

Notes and Commentary

‘Olympic Chains’: Setting the Record Straight

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In the last issue of *Olympika* (IV-1995) the editors decided to introduce a new feature to the journal’s contents, a section featuring rare Olympic photographs. The first presentation in this regard were photographs taken by German photographers of events and personalities associated with the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. The photographs published in *Olympika* IV were copies of material captured by the American military forces during World War II.¹ On page 125 a photograph is displayed bearing the caption: “A pleased Adolf Hitler receives the Olympic Order (held by Theodor Lewald) from IOC President, Count Baillet-Latour.” At first glance, the article being presented to Hitler by Baillet-Latour does indeed appear to be what Olympic scholars know as The Olympic Order. Since *Olympika* IV’s publication in December 1995, one year ago, not one challenge has been aroused relative to the photograph and the legitimacy of its caption.

The Olympic Order

Last July (1996) I received a periodical published by the IOC containing a list of all those on whom the Olympic Order had been bestowed,² at least through 1988. Adolf Hitler’s name did not appear on the list; in fact, the list commenced with the name of Avery Brundage, who was given the distinguished award in 1975, scarcely two weeks following his death on May 8th. Given what appears to be a serious error, two points of question are apparent: (1) if the first Olympic Order ever conferred was bestowed in 1975, what, then, is the object that lies resplendent in Adolf Hitler’s hands in the 1936 photograph, and (2) when and how did the Olympic Order, the IOC’s most distinguished award, come into existence?

I address the latter point first. If one commences with the date of the “Brundage Conferral” (May 1975) and treks backward through the IOC General Session and Executive Committee Minutes, the paper trail of legislation leading to the implementation of the distinguished award should be apparent. And, indeed it is.

An examination of IOC General Session Minutes for the years 1972-1975 inform us of the following circumstances. In 1972 the IOC met in late August at the Maximilianaum in Munich for the type of General Session proceedings that

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normally occur at the time and site of an Olympic Games. Avery Brundage, in his final act as IOC President, presided over the Munich General Session proceedings. On the very "eve" that he relinquished the IOC presidential gavel to Michael Morris (The Lord Killanin), Brundage proposed that "an award be established to be given to all those who had served the Olympic Movement with dedication for a certain number of years."³ Brundage stated that he would draw up the exact conditions and submit them to the Executive Board for preliminary approval. Following discussion, and anticipating that Brundage's proposal would be approved, the Session agreed that the first such award should be given to Gudmund Schack of Denmark, Edgar Fried of Austria and Jean Weymann of Switzerland.⁴

In early February 1973, at the Chateau de Vidy in Lausanne, Lord Killanin convened the 97th meeting of the IOC's Executive Committee. Brundage, though not present, had sent the Executive Committee his recommendation for naming such "an award to be established," counselling that it be called "Olympic Emeritus."⁵ Though Brundage's motivation for advancing the term "emeritus" might have been entirely divorced from his recently "retired status," it may not have appeared so for the Committee members present. They recommended writing to Brundage requesting him to propose a different title, as well as to forward his envisioned scheme for awarding the distinctive honor. As well, all IOC members were asked to send their own recommendations to the Executive Committee on criteria for selecting recipients.⁶ Though a multitude of business matters was addressed by the Committee at its next meeting in June, the minutes are silent on any discussion of "the award."⁷ However, by early autumn when the Executive Committee next convened, a report on Olympic Awards was ready for reaction. Juan Antonio Samaranch, IOC Chief of Protocol at the time, and destined eventually to succeed Killanin as President of the IOC, presented the report. The resulting recommendation of the Executive Committee was that "An Olympic Order should be created"⁸ The IOC General Session of 1973 convened directly following the Executive Committee Meetings. Samaranch presented the proposal to establish the Olympic Order award; the membership accepted in principle but delayed a final decision until its next General Session Meeting scheduled for Vienna in 1974.⁹

Following the paper trail, one learns that the IOC Executive Committee, meeting in Lausanne in February 1974, agreed that an Olympic Order design should be created and presented to the Committee at its next meeting slated for June.¹⁰ At the Executive Committee's June meeting, Willie Daume, IOC Member from the Federal Republic of Germany, who had been entrusted with the task of making arrangements for the design to be executed, presented the fruits of his labors to his colleagues. The design was approved, subject to General Session ratification. The Committee also recommended that seven IOC members would comprise the council that would determine recipients of the award and that no active IOC member could be a candidate.¹¹ When the Executive Committee next met, directly prior to the General Session Meetings of October 1974, Daume reported that the cost to produce the Olympic Order would be 550 DM if ten were made, 429 DM if 50 were purchased.¹² When IOC members assembled in Vienna's city hall for the 75th General Session, their attention was directed to a demonstration case in which the proposed Olympic Order was displayed. Though the complex trail leading to the establishment of the

Olympic Order, designed by Germany's Otl Aicher, ended with the General Session's affirmative vote on the issue, the matter of the award's first recipient remained in question until the following year's IOC General Session.¹³

By the time the Executive Committee met in Lausanne in February 1975, it had received direction from the Olympic Order Review Council recommending Avery Brundage as the award's first recipient. On May 8, 1975 Avery Brundage passed away during a visit to one of his favorite Olympic sites, Garmisch-Partenkirchen. Some in the "Olympic world" mourned; others were less sad.

Brundage's death caused some last minute confusion in the ranks of the Executive Committee. The statutes, firmly agreed upon applicable to prospective recipients, precluded the Olympic Order being awarded to deceased individuals. Hasty amendments to the statutes were made.¹⁴ At the IOC General Session Meeting in Lausanne in the latter part of May (1975), the first Olympic Order (in gold) was presented to Avery Brundage posthumously.¹⁵ The striking gold chain-like award remained in Lausanne on display at the Chateau de Vidy.

Olympic Chains



Photograph 1A

I should now like to address the question of Adolf Hitler and the necklace-like award resting in his hands as displayed in the photograph above (1A), published in *Olympika* IV. Obviously, it is not the Olympic Order. What, then, is it? I refer the reader's attention to the photograph on the following page (1B) reflecting an almost identical scene as that displayed above. The two photographs were taken literally seconds apart from each other.



Photograph 1B

The difference between the two is obvious. In photograph 1A Hitler's right arm casts a shadow on the necklace-like artifact seemingly being presented to him; enough of an interference to distinguishing the true character of the encased item to compel a brash and unenlightened soul to conclude that what Hitler was being presented was the Olympic Order.



The true Olympic Order, in this case, presented to His Holiness John-Paul II by Juan Antonio Samaranch in Rome, 1982

Would the IOC have presented Hitler with an Olympic Order, even if the award had existed in 1936? It's hardly likely; and for some graphic reasons that argue why they would not, please consult Patrick's Miller's review essay on the United States Holocaust Museum's Exhibit on the 1936 Games which follows in this volume. Returning to the photographs, study the ceremonial chain adorning Baillet-Latour's chest in photograph IA, as well as an exactly similar chain around the neck of the IOC member standing to Baillet-Latour's right. As well, note the chain encircling the back of Theodor Lewald's neck. What these individuals are wearing are ceremonial chains similar to the one in the display case held by Lewald which Hitler seems to be admiring. This is absolutely confirmed by a review of photograph 1B.

The Olympic Games of 1936 passed gloriously or ingloriously, depending on one's point of view. There is nothing in either the Executive Committee Minutes or the General Session Minutes prior to, or during, the Games that present clues as to what the mystery items are. The answer to all this lies in an aside noted in the minutes of the IOC's 36th General Session held at the Palais de la Presidence du Conseil in Warsaw almost a year later.

There is little doubt in anyone's mind that the German organizers left no stone unturned in preparing for the 1936 Games in Berlin. The functions of ritual, ceremony, celebration, and protocol, were apparent everywhere. In keeping with such initiatives, the German organizing committee, headed by Lewald and Carl Diem, presented each IOC member with an Olympic chain, a "ceremonial badge of office," if you will, to be worn throughout the period of the Games at formal, social and celebratory occasions (parties, receptions, official functions). What we see in photographs 1A and 1B are moments from one such occasion.¹⁶ This practice, we are told in the 1937 minutes, was to continue from Olympiad to Olympiad.¹⁷ Each Olympic host city was to be the custodian of the chains until the successor host commenced "their" Games, at which time IOC members would be re-presented with a chain for the already stated functions occurring at all Olympic celebrations. This intended plan came to an abrupt end following its one and only historical chapter. There were no Olympic Games in 1940, nor 1944, indeed, not until 1948, something the Germans, in 1936, could not have envisioned. Dutiful to their responsibility, after the Games closed in Berlin in 1936 German authorities stored the "Olympic Chains" carefully away in the confines of a civic building. By the summer of 1945, Berlin's civic buildings, in fact, almost all of the city's buildings, had ceased to exist, eradicated by the incessant bombing of Allied aircraft. The stored Olympic Chains met an identical fate. Not one survived.¹⁸ But, photographs of them did; and from such images a singular modern copy was crafted. The copy resides in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. Ask to view it the next time you are there.

Notes

1. The photographs, from a collection of pictures taken by German photographers of Olympic subjects and personalities during the Berlin Games in the summer of 1936, were part of a huge cache of archival material captured by American military forces in World War II. Shipped to the United States, the material was consigned to the National Archives in Washington. After numerous appeals by German authorities lasting for decades to have the material returned, the Americans eventually complied,

but not before most of the vast store of records were copied for posterity. "Captured material," in genre of almost every description, is most often considered by the victors to be "spoils of war," indeed, partial compensation for losses and damages suffered. Contemporary times continue to witness pleas from losers for the return, and claims from winners for continued custody, of "spoils of war."

2. *Annex to the Olympic Charter* (1988), Published by the IOC, pp. 45-57.

3. See IOC General Session Minutes, Munich (Germany), August 21-25 and September 5, 1972 (condensed, annotated and translated by Wolf Lyberg, former Secretary General of the Swedish National Olympic Committee). All references to IOC General Session Minutes and Executive Committee Minutes are drawn from Lyberg's compilations, copies of which are housed in the International Centre for Olympic Studies, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada.

4. *Ibid.* As it turned out, Fried would not receive the award until 1983, and Weyman, not until 1985. Schack never did receive the award.

5. See IOC Executive Committee Minutes, Lausanne, February 2-5, 1973.

6. *Ibid.*

7. See IOC Executive Committee Minutes, Lausanne, June 23-24, 1973.

8. See IOC Executive Committee Minutes, Varna (Bulgaria), September 29-30 and October 2, 1973.

9. See IOC General Session Minutes, Varna (Bulgaria), October 5-7, 1973.

10. See IOC Executive Committee Minutes, Lausanne (Switzerland), February 9-11, 1974.

11. See IOC Executive Committee Minutes, Lausanne (Switzerland), June 1-3, 1974.

12. See IOC Executive Committee Minutes, Vienna (Austria), October 18-21 and 24, 1974.

13. See IOC General Session Minutes, Vienna (Austria), October 21-24, 1974.

14. The criteria statutes for awarding the Olympic Order, hardly modified from their first framing, can be found in *Annex to the Olympic Charter* (1988) op. cit., pp. 43-44.

15. For a description of these events, see IOC Executive Committee Minutes, Lausanne, May 19-23, 1975; and IOC General Session Minutes, Lausanne, May 21-23, 1975. Further, though Brundage was awarded the Olympic Order in gold, as the "standard for the future," nine other individuals were the recipients of the Olympic Order in silver and bronze. In silver, they were: Ryotaro Azuma (Japan), Miguel de Capriles (USA), and Rudyard Russel (Great Britain). In bronze, they were: Charles De Beur (Belgium), Gyula Hegyi (Hungary), John Kasyoka (Kenya), Lia Manoliu (Romania), Ellen Muller-Preiss (Austria), and Jacques Thiebault (France).

16. The exact occasion, of course, cannot be identified, but it must have been one of the highest importance in the greater scheme of things. It is probable that Hitler is being presented with one of the Olympic Chains, rather than simply inspecting it. Not only was Hitler in attendance, but also one of Germany's best known and powerful figures of the period. Note in both photographs 1A and 1B (more

noticeable in IA) the individual standing directly to the Führer's right (clad in a jacket similar to Hitler's). The physiogamy and countenance of the Luftwaffe chief Herman Goering (even a sliver-like margin of him) are unmistakable.

17. For this notation, see IOC General Session Minutes, Warsaw (Poland), June 8-11, 1937.

18. The notation in the Minutes surrounding the demise of the chains is obviously an editorial aside provided by Wolf Lyberg.