

Sports of the Past



Olympic Programme



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The Unusual Side by Side with the Ridiculous

Putting together the program for the olympic games is a real headache for the organizers and the International Olympic Committee. Outward appearances might lead one to suppose that all is easy and straightforward, but this is far from the truth.

To begin with, the IOC has had to make certain decisions: such as admitting canoeing in 1936, and eliminating tennis and rugby after the 1924 games; but there are some events, no longer part of the games, whose very name is enough to start people laughing. There was a time when the unusual went side by side with the plain ridiculous. For example, from 1900 until 1920 tug-of-war contests were included; in 1896, 1904, 1924 and 1932 it was the time of the rope climbing; then there was fencing with wooden sticks (1904), exercises with Indian clubs (1904, 1932), weightlifting for one arm—including, believe it or not, the other arm (1896, 1900, 1920, 1924), something which strikes us today as droll to say the least—there was the 100 m event for sailors (1896)—swimming, of

course—the (live) pigeon-shooting (1904) and many similar oddities.

Many events have featured intermittently in the games, according to the whims of the current organizing committee. They include badminton (1972), baseball (1904, 1936, 1956, 1964), French boxing (1924), American football (1932), Australian football (1956), pelota (1924, 1968), waterskiing (1972), gliding (1936) and children's games (1924).

Even among athletics, the crowning glory of the olympic games, events were permitted which appear preposterous to us today. Among these were standing high jump, long jump and hop, step and jump, the last being won many times between 1900 and 1908 by the extraordinary American Ray Ewry (not to mention his win at the unofficial games in Athens in 1906); there was discus-throwing, shot-putting and javelin-throwing with both hands; and there was a stone-throwing event. Riders also had a high-jump event (Paris, 1900); in the same year there was a 60 m underwater swimming race, and of course the long-diving competition of the 1904 St Louis olympics.

The tug-of-war: included in the olympic programme from 1900 to 1920