
More on the Olympic Chains: Setting the Record Even Straighter

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In the last issue of *Olympika*, Bob Barney published a remarkable essay which dealt, in part, with the history of the *Olympic Order*.¹ The *Olympic Order* was implemented in 1975 to be awarded as an IOC decoration for distinguished service to the Olympic Movement. Various other decorations, such as the Olympic diploma, the Bonacossa trophy and the Mohammed Taher trophy were discontinued.² In his discussion, Barney “produced” two photographs in which an “Olympic Chain,” closely resembling the *Olympic Order* is being shown, or perhaps being presented, to Adolf Hitler during the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. Barney correctly states the “Olympic Chain” in the photograph is certainly not the *Olympic Order*, but rather a “golden chain” presented to all the IOC members present at the Games in 1936. The idea for manufacturing and presenting to IOC members the Olympic Chains for wearing at the official ceremonies in 1936 and at future Games was Carl Diem’s (as correctly noted by Barney). Barney, however, is of the opinion that none of the chains survived the war: “Not one survived.”³ Fortunately, Barney’s statement is not true. Some specimens still exist. First, however, their history shall be described.

A special emblem was worn by IOC members and other officials as early as the first Olympic Games in 1896. Some of these still survive today.⁴ This tradition was continued in subsequent Games and sessions. Sometimes it was an emblem fashioned out of fabric, sometimes out of metal. The German organising committee for the 1936 Games in Berlin made a great effort to provide a worthy form of Olympic ceremony and on the trip to the IOC session in Athens in 1934 discussed a uniform and other paraphernalia that would distinguish IOC members. Diem, who regarded the IOC as “the high court of body culture,”⁵ reasoned that such distinguishing paraphernalia ought to resemble a university chancellor’s official garb, if not a robe, then

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a large golden chain. The IOC agreed.⁶ The Berlin sculptor Walter E. Lemcke,⁷ who also designed the Olympic bell for the 1936 Games, was commissioned to design the chain in cooperation with the president of the Berlin Games Organising Committee, Theodor Lewald. Six medallions representing ancient Greek athletes are embedded in the bronze gilded chain. These are a discus thrower, a javelin thrower, a torch bearer on a horse, two wrestlers, an armoured runner, and a jumper with *halteres*. The colored, enamel Olympic rings join the chain together at the bottom, and from the rings is suspended a slightly larger medallion featuring the head of Zeus. The notation, “*XI, Olympiade Berlin 1936*” is embossed on the back. Below that inscription is room for the notation for ten further Olympic Games. Sixty of these chains were made. Fifty were presented to the IOC members present in Berlin. Numerous photos of the Berlin Games exist showing IOC members wearing these chains at official ceremonies, especially at the opening ceremony. Furthermore, the official report (*Amtlicher Bericht*) mentions that these chains became the property of the IOC and were to be stored in Lausanne and presented to the IOC members present at the next Games.⁸ This was not the case because at the 1937 session in Warsaw it was decided that the chains were to remain at the site of the last Games (similar to the storing of the Olympic flag) and then presented to the IOC members at the session directly preceding the following Games: “*Olympic Chains: It was decided that the Olympic chains should be worn only at official events during the Olympic Games and not at normal sessions. The city in which the Olympic Games are held stores them until the next Olympic Games in the same manner as the Olympic flag.*”⁹ Following the 1936 Games, the chains remained in Berlin and on the day after the Games closed, were presented to Berlin’s Mayor, Lippert, together with the Olympic flag. The chains and the flag were stored in a cellar of the Berliner Stadtsparkasse (State Bank) during the Second World War.¹⁰



IOC President Baillet Latour (L) and Theodor Lewald (R) wear Olympic Chains at Berlin Games 1936



A closer look at Olympic Chains

Following the war Carl Diem immediately attempted to contact officials of the Olympic Movement and offered to assist the 1948 Olympic Games in London in organizational and ceremonial matters. He also mentions the flag and the chains in a letter written in June 1946¹¹ to Sigfrid Edström, the IOC president at the time. He was afraid that all have been destroyed in bomb attacks, but stated: “I possess one of the chains . . . it can not be difficult to replicate new ones.” It is not certain if Edström received the letter because in correspondence to Diem the following month,¹² he asks him about the chains: “Do you know if they were destroyed?” Diem promptly answered.¹³ He stated that the British military administration had inquired about the flag and chains at the Berlin magistrate. This action was presumably initiated on the request of the London Games Organising Committee. Diem promised Edström to investigate personally and to approach the mayor of Berlin. He was successful and found “the flag in a nondescript box and nine of the 60 chains”¹⁴ in a cellar of the Stadtparkasse. In September Diem wrote to Edström¹⁵ “the Olympic flag has survived undamaged and I have also found the chains of honour. I will check if they are all present. If not the missing will be reproduced.” In an October letter Edström thanked Diem for this information¹⁶ and informed him that the flag and chains, “will be collected by the British authorities.”¹⁷

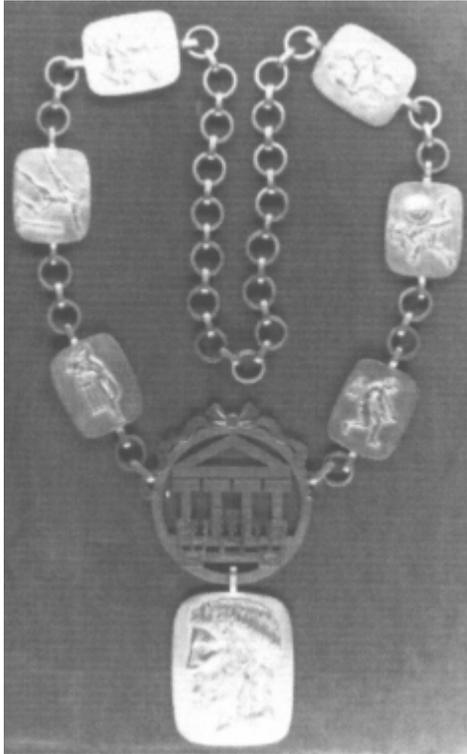


An even closer look at the Olympic Chains

The question arises, what happened to the other 51 chains? It can be assumed that all 60 were stored in a container in a safe or secure room. If the cellar had been hit by a bomb, not only the nine intact chains, but also remains of the others must have been found. This is never mentioned by Diem. Presumably, therefore, other people, either military or looters had been in the room and had taken the chains before Diem found the ones he reclaimed. Following a search request by the general secretary of the London Games Organising Committee, Lord Burghley, Diem was ordered to appear at the British military authority on 17 November 1946, at which time he was questioned about the flag and chains. During this meeting Diem related to the authorities that according to the Olympic rules the delivery of the Olympic flag and chains was to be organised by the previous host city, and added that the flag and remaining chains were in the custody of the Berlin magistrate.¹⁸ Diem also sent this information to the German IOC member, Duke Adolf Friedrich zu Mecklenburg, who, in his reply of 11 December 1946,¹⁹ labelled the British act of trying to get the flag and chains, a “confiscation.” Mecklenburg considered making an official complaint to his IOC colleague in Sweden, Edström. A few weeks later Diem learned that the flag and chains had been handed over to the British military authority by the Berlin magistrate. He communicated this fact to Edström in late December and noted, “You will no doubt have noticed that the collection (method of obtaining) of Olympic property in this manner does not conform with Olympic custom. We expect that you will compensate for this action appropriately. In any case I feel personally exempted of all responsibility following this action.”²⁰

The Olympic flag and chains must have subsequently arrived in London. The

Olympic flag still survives today and is at present stored in Atlanta until the year 2000, at which time it will be sent to Sydney. Where are the 9 chains? One (replica or original?) can be seen in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. The Diem Archives possess the chain which Diem had privately replicated for himself. Diem had a second chain modified as the official chain of the chancellor of the German Sport University.²¹



The Chancellor's Chain - German Sport University

Was this one of the nine? The German Sport Museum received a chain from the personal effects of the German IOC member Karl Ritter von Halt who presumably also had one privately made in 1936. The Berlin Sport Museum recently acquired one offered by an East German. Was this a third private replica, maybe that of Lewald, or one of the nine? In an auction of Olympic memorabilia during the Olympic Games in Atlanta 1996, Ingrid O'Neill offered an "Olympic chain" for \$10,000 US. Where did this come from? Don't all chains belong to the IOC in Lausanne if no proof is available that private copies were made in 1936?



Carl Diem of the German Sport University

Endnotes

1. Robert K. Barney, "Olympic Chains: Setting the Record Straight," *Olympika*, Vol. V-1996, pp. 141-147.
2. Not the Olympic trophy.
3. Barney, op. cit., p. 145.
4. The emblems of the IOC members and other officials are usually pictured in the Official Reports.
5. Organising committee for the XI Olympics, Berlin, 1936 (Ed.), *XIth Olympiade Berlin 1936: Amtlicher Bericht*, Volume 1, Berlin 1937, p. 126.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
7. Lemcke was a well known Berlin sculptor, 1891-1955.

8. Organising committee for the XIth Olympics, Berlin 1936 (Ed.), *XIth Olympiade Berlin*, 1936, Volume 1, p. 127.
9. Protocol of the 36th IOC session, 11 June, p. 2-3 (IOC Archives): “*Chaines Olympiques*. Il est décidé que les chaînes olympiques ne seront portées qu’à l’occasion des fêtes solennelles des Jeux des Olympiades et non lors des sessions ordinaires. La ville où ils auront été célébrés en restera dépositaire jusqu’au Jeux de L’Olympiade suivante, en même temps que du drapeau olympique.”
10. N.N., “The fate of the Olympic flag and chains of honour,” in: *Sport*, Zurich, 30 April 1947.
11. Diem to Edström, 5 June 1946 (Diem Archives).
12. Edström to Diem, 31 July 1946 (Diem Archives).
13. Diem to Edström, 16 August 1946, (Diem Archives).
14. In: *Sport*, Zurich, 30 April 1947.
15. Diem to Edström, 25 September 1946 (Diem Archives).
16. Edström to Diem, October 1946 (Diem Archives).
17. Edström to Diem, 19 September 1946, (Diem Archives).
18. Diem informs Sigfrid Edström of this on the 18th of September 1946, and Edström confirmed receiving the information on 7 December (Diem Archives).
19. Mecklenburg to Diem, 11 December 1946 (Diem Archives).
20. Diem to Edström, 29 December 1946, (Diem Archives).
21. The Olympic rings have been replaced by the Sport University emblem.