



Chamonix 1924

By R. Frison-Roche

An experienced mountaineer, explorer and writer, Mr. Roger Frison-Roche was the Secretary of the Chamonix Winter Sports Committee in 1924. The speech published here on the "preparation, organisation and staging of the events of the first Olympic Winter Games from 24th January to 5th February 1924 in Chamonix" was given on the 50th anniversary of these first Winter Games and the centenary of the Club Alpin Français.

Fifty years have passed since that cold, sunny afternoon in January 1924 when Chamonix celebrated the opening of the first Winter Olympic Games in the year of the VIIIth Olympiad of the modern era.

Seventeen nations sent their finest athletes to compete in the little known sports of snow and ice.

The local organisation, which the representatives of nations experienced in this specialised area of winter sports were pleased to call perfect, established Chamonix amongst the finest winter resorts.

These Olympic Games were also to establish great champions, but they barely escaped disaster and the public at large never knew of the incessant fight which the local organisers had to wage against the elements.

Everything had to be created and constructed in less than six months and it all very nearly disappeared in the thaw which occurred in the last week before the opening of the Games.

It was in 1921 that the International Olympic Committee, at its Congress in Lausanne, took the decision to incorporate winter sports in the Olympic Games.

It is true to say, however, that this decision was not unanimous. For many years, the Scandinavians had organised « Northern Games » and understandably they saw this new departure as an intrusion in their domain of skiers, skaters and hockey players.

Finally, thanks to the diplomacy of Count Clary and the Marquis de Polignac, a compromise was reached giving the patronage of the IOC to « the organisation of the Winter Games at the time of the VIIIth Olympiad ». A subtlety of style which triumphed over all susceptibilities.

Once the matter had been decided, the host nation had to be chosen. Naturally the nation organising the summer games had priority, on

condition that it was in a position to provide the necessary facilities for winter sports.

For France, and Paris, 1924 was an Olympic Year.

And so France was chosen for the Winter Games and Mr. Frantz Reichel was authorised by the COF to sign a contract with the municipality of Chamonix, headed by its dynamic Mayor Mr. Jean Lavaivre.

The bargaining went on for some time.

The problems of finance and facilities which Chamonix faced are not difficult to imagine.

Nonetheless, Chamonix was at that time the only French winter resort able to complete its facilities and offer accommodation (the town was rich in hotels at the time) and experienced local organisers.

First and foremost, the IOC demanded the construction of a skating rink, more than 20,000 metres square, able to contain two hockey rinks, two figure-skating rinks and a 400 m speed-skating rink with an adjacent

curling rink. This ice stadium had to be entirely built and handed over to the Olympic Committee by 1st November 1923.

At the same time, Chamonix engaged in the construction of a ski jump in the Norwegian style and following the example of Holmenkollen, it had to allow for jumps of 60 m, the longest one could hope for at that time.

There were no problems in this quarter and the jump was ready on time. It was on this same jump, incidentally, modified only four times over the years, that the Czech Raska recently jumped 103 metres.

The IOC also demanded the very expensive construction of a bobsleigh run, a sport very much in vogue at the time, even in France, where its fate was confided to the hands of Mr de la Fregeoliere.

This terrifying run with 19 very tight bends was constructed entirely by masons in the middle of the forest of Pélerin and its remains can still be seen today.



From left to right : General Kentisch, Frantz-Reichel, Count Clary, Baron P. de Coubertin.



For the ascent to the bobsleigh run the old Aiguille skilift was used with a provisional double pylon stop at the Cascade du Dard.

If the jump and the bob run gave the local organisers little cause for worry, and indeed a great deal of credit, this was not the case with the construction of the ice stadium.

The old 500 sq m skating rink was on the right hand side of the river Arve. This was abandoned and it was on the left bank, in the "Mouilles" which stretched between the Municipal Casino (now the beach) and the Grand Hotel (otherwise known as the Residence) that what was to be the biggest skating rink and largest ice stadium in the world was to be built, a record held up until then by Davos.

First of all the river Arve had to be diverted the length of the future stadium; then the water had to be drained and underground pipes installed together with the many water sprays for the future skating rink. This was carried out while the engineers and architects finalised plans for the work.

The biggest job was filling in and planning the land over a usable space of 36,000 square metres.

The contract with the builders was signed and work commenced on 31st May 1923, that is, exactly five months before the date fixed by the Olympic Committee for the handing over of the stadium.

Let us take off our hats to those brave chaps who took on the challenge !

Even in this day and age, with the massive resources of modern technology at our disposal, such a project would seem impossible.

However, under the impetus of the municipality of that time the work went ahead at record speed. The important cutting work was carried out in the Bouchet wood, beside the Municipal Casino and this excavation was later to form the lake and the beach. To do this the builders had only a steampowered digger, which worked very badly and was constantly break-

ing down. The rubble was then trundled away in little carts. All this involved enormous manual labour.

It rapidly became obvious that the stadium would never be ready in time as autumn approached and the winter freeze would soon set in. And so the work intensified, twenty four hours a day, digging, dragging away the rubble, with a furious unremitting effort which drew admiration from the specialists and virulent criticism from those who had not as yet grasped the importance of the Games for the future of Chamonix and who feared the project was a bottomless pit where money was concerned which would eventually engulf the town.

Despite all these efforts the stadium was not handed over to the IOC until December, that is, one month late, and the icemaking team, under the direction of Benoit Couttet, with his assistant Jean Claret, set to work immediately. It snowed.

A heavy frost set in and everything went well. Benoit Couttet had installed about 30 men in the basement of the building, which served both as a cloakroom and grandstand.

Naturally the sprinkling work was done at night with hoses and it needed the delicate touch and technique of Benoit Couttet to create ice as smooth and hard as the best Swiss or Scandinavian rinks.

At the same time, as I have said, the work on the bob run and the ski jump was completed, and taking advantage of the fresh snow the tracers began to mark out the future runs for the cross-country skiing.

The snow fell regularly in light layers ; it posed no problems and at each snow fall the ice was cut away with the aid of scrapers and shovels and tipped into the bed of the river Arve.

Then came the black period.

It was the end of December, 1923. As Christmas approached, Chamonix was full of winter holiday makers and jingling sleighs sped across the snow covered streets.

The first catastrophe befell Chamonix overnight.

In 24 hours 1 m 70 (3ft 8 in) of snow fell on the valley. The highest precipitation recorded in the memory of man.

At that time I lived at Praz de Chamonix and I remember as if it was yesterday that astonishing morning when we awoke to find ourselves

buried under the snow, unable to believe our eyes.

My colleague Auguste Cachat, also secretary of the winter sports committee, and I had to be at the office at 8 a.m. We put on our skis and made tracks. Changing every 50 metres, it took us two hours to cover 2 ½ kilometres.

There was consternation in Chamonix.

Although the weather turned fine again, the snow covered everything. We were only one month from the opening of the Games, and the immense stadium had to be cleared of the snow !

We recruited workers everywhere. Soon 600 men were working day and night with shovels to excavate the snow down to the surface of the ice.

The snow was carried away on hand-drawn sleds. As it solidified it offered more and more resistance. Work went on like this through the New Year celebrations and into the first three weeks of January! Everyone regained hope and the stadium and its skating rink were ready 8 days before the opening of the Games. Alas, we rejoiced too soon. As often happens after a long period of good weather, the sky changed and a thaw set in. In those days when skating rinks were formed naturally and open to the sky, a thaw was dreaded by the winter resorts.

To make matters worse, it began to rain heavily.

The effect of the rain on the enormous mass of snow which covered the mountain was disastrous. An avalanche blocked the ministerial train at Planet, and another cut the line at Servoz.

As for the skating rink, it was transformed into a lake – a sight of unequalled desolation. All night we waited by the barometer and the thermometer, watching for the smallest sign that the thaw was ending.

Already there was talk of cancelling events, when, just in time, the freeze set in again.

The skaters were all present, waiting for days for the chance to train. There was no question of remaking the immense rink in one day. The curling rink, hastily reconstructed, was handed over and on this area of 2000 sq m I watched the staggering spectacle of figure skaters, speed skaters, hockey players turning tirelessly round and round as they trained as best they could, while Benoit Couttet and his men worked to put the finishing touches to the big stadium, where from hour to hour the ice became thicker, harder, smoother.

Chamonix and the French Olympic Committee heaved a sigh of relief – the Olympic Games would take place after all !

The opening ceremony went ahead as planned in an atmosphere of general euphoria after a demoralising week. The flags of 17 nations fluttered in the stadium breeze.

The parade formed in front of the Town Hall ; at its head, behind the municipal band, came the delegations from the society and constitutional bodies of Chamonix, followed by the official authorities, then the athletes and officials of the 17 nations represented. Mr. Lavaivre, Mayor of Chamonix, welcomed all the guests to Chamonix and the joyful cortege set off.

Once Count Clary had greeted the athletes and the authorities and thanked the local organisers, Mr. Gaston Vidal proclaimed the opening of the Games according to the solemn protocol.

The flag bearers formed a semi-circle around Adjutant Camille Mandrillon who took the Olympic oath on behalf of the athletes.

Then began the parade of the athletes. Nation followed nation in alphabetical order, headed by Austria, represented only by skaters, since at that time Alpine skiing was virtually unknown. Next came the Belgian hockey players, followed by Canada, Estonia, United States, Finland, France, Great Britain, Italy,



The officials and local delegations entered the stadium by the rue Joseph-Vallot and the Hassler footbridge over the Arve in front of the Hotel Beaulieu and reached the official stand.

The athletes went up to the Hotel de la Mer de Glace (now the hospital) and entered the stadium by the gate facing the Municipal Casino.

Once inside they lined up in an orderly fashion before the grandstand, where Mr. Gaston Vidal, the Secretary of State, awaited them.

Latvia, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

The majority of competitors were skaters.

Ice hockey was the premier sport at these first Winter Games. It had already been established at Antwerp. In skiing, a sparkling performance was expected from the Scandinavians. With the passing of time the recollection of this parade remains engraved on my memory, down to the smallest detail.

I recall the slight figure of a 12 year old girl, skipping along in a pleated skirt and a club blazer that was too big for her at the side of a blond giant in the Norwegian team. It was Sonia Hennie. From this modest beginning, began a dazzling career as a skater. Placed 8th at Chamonix, four years later at St-Moritz she came first, and kept her title for the next 10 years.

The weather remained fine, the cold was sharp and the snow excellent. All the events went ahead with perfect regularity.

France, as the host country, was represented in most events despite its feeble strength in these sports. In the speed skating we were represented by de Wilde, Gegout, Albert Hassler and Leon Quaglia. The latter had obtained the world record at Davos.

The 500 m was won by the American Jewthraw in 44 seconds, the 1500 m and the 5000 m by the astonishing Finnish skater Thunberg, the 10,000 m by his fellow countryman Skutnabb, while Leon Quaglia finished 7th, 19 seconds behind the winner.

He was classed in 6th place overall in the four combined events and received a diploma.

The figure skating event was won by the Austrian couple Szabo-Plank and the French couple Brunet-Joly brought us the bronze medal. The individual masculine title was carried off effortlessly by the Swede Grafstrom.

At the same time, the ski events went ahead in the valley on the perfectly traced runs amidst a setting of snow covered mountains.

The most important event was the 50 kilometre race. The course began at the stadium then went up as far as Charamillon, and came down again to Montquarts Bridge before returning to the stadium. It was a formidable one and brought the first gold medal to the ski king, the Norwegian Thorleif Haug, who accomplished the course in the record time of 3 hours 44 minutes 32 seconds. The event had thirty three entrants, amongst whom were the Frenchmen Pouteil-Noble (15th), Medy and Perrin (16th) and Bluffet (17th).

The Finns, who were the world titleholders and ran, as I remember, with very long sticks with handles made of reindeer antler, were crushed by the Norwegian coalition.

In the 18 kilometres, won by the same Thorleif Haug, there were also three entrants from Chamonix : Denis Couttet, Martial Payot and

Gilbert Ravel, and Vandelle and P. Simond from the Jura region.

Ravel came 20th out of 41 entrants.

On the day of the ski jumps, the first grand competition organised in France attracted almost 15,000 spectators to the site at Mont.

Training was also carried out at the Grépon site and it was there that I saw Prince Olaf, who was later to become King of Norway, jumping with his friends.

The ski jump competition itself had been something of a disappointment to the spectators. The jumping platform had been built for 60 metre jumps but following a decision by the jury, the run-up was not fully utilised, as the officials, impressed by the slope of the landing run, the longest in Europe at that time, voluntarily shortened the run-up.

The winner was the Norwegian Tullin Thams who, with two 49 m leaps, carried away the competition. The longest jump in the event was 50 m. France was represented by Kleber Balmat, who came 10th in the combined jump, 15th in the long jump, with 36 m and 39 m ; Martial Payot, Gilbert Ravel and Vandelle also represented France.

As everything had gone so well, the jury authorised attempts at longer distances and it was thus that the Norwegian Tullin Thams established a world record with a jump of 58 m 50 ! This may seem nothing to us today but caused a frenzy of admiration amongst the crowds then as even at Holmenkollen no one had jumped more than 50 m.

The big event of the Games, the Military Patrol, was entered by Switzerland, Finland, France, Poland and Italy.

To everyone's surprise, this event, over which the Finns had reigned supreme until then, was won by Switzerland, which beat Finland, with France finishing third with a very well-knit team commanded by Adjutant Mandrillon, comprised of soldiers Maurice Mandrillon, Georges Berthet and Vandelle.

The ice hockey tournament was, however, the king pin of the Olympic competition.

Incidentally, the modern day barriers which enclose the playing field were not known at that time and the surface of the playing area was marked out by a rectangle formed by 20 cm beams placed on the ice. Subsequently, as the puck was forever being sent out, thus provoking incessant interruptions in the game,



Sweden-Great Britain.



Helene Engelmann and Alfred Berger (AUT).



Thams (NOR).



Clas Thunberg and Julius Skutnabb (FIN).



Start of a 500 m race.



Sonja Henie (NOR).

beams were replaced by the barriers which we know today, thus changing in an instant the speed and tactic of the game.

There were 9 nations entered for the hockey tournament, and the finalists were Canada and the United States. As had been expected, the tournament was won by Canada, which beat the United States in an Homeric match, while Great Britain took third place, Sweden fourth, and France and Yugoslavia tied for fifth. An honorable result for France, and one which we would very much like to repeat !

Our ice hockey team was an enthusiastic, mixed bunch, from the veteran Parisian Del Valle, 41 years of age, to 20 year olds Albert Hassler, Charles Lavaivre and Gérard Simond.

The captain was the Parisian de Rauch, and the other players were André Charlet, Charpentier, Chaudron, Raoul Couvert, Del Valle, Hassler, Charles Lavaivre, the little Monnard, known as Bobby and the big Léon Quaglia, Calixte and Philippe Payot and Gérard Simond.

The youthfulness of these hockey players allows us the pleasure to see many of them present here today and we would like to offer them, as we do the skiers of this fine period, our warmest wishes for a long life, in which they have accomplished so much.

Let us also recall the curling matches, where Great Britain triumphed over Sweden and France, and come to the bobsleigh event on the run at Pèlerin. With its 19 bends, vertically banked and frozen by water sprays, it was a formidable and even murderous course. The competition was won by Switzerland, with Great Britain second, Belgium third, and France in fourth place with the bob of Aldebert, André, André Berg and Aulan.

On 5th February, the events came to an end amidst the general euphoria engendered by the wonderful weather and the cold. The closing ceremony was marked by a solemn speech by Baron de Coubertin.

From now on, the Winter Games were part of the Olympic Family. Even the Scandinavians, who had been hostile to their introduction at first, sportingly accepted that winter games had never before provoked such enthusiasm and brought Nordic skiing to a wider audience.

Chamonix's success was complete, although the town paid dearly in terms of sacrifice and anxiety in making the preparations.

Henceforth, Chamonix would be classed as the number one winter sports resort, exciting

the emulation which would be transformed. four years later, into the even greater success of the Games at Saint Moritz.

Before they broke up, the members of the International Olympic Committee awarded the Olympic Mounting prize to Colonel Strutt, leader of the first English expeditions to Everest. I do not know whether this prize which was a traditional feature of the early Games, was still awarded subsequently. If not, what a pity ! It was an award for unselfish effort, for the discovery of the mountains of the globe.

An effort in line with the rules of the Olympic Games. All this may seem old hat nowadays, since one after another the 14 8000 m of the globe have been conquered !

The Games at Chamonix are half a century old.

The Games at Montreal have yet to come. May I make a wish for them ? May I wish that they should have the freshness, I almost said naivety of the Chamonix Games, and also their simplicity. May the gigantism which wishes to convey national superiority be excluded, so that the Olympic Games, may simply be an occasion for the young people of the whole world to get to know each other better.

R. F. R.

