blockage of a move to relieve Lewald. He cited the I.O.C.’s 1968 suspension of Indonesia for refusing admittance to an Israeli team. He added that his golf club had many Jewish members and that his businesses had employed many negroes and Jews. He concluded with a statement that the Olympic Games “will proceed...open to all qualified athletes regardless of race, color, religion or political affiliation.”¹⁵

In 1968, a year filled with assassinations and protest demonstrations, the Olympic Games were held in Mexico City. Acknowledging that the world was “marked by injustice, aggression, demonstrations, disorder, turmoil, violence and war”, Brundage invited athletes “to accept our regulations and to participate.” His statement that “We must never permit the Olympic Movement to be used as a tool or a weapon for any ulterior cause nor the Olympic Games to be a forum for demonstrations of any kind” was taken as a challenge. Edwards organized the Black Power protest at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. The Tommie Smith and John Carlos protest at an awards ceremony led to their censure by the United States Olympic Committee and, when the I.O.C. requested further action, their suspension. Brundage received the usual letters and telegrams of support for his courageous stand and condemnation for his “racism”.¹⁶

At the Munich Olympics in September 1972, another Black Power protest at the awards ceremony brought two more expulsions. On September 5, a Palestinian terrorist attack resulted in the deaths of eleven members of the Israeli team. Although the contemporary reaction was that “the games must go on”, there were additional condemnations of Brundage for his decision to proceed with the games.¹⁷

Avery Brundage’s racial views were shaped by his family, his boyhood employment, his schools, his social clubs, his building construction and investment business contacts, his readership of the Robert R. McCormick’s *Chicago Tribune* and William R. Hearst’s *Chicago Herald Examiner*, and the associations and responsibilities of fifty years as an amateur sports and Olympic official. The paramount influence on Brundage was the Olympism of Pierre de Coubertin, which combined internationalism with fitness and competition. As a moral agent, Brundage made right and wrong decisions. He was both an idealist and an ideologue. When convinced that his course of action was correct, he seldom gave ground and delighted in battling and baiting the press. Committed to athleticism, inclusiveness and peace, he set high moral standards and accepted the high risk of major tactical errors. In 1934, he failed to see beyond the Nazi government’s superb performance as Olympic hosts and its appearance as a prosperous bulwark against communism and perceive the extent of its commitment to racial politics and military aggression. Discussions of the Berlin games have dwelt on “the frequently painful tension between memory and history.” Much of this pain comes from the “fallacy of presentism...in which the antecedent...is...interpreted in terms of the consequent.” The criticisms of Brundage and the Olympics by academics, reporters, and politicians must also be evaluated in moral terms. A half century that involved the slaughter of twenty six million humans between 1914 and 1918 and about another forty million between 1937 and 1945 also witnessed the development of “a great quadrennial sport festival” held to create “international respect and goodwill” and “construct a better and *more* peaceful world.”¹⁸

Endnotes

1. *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language Second Edition* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1959) 2048- 2049; *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: William Benton, 1964) 18:864-865; David H. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970) 232, 235-236.

2. *The Olympic Games* (Lausanne: I.O.C., 1962) 9, 16.
3. *The Holy Bible* (New York Thomas Mason & George Lane, 1837) Exodus 6:7, Leviticus 20:24, Numbers 21:3 & 33:53, Deuteronomy 7:6 & 27:9, Isaiah 51:16; George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981) 4-5, 116, 153, 173; Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1927) xix, 3, 14-15, 55-58, 126, 686; Reinhard Rürup ed., *1936 Die Olympischen Spiele und der Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Argon Verlag, 1996) 23-25.
4. Rürup, *1936 Spiele*, 26-27, 54.
5. Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 3-6, 13-63; C. Diercke and E. Gaebler, *Schul-Atlas* (Braunschweig: George Westerman, 1910) 4; Ralph S. Tarr and Frank M. McMurry, *New Geographies Second Book* (New York: Macmillan, 1923) 231-233.
6. Allen Guttman, *The Games Must Go On*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 2-5; *Detroit City Directory* (Detroit: R.L. Polk & Co., 1890) 307; U.S. *Twelfth Census 1900, pt. 1* (Washington:1901) 579, 613, 954, 879; *Report on Statistics of Churches in the United States, Eleventh Census, 1890* (Washington: 1894) 417; W.J. Marshall comp., *General Catalogue of Sigma Alpha Epsilon* (1918) 130; (March 1921) 63; *The Record* (Sept. 1923) 113; *The National Laws of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity* (Evanston: 1931) 5; *The National Laws of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity* (Evanston: 1951) 5. Between 1898 and 1913, five Jewish fraternities were founded in New York. Between 1906 and 1914, four negro fraternities were founded. Jack Anson & Robert Marchesani, eds., *Baird's Manual of American College Fraternities* (Indianapolis: Baird's Manual Foundation, 1991) III-8, 59, 140, 158, 163, 167, 169, VIII-14, 18.
7. Guttman, *Games*, 28, 34-36.
8. Avery Brundage, "Athletics and Industry", Chicago Association of Commerce, Nov. 29, 1929, RS 26/20/37-244.
9. Rürup, *1936 Spiele*, 29-32; Moshe Gottlieb, "The American Controversy Over the Olympic Games" in *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (1968) 181-213.
10. Gottlieb, "Controversy" 182-213; Guttman, *Games*, 67, 70-74, 83; Arnd Krüger, *Sport und Politik* (Hannover: Fackelträger-Verlag, 1975) 71-73; Ornstein to Brundage, April 9, Oct. 16, 1934, 26/20/37-234; Rubien to Brundage, Aug. 18, 1935; Brundage to Rubien, Sept. 13, 1935, RS 26/20/37-152; Brundage to Evan Hunter, Feb. 1, 1937, RS 26/20/37-27; Brundage to William Garland, Sept. 23, 1937, 26/20/37-56.
11. William Garland to Brundage, Oct. 14, 1933, 26/20/37-56; Evan Hunter to Brundage, Jan. 1, 1934, 26/20/37-129; Brundage to Diem, July 13, 1934, 26/20/37-22; Brundage to Justus Meyerhof, Oct. 1, 1934; Tschammer to Brundage, Sept. 24, 1935; Brundage to Diem, Sept. 27, 1935; Tschammer to Brundage, Nov. 26, 1935, 26/20/37-129; Guttman, *Games*, 70-74, 162, 238, 249.
12. Italian Boxers Welcome, May 12, 1935; Chicago Association of Commerce Speech, April 22, 1936; Speech, October 8, 1936; RS 26/20/37-244; Guttman, *Games*, 93-94.
13. *Ibid.*, 98-103; *New York Daily Worker*, p. 12, June 1, 1950; Charles Ornstein to Brundage, April 4, 1951; Harry Henshel to Brundage, Aug. 25, 1955; Brundage to Julius Klein, Jan. 30, 1963, Brundage to I. Inbar, June 25, 1967, RS 26/20/37-134.
14. Avery Brundage to Pope Paul VI, April 28, 1966, *Frederick Ruegsegger Papers*, RS 26/20/36-1; Guttman, *Games*, 230-254; *Time*, May 3, 1968; *I.O.C. Newsletter No. 8*, May 1968; Brundage to Executive Board, April 21, 1968; *Chicago Tribune* April 23, 25, 1968, RS 26/20/36-1.
15. *Gary Post-Tribune*, Dec. 15, 1967; *Chicago Daily News*, Dec. 15, 1967; *American Jewish Life*, 27, December 29, 1967.

16. Avery Brundage, *The Speeches of President Avery Brundage 1952-1968* (Lausanne: I.O.C., 1969; *Time*, 62-63, Oct. 25, 1968; Guttman, *Games*, 243-245.
17. *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 10, 1972; *Time*, 8-10, 13-17, 29, September 18, 1972.
18. Rürup, *1936 Spiele*, 10; Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, 135- 144; *The Encyclopedia Americana* (Danbury: Grolier, 1989) 29:361, 530.