

SPORT

Dimitrios Vikelas: The First President of the International Olympic Committee and His Role in the Implementation of the First Olympic Games

Eleni D. Kantzidou and Lawrence W. Judge

Abstract

This paper explores the life of Dimitrios Vikelas, specifically as it relates to his work in bringing the first modern Olympic Games to Athens, Greece, in 1896. The increasing professionalization of the Olympics has shifted the focus of the Games toward sport and the building of superstars rather than the ethical values that can be gleaned from this international event. Discussing Olympism and Vikelas' core values with students is an important way to reintegrate fair play and sportsmanship into all levels of sport. The paper examines the history behind the concept of international sporting games, specifically the ancient Olympic Games, their much-imitated early European counterparts, and the Modern Olympics. By teaching Vikelas' philosophy of brotherhood and sportsmanship in the classroom, we can begin to breath the spirit of Olympism back into the Olympic Games.

Eleni D. Kantzidou, European School Brussels III; Lawrence W. Judge, School of Kinesiology, Ball State University. Please send author correspondence to lenakantz@gmail.com or corresponding author jlwjudge@bsu.edu

Introduction

The modern Olympic Games have undergone a considerable evolution since its resuscitation in 1896. As the rescheduled 2021 Olympic and Paralympic Games closed in Tokyo, discussing Olympism and its core values is an important way to reintegrate the concepts of fair play and sportsmanship into all levels of sport. This paper explores the life of Dimitrios Vikelas, specifically as it relates to his work in bringing the first modern Olympic Games to Athens. This work was expanded from Kantzidou's (2004) proceeding in the 12th International Seminar on Olympic Studies for Postgraduate Students. The present manuscript represents the completion of that work. The purpose of the manuscript was to examine the history behind the concept of international sporting games, specifically the ancient Olympic Games, their early European counterparts, and the modern Olympics.

The Birth of Modern Sport in Europe

Since the beginning of the 17th century, there has been a remarkable amount of activity in the field of sports throughout Europe. Europeans have a history of both team games and individual contests, specifically the organization of athletic games in the pattern of the ancient Olympic Games.

In 1610, Robert Dover and William Penny Brooks organized athletic games in England that mirrored the spirit of the ancient Olympic Games (Mouratidis, 1994). In the 1770s, a part of Germany witnessed similar games: Leopold F. Franz, governor of Dessau, organized these games on September 24 each year. These games were held as a birthday present for Franz's wife. Students of the village Niesk of Goerlitz and the surrounding area were invited to take part in the Olympic Games around the same time as Franz's games in Dessau (Morbach, 1998).

Of course, one should never forget the "*Dessau Pentathlon*" established by Jochan Bernhardt Basedow in *Philanthropinum*. Basedow founded the event in Dessau in 1774, using the ancient Greek pentathlon as a model (Saurbier, 1966).

Flash forward to France in 1792, during the fourth year of the French Revolution. During the drawing up of the Revolutionary calendar, Gilber Romme suggested that the extra day of leap years be

fixed as the day of the French National Olympiad (Morbach, 1998). The glory of the ancient Olympic Games spread all over Europe through the study of Greek writings.

This glory was being shown in two ways. Initially, the spread of the Olympic Games was characterized by a keen interest in bringing to light the cities and facilities where these games were held. Secondly, the organization of athletic events referred to as “Olympic Games” was sweeping across Europe with increased frequency and popularity.

Despite the problems incurred during the long-lasting Turkish occupation, Greece, too, was moving toward establishing the “Olympic Games.” Serious effort was made to re-establish the Olympic Games promptly after liberation. The city of Letrina put the games into action first by organizing the “Olympic Games” in 1838 (Giatsis, 2000).

However, the most important effort to revive the Olympic Games was undertaken by national benefactor Evangelos Zappas. Zappas inspired and financed athletic games that he called Olympia. These games took place successfully in the context of a business, trading, and industrial exhibition during the years 1859, 1870, 1875, and 1888-89 in Athens (Mouratidis, 1994). These games were undoubtedly the forerunner of the modern international Olympic Games (Linardos, 1999).

The Rebirth of the Olympic Games

The most direct step toward the rebirth of the Olympic Games was made by French baron Pierre de Coubertin, who organized an International Sports Convention in June of 1894 in Sorbonne of Paris. The convention in 1894 came after his first ineffectual attempt in 1892 (Mouratidas, 1994). The principal purpose of this convention was to awaken the sporting spirit and rally people around the Olympic ideal of Antiquity. As a result, after well-planned preparation (Morbach, A., 1998), the first International Sports Convention started its proceedings on June 16 (Georgiadis, *The Rebirth*). Coincidentally, Dimitrios Vikelas participated in that convention as a representative of the Pan-Hellenic Gymnastic Club (P.G.C.) of Athens, or more correctly, of Greece.

Dimitrios Vikelas was the son of Emmanuel Vikelas from Veroia and Smaragda Mela from Ioannina. Both his father’s and mother’s families left their hometowns at the beginning of the 19th century

and sought a better fortune by engaging in trade in Constantinople. However, with the beginning of the fight for freedom in Greece (March 25, 1821), both families left Constantinople and settled in Syros. Dimitrios was born on this island of the Aegean on February 15, 1835. He was the firstborn of four children to Emmanuel and Smaragda Vikela. The Vikelas were well off. Smaragda, Dimitrios's mother, was a woman of great learning, and because of this, Dimitrios received an excellent education. Dimitrios possessed a lot of remarkable virtues at a very young age and gave considerable signs of his culture; at the age of 15, he translated the tragedy '*Esthir*' by Rakina (Oikonomou, 1953). In addition, he gave clear indications of his literary talent by writing remarkable poems.

At the age of 17, on May 17, 1852, Dimitrios Vikelas left his parents in Constantinople (Oikonomou, 1953). After passing Syros, he headed toward London, where he was received by his mother's two brothers, businessmen Vasilios and Leonidas Melas. In London, Vikelas was to spend a long period of his life. Here, in London, he reached manhood. Vikelas acquired an academic education and made many acquaintances with important political figures of the time. These acquaintances, along with successful trade and culture ventures, allowed him to amass a large fortune. This fortune allowed him to quit his business activities and devote himself entirely to literature and his country (Oikonomou, 1953). During this time in his life, he met and married his wife, Calliope. During his stay in London, he managed to combine harmoniously his business activities with his literary and social activities. Vikelas spent much of his free time studying and translating texts and writing short stories. His short story '*Loukis Laras*' became well-known all over the world and was translated into many foreign languages. The story brought Greece and Greek literature into the international foreground and gave Vikelas an international reputation.

Thus, the stage was set for Vikelas to contribute to the development of the great interest in philhellenism sweeping the European countries. At 45, he had the economic independence, fame, and affluent acquaintances to play a part in arguing for a more just treatment of Greek affairs by International Diplomacy (Oikonomou, 1953). His love for Greece contributed to his decision to leave London on

November 9, 1876. He returned to Greece, where he would live in Athens for the remaining majority of his life (Oikonomou, 1953).

Dimitrios Vikelas' Part in the Modern Olympic Games of Athens 1896

Despite Vikelas' desire to make a permanent home in Greece, his wife Calliope's serious health problems forced them to leave Athens and move to Paris for the next few years (Oikonomou, 1953). During this time, the first International Sports Convention was to take place in the French capital (16.6 to 24.6.1894; Giatsis, 2000). The convention included representatives from sports clubs all over the world. In addition to these representatives, important figureheads in politics, diplomacy, and culture were also invited to participate in the convention. An invitation to represent Greek athletics was sent to the President of the Pan Hellenic Gymnastic Club (Panellinios Gymnastikos Syllogos/P.G.S.) of Athens, Ioannis Fokianos.

To his great astonishment, in May 1894, Dimitrios Vikelas received a letter from the Pan Hellenic Gymnastic Club (Panellinios Gymnastikos Syllogos/P.G.S.) of Athens. In this letter, the Club proclaimed him a "corresponding member," even though he himself was never involved with athletics (Oikonomou, 1953). His surprise was resolved the next day when a second letter from the club invited him to be their representative in the International Sports Convention taking place in Paris in June 1894. The letter explained that the convention was "for the re-birth of the Olympic Games" (Georgiadis, 2001). Inside the same envelope, there was a twenty-page dissertation on the Ancient Greek Games that Vikelas was to present at the Convention. The fact that he had a complete ignorance of sports issues made him initially consider declining the invitation from the Pan Hellenic Gymnastic Club (Panellinios Gymnastikos Syllogos/P.G.S.) (Linardos, 1991). However, Vikelas began to consider the invitation a unique opportunity for Greece to come into the international foreground. With this goal in mind, he let go of his initial reservation and accepted the authority with satisfaction. On June 6, 1894, he sent a letter to P.G.C. expressing his gratitude for the honor of representing them (Oikonomou, 1953). He then took it upon himself to translate the memorandum (Oikonomou, 1953).

From June 16-24, 1894, 60 representatives of sports clubs all over the world assembled in the amphitheater of 'New Sorbonne' in Paris. After settling all issues, they separated into two committees. The first committee was to specify the notions of amateur and professional athletes, whereas the second committee, presided over by Vikelas, had to deal with the organization of the games. In Ancient Olympia, these games were 24, six of which were for the boys (Oikonomou, 1953). Vikelas had a unique opportunity to make his life dream of helping his country come true. During the last general session, Vikelas, without asking anybody in Greece or without authorization, suggested that the first modern International Olympic Games should take place in Athens in 1896. He also added, "Some may say that Athens is far away, that there are not the necessary facilities and means as in Paris or London... this is true. But we must not forget that in Athens there are... monuments and museums of the highest interest.... Then there is the sentimental part of the issue. Since we are talking about the Olympic Games don't you think that Greece has a right to celebrate them on its territory? ... Without having any authorization by the Greek government, I simply suggest that the Convention should express a wish: the first celebration of the International Olympic Games should take place in Athens" (Oikonomou, 1953). The Convention accepted Vikelas' suggestion unanimously. At this point, one should admire his readiness for wit and his courage to take this initiative, as well as his optimism and faith in the dynamism of the Greek nation (Oikonomou, 1953).

The news that the games had been assigned to the city of Athens shook the Greek public opinion. As Oikonomou (1953) mentions, "After the first enthusiasm, there was some concern in the form of reasonable questions such as: How could Greeks organize such a great international event in two years, starting from point zero? It was also known to everybody that the government was not in a position to support the games financially, as Greece had declared bankruptcy not that long ago. Under this apprehension and doubt, there were two views, 'The prudent old people' who believed that the so-called experts did not have the necessary knowledge to accomplish such an important project and that Greece run the risk of exposing itself internationally after a possible failure. On the other hand, the young people were more optimistic and sided immediately with Vikelas"

(Giatsis, 2000). Vikelas was soon informed of the situation and the differing opinions of the Greek public. However, he was not able to come to Athens immediately to re-establish peace due to personal health issues. He sent a letter to the warrant officer of the heir to the throne of Constantine, K. Sapountzakis, to inform him and King George the 1st about the issue of the Olympic Games. Vikelas wrote in a letter about the new bond that was being established between Europe and Greece. In the letter, he mentioned the positive impacts the games could have on Greece to strengthen his point of view. He also explained that physical education would be promoted, leading not only to physical well-being but also to the formation of character in the younger generations (Mouratidis, 1994).

Finally, Vikelas arrived in Athens on September 13-25, 1894, and immediately occupied himself with the re-establishment of peace and optimism among the members of the “committee on the Olympians and Legacies” and athletic authorities in general (Mouratidis, 1994). However, he was soon forced to travel to Paris again due to the recrudescence of his wife’s health. His family was struck by tragedy shortly before midnight on October 22, 1894, when Calliope passed away.

On December 13-25, 1894, Vikelas returned to Athens where he had many serious problems to solve, such as:

- Re-establishing confidence in the public opinion that the preparation of the games would lead to a satisfactory conclusion,
- Finding the necessary funds to cover the expenses of the organization of the games,
- Planning a methodic way to prompt the building of the sports grounds, and
- Promoting and advertising not only in the interior of the country but also abroad.

The very next day after his arrival in Athens, Vikelas called the correspondents of the Athenian newspaper and informed them of the existing organizational and economic problems surrounding the games. More importantly, he explained the consequences that a possible cancellation of the games would have on the prestige and reliability of Greece abroad. At the conclusion of his speech, he said, “The visitors will find out that Greeks are much better than they

thought them to be. On the other hand, the games will conduce to the spread of physical exercises in the country as well as moral and spiritual uplift... it is a national aim and all Greeks have to work for it... The games will take place now and here or never” (Oikonomou, 1953). A few days later, from January 4-16, 1895, Vikelas was present at a meeting for presidents of Athenian trade and professional corporations who had already raised 2850 drachmas as a sum of assistance for the games. Vikelas did not “doubt that the Greeks abroad [would] not be deaf to our appeal for help under the chairmanship of the successor of the committee...and it is not only about the first Olympic Games. It [would] be a beginning so as foreigners get to know the way of Greece. We have the qualifications that no country has: the prestige of Antiquity and our beautiful nature” (Oikonomou, 1953). After restoring the optimistic climate among the members of the meeting, he exhorted them to raise as much money as possible, acting as pioneers in assistance of the games (Oikonomou, 1953).

On January 10, 1895, Charilaos Trikoupis resigned from the office of prime minister, and Nikolaos Diligiannis came to his position as a provisional prime minister. Diligiannis, influenced by his term of office as an ambassador of Greece in Paris, came out in support of the Olympic Games. A consequence of this switch in power was the reformation of the games’ organizing committee. The committee was now split into nine subcommittees with Secretary General Filimona Timoleonta and President Heir Constantine. A month after this reorganization, Vikelas was required once again to travel to Paris to settle urgent personal affairs.

During his stay in Paris, he found new sources of revenue for the upcoming Games. The bulk of the revenue came from Georgios Averof’s offer, which helped to cover the expenses of the games to a large extent. These comings and goings between Athens and Paris came to an end in 1896. On February 16, 1896, Vikelas came to Athens and immediately busied himself to find solutions to the problems surrounding the games. One of Vikelas’ priorities was the promotion, publicity, and advertisement of the games both in Greece and abroad. To materialize this purpose, he set about:

- Regular and frequent sending of informative telegrams about the progress of the Olympic preparation;

- Distribution of illustrated programs of the games and organization of various shows, festivities, and excursions; and
- Dispensation of information and advice for the games (to settle the doubts of the Athenian public) by sending a letter to the Athenian press where he pointed out the following: “[...] it was a great honor for Greece to wreath the first winners in the International Games. It is a recognition of the superb position that Greece by name has in the civilized world [...] for this reason the victory of every athlete either Greek or not honors Greece equally and must be hailed with equal enthusiasm” (Vikelas, 1896).

On March 25, 1896, the second day of Easter and the anniversary of the Greek Revolution in 1821, King George the 1st of Greece opened the first International Olympic Games, certain and confident of their success. King George opened the games in an overcrowded Panathinaiko Stadium among an exceptionally enthusiastic crowd of spectators. Exactly 1503 years later, the Greeks celebrated, with great national satisfaction, the rebirth of the most important pan-Hellenic institution. More than 80,000 spectators graced the first international celebration of sports with their presence. The first international Olympic Games saw 167 athletes from around the world, 83 of them Greek athletes, set the foundation stone and gave the signal for international sports and cultural cooperation.

The rebirth of the modern Olympic Games was envisioned by organizers to serve a much greater purpose than solely international sporting events. They envisioned an international brotherhood where athletes took pride in representing their country with pride, ethical and moral values, and sportsmanship. Studies show this type of sportsmanship and fair play is lacking in all levels of sport today, from youth leagues to the Olympic Games. Vikelas’ desire for the Games to transcend nationality with cooperation and fair play is achievable with education. By instructing youth on the importance of fair play and sportsmanship for an athlete, the ideals of Olympism become integrated into sport at the ground level. The history behind the Olympism and the original vision of the Olympic Games is rich and worthy of rebirth.

King George the 1st of Greece recognized the decisive part Dimitrios Vikelas played in realizing the dream of the rebirth of the Olympic Games and their complete success during the dinner he gave on Sunday night, March 31. King George the 1st expressed his gratitude to the public by addressing his guests with the following, “Thank you, Vikelas, for the initiative you had. At first, I was intimidated by your idea, but the successful results of the Games prove that you were absolutely right, and for this reason, I drink to toast your health” (Oikonomou, 1953). In addition, the Greek state honored Vikelas “for his successful efforts in support of the Olympic Games” and awarded him the cross of commanders of the second Order of Sotiros (Royal Decree, 1896).

Shortly after the close of the first modern Olympic Games, Dimitrios Vikelas handed over the presidency of the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C) to Pierre de Coubertin and devoted himself to other issues, focusing on national, social, charitable, and educational issues. However, he continued to show immense interest in the future of the Olympic Games. A letter Dimitrios sent on May 19, 1896, to the new President of I.O.C., asking him to support the Greeks’ request that the Olympic Games should be held in Athens in the mid intervals of the International Olympic Games shows specifically his continued dedication to the games (Oikonomou, 1953).

The Games Return to Athens

In 2004, Greece again enjoyed the privilege of organizing and enjoying the Olympic Games: A unique attraction for all the citizens of the world. Greek citizens were united during the games irrespective of political, ideological, class, or religious differences. They participated either as athletes or spectators in this unprecedented athletic and cultural event. As citizens of the world who enjoy this cultural experience, it is important to reflect, even if only for a while, on two people—Phil Hellene Pierre de Coubertin and Dimitrios Vikelas.

The first was the man who inspired the rebirth of the Olympic Games and organized the first International Sports Convention in Sorbonne. The re-establishment of these games was decided on while he was secretary general of the I.O.C. The second one was a well-known scholar and patriot. Dimitrios Vikelas shouldered the responsibility of reorganizing the games and the possible failure that could come with it. His sound reasoning managed to convince the

members of the convention of Athens' superiority compared to that of the other nominees, resulting in their decision to assign the first modern Olympic Games to Athens. Moreover, with his method and dynamics, he contributed significantly to the impeccable organization. Vikelas had the strength to see the games through to successful completion without any dilemma or hesitation.

It is with today's hindsight that full appreciation can be given to the grandeur of spirit with which Vikelas' worded his toast during the closing ceremony of the Sorbonne Convention, "Thanks to sports there are no foreigners anymore, only friends" (Oikonomou, 1953). In the increasingly challenging times that characterize the 21st century, it is more important than ever that citizens of the world allow their minds to broaden, proving in both words and deeds that, thanks to sports, there should be no foreigners, only friends.

Conclusion

When Tokyo won the bid to host the 2020 Summer *Olympics* and Paralympics in 2013, no one could have foreseen the current *impact of COVID-19* on society and sport. The 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games were delayed one year and were contested with no fans. With the professionalization of Olympic sports in recent years, it is easy for athletes to forget Vikelas' vision of Olympism. Superstars such as Simone Biles, the Williams sisters, and the USA men's basketball team bunked in hotel rooms instead of the athletes' village. These trends have shifted the focus of the Olympics from athletic brotherhood to personal brand building. Personal branding is an important aspect for Olympians to fund their training (Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). The 2020 to 2021 Games delay may have increased athletes' focus on brand development. Interestingly, this dynamic may have shifted from focusing on brand development to sportsmanship during these Olympic Games because athletes may have felt grateful and proud of everyone's athletic accomplishments due to the COVID-19 setbacks in sports.

Critics suggest that the idea of Olympicism is antiquated and too "Utopian" for today's world. Relinquishing the experience of the athletes' village comprises Vikelas' desire that the Olympics convert foreigners to friends. By teaching Vikelas' philosophy of brotherhood and sportsmanship in the classroom, we can begin to breathe the spirit of Olympicism back into the Olympic Games. Ideally, the

empty stadiums of the rescheduled 2021 Olympic Games will be a positive step toward reigniting and instilling Vikelas' philosophy of brotherhood and sportsmanship.

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