Douglas Fairbanks and the Birth of Hollywood's Love Affair with the Olympics

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Over the past 20 or so years, Hollywood stars have clamored to be associated with the Olympic Games. Tom Selleck was the honorary captain of the 1984 U.S. Olympic Men's Volleyball Team. Dolph Lundgren was chosen by the United States Olympic Team as the honorary team leader for the 1996 U.S. Olympic Pentathlon Team. Also in 1996, Bruce Willis and then wife Demi Moore adopted the U.S. Olympic Gymnastics Teams, holding nightly parties for them in the Atlanta Planet Hollywood. Recently, Pamela Anderson sponsored Olympic gymnast Mohini Bhardwaj, enabling her to concentrate on making the 2004 U.S. Olympic Team. But all of these instances appear to be one time arrangements and mostly for publicity, either for the celebrity or the team. The first time any actor showed a genuine interest in the modern Olympic Games came in the 1920s.

Douglas Fairbanks was always interested in physical activity, even as a boy in Denver, Colorado, when he was known as Douglas Ulman. Once he decided to pursue an acting career he moved to New York and changed his name to Douglas Fairbanks. In addition to acting he began taking formal gymnastics and fencing lessons, although he had begun both informally as a 12-year old. After an on again off again Broadway career, Fairbanks and his first wife moved to Hollywood to begin his career in films. Quickly he began to catch on in films, mostly due to his athletic prowess and daring stunts. By 1919, he was one of the stars of Hollywood, and within the year he would divorce his wife and marry America's Sweetheart, Mary Pickford. They became the “most popular couple in the world.” Together with Charlie Chaplin, they would found United Artists and become three of the most powerful people in the film industry.

Fairbanks was an avowed fitness advocate and an avid sports fan. He was the first real stuntman in movies and was the first, and best, of the “swashbucklers. “Of all the actors who have fought with swords the best actual athlete remains… Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. Yet he made all of his swashbuckling movies after the age of thirty-five,” said fencing historian Richard Cohen.

He admired athletes as much as people around the world idolized him. As heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey remembered, “Fairbanks wanted to be my pal and having him as a pal in Hollywood back then was like having a credit card today. Except there never was a bill.”

Two of Fairbanks' closest friends were Fred Cavens, his Belgian fencing master, and Chuck Lewis, his trainer and close personal friend. Craven was promoted by Fairbanks' film company as an Olympic champion, and Lewis was also portrayed as an Olympic decathlete. The problem was that neither was
an Olympian; the claims were pure public relations, or in modern jargon—spin. Why would Fairbanks lie about such information? He had a knack throughout his life of exaggerating the truth.\(^4\) Perhaps it was because he valued the Olympic Games as the epitome of athletic competition, or that he simply admired Olympic athletes so much that he desired to be associated with them.

Whereas he admired all accomplished athletes, it was the “amateur athletes,” the runners and fencers, that he appreciated the most. At Pickfair, the mansion where he and Pickford lived, he had a world-class cinder track installed along with a well-furnished gym. He also had a track built at his movie studio, often inviting his favorite athletes over to train and for makeshift competitions in which Fairbanks participated.

“I got to know Douglas Fairbanks real well,” remembered Bud Houser, 1924 Olympic shot put and discus gold medalist and 1928 discus gold medalist. “He’d never miss a meet at the Coliseum; he might pass up a football game, but not a track meet. He’d have Kenny Grumbles, Leighton Dye and I over to the studio on Saturday mornings for decathlon competitions. He was right in there with us. He said, ‘I’ve got a generation on you guys and I don’t want to pile up and die right here, so I’ll stop at six events; you guys can keep going.’ He’d always make sure we were given a nice lunch afterwards. Fairbanks was a really good athlete. I remember he could chin himself forever—he was very strong.”\(^5\)

Besides befriending young athletes, he also acted as a mentor and advisor, taking a personal interest in their well-being and future. Such was the case with 1928 Olympic shot put silver medalist, Herman Brix. In January 1929, Brix moved to Los Angeles to compete for the Los Angeles Athletic Club. By autumn, the Great Depression had hit and Brix was broke. In addition, his roommate had suddenly died of a mysterious disease with Brix by his bedside. It was at this time that Brix happened to meet Fairbanks at a local track meet. “Back then the Junior Olympics were held on the campus of UCLA,” Brix remembered. “Doug was a patron. The Junior Olympics asked me to give a demonstration one day, and Doug was there.”\(^6\)

They became fast friends and Brix would work out with Fairbanks at his studio gym, followed by food and then parties at Pickfair. During these trying times, Fairbanks’ generosity kept the unemployed Brix alive. Soon Fairbanks arranged film tests that led to a long and successful film career. Known by his screen name of Bruce Bennett, Brix went on to act in over 100 memorable roles including, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, as Joan Crawford’s husband in *Mildred Pierce*, *Strategic Air Command*, and the original *Angels in the Outfield*.

One of the first Olympic athletes that Fairbanks befriended, and perhaps his closest Olympic friend, was world champion sprinter, Charley Paddock. He became very influential in Paddock’s career during times of challenge.

In 1923 Paddock was in the middle of a battle between the AAU, the driving force in the selection of the American Olympic Team, and the fledgling NCAA that controlled collegiate athletic competition. Paddock was about to hang up his spikes when Fairbanks invited him to his studio track and gym and convinced him to return to the University of Southern California and train for the 1924 Olympic Games. Paddock returned and was named the captain of the Trojan track team. Ultimately, he was invited to compete in a collegiate meet in Paris, but the AAU stepped in and announced that if Paddock competed he would be ineligible to compete in the Paris Olympics, claiming that only it had jurisdiction over American athletes competing internationally. Paddock stood up to the AAU and made the trip—the
AAU backed down and Paddock competed in the 1924 Paris Olympic Games where he defended his 100-meter Olympic title won in the 1920 Games in Antwerp.7

While the American Olympic Team was in New York, there was no place to train privately. Fairbanks came through by offering the set of his latest film, *The Thief of Bagdad*, which was on the Astoria studio lot in Queens.8 When the team arrived in Paris, there were Fairbanks and Pickford to meet them. Also on the boat to Paris was Fairbanks’ 14-year old son from his first marriage, Douglas, Jr. He had befriended the members of the U.S. team on the trip, was named their unofficial mascot and presented with a team dress uniform. When his father could not locate tickets for the track and field finals, it was Douglas, Jr., who used his connections to secure tickets for his father, much to his father’s pride.9

During the Olympic trials, Paddock did not fair well, and in the end his coach, Lawson Roberts, had to campaign for his being placed in the 200-meters. Paddock was depressed and felt that he was too old, and time had passed him by. Fairbanks searched him out in Paris and gave him a stern lecture. “You college fellows are all alike,” Fairbanks told him. “The moment you graduate you think your athletic days are over—that you are all washed up. Why, man, you’re just beginning them!”10 Still pensive, Paddock tied Harold Abrahams of England in the preliminary heats and finished fifth in a closely contested 100-meters final where the third, fourth, and fifth place finishers all were timed at 10.9.

Before the 200-meters, Paddock was once again feeling low after losing the 100-meters final. Fairbanks once again found Paddock and took him out for dinner at the Crillon Hotel with his wife, Mary Pickford, and Maurice Chevalier. When the evening was coming to an end, Chevalier and Fairbanks went for a walk, leaving Paddock and Pickford to talk. “You are defeating yourself,” said Pickford. “And even with my scant knowledge of sport, it is clear as day that you are faster than all of them. Only you will not allow yourself to think so anymore…If you believe in yourself you will win tomorrow.”11 After a good night’s sleep at the Crillon, away from the rest of the U.S. team, he arrived at the stadium rested for the 200-meters final. Repeating Pickford’s final words over and over again in his head, Paddock finished second behind his teammate Jackson Scholz, with a time of 21.7, three tenths of a second faster than his 1920 second place finish.

Besides assisting athletes, Fairbanks and Pickford lent their support to other Olympic endeavors. Fairbanks was an official spokesman for the junior Olympics during the 1920s and 1930s. When the Olympics came to Los Angeles, they both were official greeters and hosts during the Games. Three weeks before the Games, they both made radio broadcasts urging Americans to attend the Los Angeles Games and extolling the virtues of the Olympic spirit.12 On August 9, 1932, the couple hosted a dinner party for the International Olympic Committee, with a private showing of Fairbanks’s latest film *Mr. Robinson Crusoe*, at their home, Pickfair, which had been refurbished especially for the affair.13 Financially, both made contributions to the American Olympic Committee on many occasions.14

Pickford and Fairbanks separated in 1933, the year after the Games, when it was disclosed that Fairbanks was having an affair with Lady Silvia Ashley. Their divorce was finalized in 1936, and Fairbanks and Ashley were married in Paris on March 7, 1936. Their honeymoon included a trip to the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games; they returned to the United States soon after the Games on the zeppelin Hindenburg.15 Within four years, Douglas Fairbanks, the actor who epitomized athleticism in film and preached a healthy active lifestyle, died from a heart attack at the age of 56.

While most celebrities’ Olympic interest waned quickly, Fairbanks’ attention never wavered. For two decades, he attended almost every Olympic Games wherever they were held. During the 1920s
109

Douglas Fairbanks and the Birth of Hollywood’s Love Affair with the Olympics

and 1930s, that took a considerable commitment of time, effort and money. Perhaps he saw more in the Games than a mere athletic contest. A hint came in an essay on the power of film that Fairbanks wrote for the May 1924 edition of the *Ladies Home Journal*:

> When remote peoples see how little difference there is between us, for instance, and themselves, they will come closer to understanding and to tolerance than through any medium of books and schools and, I am courageous enough to think, churches. To make one nation understood by another, and to dispel the idea of differences which create only suspicion–these results are far more progressive and important that the thin, superficial thing that we call civilization. It is only a name and a point of view, anyway. It means different things under different circumstances.\(^{16}\)

Endnotes


4 “My father was an incorrigible exaggerator and although some of his reminiscences were reliable, many were not.” Fairbanks, Jr., p. 16. See also, Booton Herndon, *Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks: The Most Popular Couple the World Has Ever Known* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), pp. 44-47.


8 N.E.A. photograph #P1041 --- FAIRBANKS, June 11, 1924. Caption: “New Yorkers who are wondering what became of the sets for *The Thief of Bagdad* will be interested to know that Doug Fairbanks converted them into a training camp for American athletes who will compete in the Olympic games. This picture shows some of them. From left are “Chuck” Lewis, decathlon candidate; Fred Kelly, former Olympic high hurdles champion; Charles Paddock, the Mercury of America; Boyd Comstock, famous coach, who is donating his services. Kelly acts as Paddock’s pace-maker.” Photo is in private collection of the author.

9 “The transatlantic trip was particularly memorable for me because the 1924 American Olympic team was also on board our ship on its way to the Olympic Games in Paris. As soon as possible I ingratiated myself
with my favorite athletes: Charley Paddock from USC, ‘the World’s Fastest Human’ and world record holder in the 100-yard and 100-meter dash, and his pal and rival, Loren Murchison, co-holder of the 220-yard record. Dad and Mary had also returned to Paris for the Games and were at the Crillon, as usual. He was very surprised when I rang up and asked if I could see him. One reason for my boldness was that my new friends on the team had made me the unofficial U.S. team mascot and had given me one of the navy blue jackets with the U.S. Olympic shield over the breast pocket as well as a straw boater—the recognizable team uniform. I couldn’t wait to show it off to my father and perhaps win a hint of approval. (Mother took my honorary position for granted. It never occurred to her that these gestures were actually ploys for an introduction to my father.) I must say he did seem pleased, and impressed. So much so, in fact, that when his own representatives failed to acquire extra tickets for the big day of the finals he asked me for help. I modestly murmured my willingness, knowing damned well that I could get them from a member of the team—but for a price. I succeeded all right, and when he laughingly boasted that it was I who arranged this (‘some way—I don’t know how!’), I puffed up with pride.” (Fairbanks, Jr., pp. 97-98)

10 Paddock, p. 175.
11 ibid., pp. 180-182.
13 Copy of invitation in the author’s private collection.