

CONAN DOYLE AND THE OLYMPICS

By Peter Lovesey



First, let us dispose of a *canard*. For years there has been a story that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was one of the officials who assisted Dorando Pietri at the finish of the 1908 Olympic marathon and so made the disqualification inevitable. He has even been identified as a portly figure in a straw boater pictured in the background of one of the most famous of all Olympic photographs. Sadly for the romantics, the story isn't true. The two officials at either side of the athlete are Jack Andrew, the Clerk of the Course, holding the megaphone, and Dr Michael Bulger, the chief medical officer. The figure in the background (and seen beside the stricken Pietri in other photos) is probably another of the medical team. Conan Doyle was seated in the stands.

His report in the *Daily Mail* (25 July, 1908) makes this clear. ". . . Then again he collapsed kind hands saving him from a heavy fall. He was within a few yards of my seat. Amid stooping figures and grasping hands I caught a glimpse of the haggard, yellow face, the glazed, expressionless eyes, the lank black hair streaked across the brow."

Conan Doyle had been commissioned by Lord Northcliffe to write a special report of the race. "I do not often do journalistic work," he recalled in his memoirs¹, "but on the occasion of the Olympic Games of 1908 I was tempted, chiefly by the offer of an excellent seat, to do the Marathon Race for the 'Daily Mail'." The almost melodramatic scenes affected him deeply. "It is horrible, and yet fascinating, this struggle between a set purpose and an utterly exhausted frame." Nothing like it had been seen to that time, though similar scenes would occur at marathon finishes in the future. With remarkable foresight, Conan Doyle finished his report with the words, "The Italian's great performance can never be effaced from our records of sport, be the decision of the judges what it may."

The next day, the disqualified runner was presented with a special silver cup by Queen Alexandra. It has been suggested that

the cup was Conan Doyle's idea, but this is another distortion of the truth. In fact, Conan Doyle's contribution was financial; he got up a fund to raise money for Dorando Pietri. A letter published beside his report in the *Daily Mail* statedly "I am sure that no petty personal recompense can in the least console Dorando for the national loss which follows from his disqualification. Yet I am certain that many who saw his splendid effort in the Stadium, an effort which ran him within an inch of his life, would like to feel that he carries away some souvenir from his admirers in England. I should be very glad to contribute five pounds to such a fund if any of the authorities at the Stadium would consent to organise it."

Nobody seemed to bother that Dorando's amateur status might be sullied. The appeal raised the substantial sum of three hundred pounds. Readers of the paper were informed that the money would be used to enable the gallant runner to start up as a baker in his own village. If the villagers were relying on him for bread, they must have been disappointed. For much of the next year he was in the United States, only returning to Italy in May, 1909. He turned professional and cashed in on the marathon craze triggered by his race. His travels lasted until 1912.

For Conan Doyle, that hot afternoon in the White City Stadium was a seminal experience. It convinced him of the international significance of the Olympic movement. He had always enjoyed his sport. As an all-rounder, he was quite an Olympian himself. At Stonyhurst School, he had learned to love the game of cricket. While still a young doctor in 1889, he scored a century playing for Portsmouth against the Royal Artillery. Between 1900 and 1907, he played for the MCC (though it has to be said that selection was not quite so prestigious as it now is), was a useful slow bowler and once took the wicket of the finest batsman of the century, W.G. Grace. He was a founder of Portsmouth Football Club (1884) and played in goal and as a defender until he was forty-four; had a golf handicap of ten; and in 1913 got to the third round of the British amateur billiards championship. In his time at Southsea he was president of the bowls club. His knowledge of boxing, particularly the prize-ring, is evident in his writing, particularly *Rodney Stone* and *The Croxley Master*. And he is often credited with popularising skiing during the years he spent in Switzerland when his first wife Louise was ill with tuberculosis. He imported skis from Norway in 1894 and climbed the Jacobshorn at Davos, the first time an Alpine mountain had been conquered on skis. A plaque crediting his part in the history of Swiss skiing can be seen at Davos.

A curious consequence of his interest in boxing was that in December 1909 he was invited to referee the world heavyweight fight between Jim Jeffries and Jack Johnson. Conan Doyle, amazingly naïve in many respects, was keen to accept until someone

¹ Memories and Adventures

pointed out the subtext to the fight. Johnson was black, and Jeffries had been persuaded out of retirement as the "great white hope" for one of the most racially charged contests in the history of sport. The two fighters' backers had been unable to decide on an impartial referee. Their compromise choice was Conan Doyle. After a week of uncertainty, he wisely turned down the offer.

One offer he did not turn down was the presidency of the English Amateur Field Events Association, founded in 1910 by a small group of enthusiasts who had noted how Britain's preoccupation with the more glamorous track events had left the nation far behind the USA and the Nordic countries in jumping and throwing.

Britain's performance in the Stockholm Olympic Games in 1912 came as a shock to a nation that had dominated sport during the previous century. In the athletics an "official system of counting points" (3 for gold, 2 for silver and 1 for bronze) resulted in the USA scoring 80, Sweden 30, Finland 29 and Britain 15. Counting all sports, Britain was third, behind the USA and Sweden, Bitter recriminations followed. To quote F.A.M. Webster, *"a perfect wave of popular indignation swept over the country, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, president of the Amateur Field Events Association, had his attention drawn to the position. Sir Arthur, ever willing to exert himself in a good cause, took the matter up the direct outcome of his tactful negotiations being the formation of the Berlin Special Committee."* Berlin, of course, had already been named as host of the next Olympics, due in 1916.

Conan Doyle's own account² tells us that in the early summer of 1912 Lord Northcliffe sent him a telegram *"which let me in for about as much trouble as any communication which I have ever received."* Northcliffe (who in 1908 had raised nearly £12,000 to bail out the London Olympic Games) said Conan Doyle was the one man in Great Britain who could rally round the various discordant parties and achieve a united effort to restore the nation's status as an Olympic nation.

It is worth recalling here that Conan Doyle was a strong patriot. It is often assumed he received his knighthood because of his literary success, but Sherlock Holmes had nothing to do with it. In fact the honour was given mainly in recognition of the writer's much-translated booklet, *The War in South Africa: Its Causes and Conduct*, a British response to international criticisms of the nation's role in the Boer War.

His first response to the dismal showing in Stockholm was to write to *The Times* (18 July, 1912) suggesting that in future Britain should send a British Empire team, for *"there could not be a finer object lesson of the unity of the Empire than such a team all striving for the victory of the same flag."* Twelve days later came a fuller proposal with recognition that "liberal funds" were needed to form, equip and train such a team. It was couched in language that left no doubt of the national prestige at stake; the fund would be *"a good war-chest"* and *"we must bring our full strength into the field"*. Annual or bi-annual games should be held on the Olympic model, to accustom athletes to the metric distances and to the "abnormal events" such as the discus and javelin. The Olympic Games should take priority over such traditional British competitions as Bisley, Wimbledon and Henley, for *"the absence of our tennis players and of our yachts this year was a deplorable thing"* His proposals on training were ahead of their time: *"The team should be brought together into special training quarters*



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle 1901

for as long a period as possible before the Games, with the best advice always available to help them."

But the response in the press was far from helpful. Some of Northcliffe's own papers attacked the principle of investing money in amateur sport. But Conan Doyle was not a man to be silenced. In another letter to *The Times* (8 August, 1912), he appealed to all concerned to *"let bygones be bygones, and centre our efforts upon the future."* Never one to shirk controversy, he pointed out that the British Olympic Council, consisting of about 50 members, was too large an organisation for executive purposes. Instead, he proposed *"a nucleus of four or five from the present Olympic Association, with as many more co-opted from outside."* Only then, he felt, would they be in shape to appeal to the public for funds.

By March, 1913, his vision was taking shape. The new Olympic Financial Committee was in place and he was a member. The others were the chairman, J.E.K. Studd, the cricketer and founder of the London Polytechnic; H.W. Forster, MP, a future Governor-General of Australia, and first-class cricketer; Edgar Mackay, the motor-boat pioneer, who was treasurer; Bernard J.T. Bosanquet, a test match cricketer now best remembered for inventing the "googly";

² Memories and Adventures

Arthur E.D.Anderson, an Olympian from 1912; Arthur Robertson, another Olympian athlete; Theodore Cook, the Olympic fencer; Percy Fisher, representing the AAA; and J.C.Hurd, representing the swimmers. Even so, there was sniping from people who felt the committee should be larger, more representative, with some influence from the likes of Lord Alverstone and Lord Lonsdale. Diplomatically, Conan Doyle pointed out in a letter to the *Sporting Life* (22 March, 1913) that "it would make any united national effort impossible if we were to wait for such a heaven-sent committee as would equally commend itself to everyone."

Unfortunately for the fund-raisers, the state of the money market during the Balkan War made this, in Conan Doyle's words to the *Daily Express* (24 May, 1913), "a very in opportune time to go to the public for funds". The project was put on ice. In July, the *Daily Express* once more demanded to know when the appeal would be launched. "An ill-timed appeal for funds would be disastrous . . . The money market is still unfavourable," replied Conan Doyle (4 July, 1913).

Then he made an unfortunate decision: he went on holiday and missed a crucial meeting. In his absence, the committee yielded to pressure and launched the appeal, not for ten thousand pounds, as Conan Doyle had planned, but a hundred thousand. "I was horrified," he wrote in *Memories and Adventures*, "The sum was absurd, and at once brought upon us from all sides the charge of developing professionalism . . . My position was very difficult. If I protested now it would go far to ruin the appeal."

Immediately there was a backlash. Frederic Harrison, a man of influence as head of the Positivist movement in Britain, wrote (rather negatively) to *The Times* (26 August, 1913), "The whole affair stinks of gate money and professional pot hunting . . . The craze to collect Olympic dust bids fair to be another case of 'gate' – professionalism – years of specialist coaching. I should myself prefer to see Britain decline to enter, as not liking the terms and devices on which the show is run."

Conan Doyle's response (*The Times*, 27 August, 1913) was a long, cogently argued letter pointing out the scale of the scheme and the practical requirements of improving national standards of physical education. He concludes: "If Mr Harrison's contention was that we should never have gone in for the Olympic Games at all, he might find many to agree with him. But, things being as they are, I would ask him to consider the courses open to us. One is to retire in the face of defeat and to leave the Colonies to put the Union Jack at the top where they can. As a good sportsman I am sure Mr Frederic Harrison could not tolerate that. A second is to continue with our present haphazard half-hearted methods, and to see ourselves sink lower and lower from that third place which we now occupy."

There was now a real risk that the critics would not only torpedo the scheme, but actually succeed in securing Britain's withdrawal from the next Olympics. In the same issue of *The Times* came a letter from Nowell Smith, the Headmaster of Sherborne, one of the great public schools. He had spoken to many lovers of sport, he claimed, and "We are just ordinary, though, I fear, rather old-fashioned, Britons, and we think these modern pseudo-Olympic Games are 'rot' and the newspaper advertisements of them and the £ 100,000 fund for buying victories in them, positively degrading."

The controversy raged for weeks. "The first and vital question is: Is Great Britain to be represented at Berlin or not?" the Chairman of the committee argued in a letter to *The Times* (5 September, 1913) ". . . It is too late to find fault with Olympic Games and conditions. . . . Had the British cause been adequately represented at Stockholm the nation might



Sir Arthur Conan Doyle 1912

conceivably have withdrawn from future contests, but now such a course is not open to us." *The Times* of 13 September devoted its leading article to the subject of veiled professionalism in the Olympics, pointing out that even the most amateur of sports, such as the University Boat Race, or schoolboy cricket, were funded to some degree. More subversively, the humorous magazine, *Punch*, published a piece strongly hostile to the Olympic Games.

Sensing that the public mood was becoming dangerously hostile to the Olympic appeal, Conan Doyle decided to meet the crucial question head on. He wrote to *The Times* (13 September, 1913): "I should like to ask one question and receive a definite reply from all those persons, including Mr Punch, who are making our Olympic task more difficult. It is this:- 'Are you prepared to stand down from the Berlin Games altogether?' In answering it they would do well to bear three points in mind – that we were defeated at the last Games, that the Games are in Berlin, and that all the chief nations have already announced their intentions of competing. If in the face of this they are prepared to stand down, then their attitude is, I admit, perfectly consistent. If they are not, then what is it they want to do?"

He persuaded the chairman of the committee, J.E.K.Studd, that the right way to handle this crisis was to invite the press, including the strongest critics, to a London hotel to debate the issue of Britain's participation. It was a turning point. Studd and Conan Doyle each spoke at length and with honesty. Time, they

argued, was against them. The subscriptions were slow (by October 18th only £9,500 was collected). But withdrawal from the Games would cast Britain in the role of bad losers. They admitted that the target sum of £100,000 was an “outside figure”. Studd, speaking for himself alone, said he had only accepted the chairmanship in the hope that “if successful, the work of the committee will enable Great Britain to retire from future Olympic contests without loss of dignity or prestige should she desire to do so.” Conan Doyle disagreed with this view, and said so. As he wrote in a foreword at about the same time, *“No department of national life stands alone, and such a climb down in sport as would be involved by a retirement from the Olympic Games would have an enervating effect in every field of activity.”*³

Such straight talking was rare. The press agreed that the project deserved their support, but the damage had been done. In an article written at the end of November, 1913, Conan Doyle admitted, *“The public seem apathetic on the question. . . . Unless prompt and generous help comes to us, the Committee will have dissolved, and the organisation, which has been laboriously built up during the last year, will have gone to pieces. The next few weeks will decide the matter.”*⁴

Of course, the matter was decided by events outside the control of sportsmen and writers.

When the First World War was over, and the question of Britain’s participation in the 1920 Olympics was debated, Conan Doyle was no longer in the forefront. He was devoting his energies to another cause – spiritualism. Sadly, the fund-raising experience had embittered him. *“This matter was spread over a year of my life, and was the most barren thing that I ever touched for nothing came of it, and I cannot trace that I ever received one word of thanks from any human being. I was on my guard against Northcliffe telegrams after that.”*

But in a modest way, there had been results. An “Olympic sports meeting”, over metric distances and including those “abnormal” field events, the discus and javelin, was held at the Crystal Palace track in 1913. And in February, 1914, Britain’s first paid national coach, Walter Knox (a well-known professional with experience in Canada and the USA) was appointed on a salary of £400 from the Olympic fund. The AAA expanded its Championships to two days and added the 440yds hurdles, triple jump, discus and javelin to its programme. Some important principles had been established.

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³ Olympian Field Events

⁴ Some Views on the Olympic Talent Fund. The Stock Exchange Christmas Annual 1913-14