The 1912 Stockholm Olympics: Essays on the Competitions, the People, the City

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It is an odd circumstance, indeed, that Sweden—one of the few countries in the world that has made both enduring and successful efforts to preserve the historical record of its involvement in Modern Olympic matters and the Olympic Games themselves—ranks far behind other “first-rank” Olympic nations in revealing its history to the global genre of what might be called Olympic scholarship. For instance, nations reflecting far less priority in preservation of their Olympic archival record, including the United States,1 Canada, Australia, and Germany, to cite but a few, have themselves far outstripped Sweden in the examination, the analysis, and the “body of knowledge” production of their Olympic heritage. This is partly the result of a miniscule number of experienced sport historians in Sweden motivated to pursue Olympic themes. This recent work, undergirded in excellent fashion by the Swedish archival record referred to above, and composed under the creative editorship of Leif Yttergren and Hans Bolling, helps to address much of what we never knew about the Games of the 5th Olympiad, that festival widely acknowledged by historians as the Olympic Games that firmly established and ensured the rosy global future of Baron Pierre de Coubertin’s “great expectation.”

Taken collectively, the organization and focus of the book are directed towards examination of various aspects of preparing for and executing the 1912 Games: their basic organization, marketing the entire endeavor, priorities in advancing Sweden’s athletics (track and field) performance, the arts competitions, the role of women in the festival, the nature and background of Swedish participants, national press reaction, and the celebratory functions inside and outside the stadium. Including a lengthy and detailed introduction, there are twelve essays, five of which are the work of Yttergren and Bolling, jointly or individually. In Yttergren’s “The Jewel in the Olympic Crown: The Training Preparations and Competitions in Athletics,” the tale is unfolded of how Sweden went to unprecedented extremes to ensure that it ranked high in the track and field events. Organizers hired Swedish-American Ernie Hjertberg, former athletics trainer at the New York Athletic Club, to prepare 118 Swedish athletes mustered for the athletics events. The results merited the extravagance of Hjertberg’s contract: Sweden scored 30 points (second to the U.S.), achieving five medals each of gold, silver, and bronze. Yttergren’s co-editor, Hans Bolling, author of “Punch, Splendor and Patriotism,” unveils Swedish attempts to present a rich program of social and cultural events, galas, and gatherings for sports participants and officials, spectators, general Olympic visitors, and the grand event’s associated dignitaries. Despite Swedish Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf’s call for prudence when it came to festivities of this...
nature, flamboyance became the general order, leading on-site German journalist and sports official Carl Diem to note that when it came to celebratory events, the Swedes mounted “as full and varied a program as it did in sports” (p. 177). An illuminating Yttergren–Bolling collaboration, “Gender and Class: Women on the Swedish Squad,” concludes that ladies participated in aquatics, tennis, and gymnastics (exhibition, rather than competitive). Whereas Swedish female tennis players, in general, came from a privileged class, were often married, and were among the older participants in the Games, their aquatic counterparts were generally the opposite—younger, unmarried, and from working class backgrounds. The lady gymnastics performers generally represented an “in-between” description, at least with reference to married status and age.

The most noted among the list of contributing authors is the distinguished Swedish historian Jan Lindroth. His “A New Experience in Life: The Olympics and the General Debate in the Swedish Daily Press” examines Swedish newspaper debate on the subject of modern competitive sport. Lindroth’s research results conclude that, in general, the “the bourgeois right had only good things to say about the social and political function of sport,” while Social Democratic opinion was negative: “national and militaristic elements [arguments] were rejected, with very few exceptions” (p. 213). In “Nothing New Under the Sun?: Marketing the Stockholm Olympics,” by Per Anderson and Hans Kjellberg, the work’s most substantial (thirty pages) contribution (excluding the concluding chapter detailing the final competition results, written by Ingemar Ekholm), the authors unravel myriad initiatives undertaken to promote and market Sweden’s Olympics,” not only domestically, but also to the greater international community. A variety of approaches were pursued, including co-branding, promotion, and varied forms of advertising, underwritten by a total expenditure of 306,000 kronor. Olympic history’s first “art competitions” were held at the Stockholm Olympics. They are described and analyzed by Patrik Steorn in his “Art and Sport: Different Worlds? The Art Competitions.” Analysis of organization of the Games, the accommodation of spectators, and the Games as a patriotic endeavor, are treated by Therese Nordlund Edvinsson, Mats Hellspong, and Ansgar Molzberger, respectively. Finally, the socio-economic nature of competing Swedish athletes is examined by Leif Yttergren, Hans Bolling, and Ingemar Ekholm in their essay, “Counts and Draymen: The Swedish Participants.” The title itself hints that Swedish athletes in the 1912 Olympics came from all walks of life, a fitting reminder of the long tradition of social democracy entrenched in Sweden.

This is a scholarly book, buttressed by extensive primary source material relative to each contribution. Expressed in surprisingly good English, the prodigious work of translator David Grist, it is an excellent, indeed unique, addition to the corpus of scholarly literature dedicated towards understanding what might be termed as perhaps Olympic history’s greatest festival marking the early modern era.

Notes

1. Although a close rival to Sweden in preservation of its Olympic heritage is most definitely the United Kingdom, a recent initiative by the United States Olympic Committee thrusts the USA into the rarified status of “top three” recognition. In 2014 the USOC, in its downtown Colorado Springs, Colorado, administrative headquarters, opened its brand-new, expansive, privately funded, $1.5 million historical archives facility.