

POLO

SHOULD THE SPORT OF POLO RETURN TO THE OLYMPIC ROSTER?

By Bridget McArdle McKinney

FROM THE SUMMER OLYMPICS IN PARIS IN 1900 TO THE 1936 GAMES OF THE XI OLYMPIAD IN BERLIN POLO WAS INCLUDED IN THE SUMMER OLYMPICS AS AN OFFICIAL SPORT IN COMPETITION. SEVENTY YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THEN AND IT'S TIME TO ASK WHY THIS PHYSICALLY DEMANDING, THRILLING, CROWD-PLEASING TEAM SPORT PLAYED BY ATHLETES OF THE HIGHEST CALIBER IN SCORES OF COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD IS NO LONGER NUMBERED AMONG THE ELITE OLYMPIC SPORTS AND, FURTHER, TO ASK WHETHER IT SHOULD BE RETURNED TO THAT STATUS

The first Olympic polo tournament to be played premiered at the 1900 Summer Olympics in Paris. This was the first Olympics to include horse sports. Polo was contested at nearly every Olympics except during the war years until 1936, the last time polo was to appear on the programme.

The situation remained in this moribund state for many years. It was thought that Great Britain might have weighed in on a return of polo for the 1948 Summer Olympics which London hosted, but alas the Hurlingham polo fields had been requisitioned for public use during the war. It was not until the late 1970's and early 1980's that measures were taken to start the process of reclaiming eligibility to compete in the Olympics.

First, the national polo associations had to come together and create an international federation to govern the sport as a prerequisite to consideration for recognition by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Thus, in 1983 the Federation of International Polo (FIP) was born and has since dreamed of reintroducing polo as an Olympic event. After years of campaigning finally in 1996, the IOC decided to designate polo as a "recognised sport" and in 1998 the IOC granted the sport "outright recognition", which makes polo eligible for reintroduction. Poised to be brought back into the Olympics family with all eligibility requirements met, what has prevented polo from stepping onto the Olympic field?

Well, it's complicated. The IOC is an enormous multi-faceted machine that runs on the interplay of national interests, international interests, logistics, diplomacy, and the love of sport, an incredibly intricate balance of myriad factors, not one of which actually predominates. Here are some of the arguments surrounding the inclusion of polo in the Olympics:

Polo is expensive. This is a fair statement of fact. To put together a team of players, a string of ponies, transportation, and all of the necessary support for a polo tournament is very expensive, make no mistake. And the costs to the host country in building stabling and preparing and maintaining playing fields cannot be underestimated. But costs could be reduced by adopting rules reducing the number of players and chukkas, and reducing the field of finalists through regional qualifiers, in addition to the costs which might be saved if a FIP World Cup-type system were embraced. In any event all Olympic team sports are going to entail higher expense than individual competitors and if national teams are able to drum up financial support to cover these expenses, then why should the expense per se be an obstacle to inclusion?

Polo doesn't attract crowds needed for ticket sales and sponsorships. Of course, the IOC must aim to be self-sustaining and the host countries need the maximum attendance and sponsorships in order to at least cover the costs of building and maintaining the facilities and providing security. But if the enthusiastic sold-out crowds at Deauville for the World Equestrian Games Exhibition Polo in 2014 are anything to go by (see, Horse Times, "Polo in Deauville", 6 September 2014), there is a strong appetite for this hard-hitting breath-taking sport.

There are so many polo players, patrons and fans around the world vigorously promoting polo and bringing these special sporting events to the general public. Polo players and celebrities such as Sunny Hale, Mohammed Al Habtoor, Nacho Figueras, Prince Henry, and so many others, as well as local and regional polo clubs and the major polo associations are working hard to open doors and make the events fun and family-inclusive. FIP, in particular, has been robust in efforts towards inclusive outreach. Indeed, FIP's stated principal aim is to enhance the image and status of polo internationally and to promote the practice of the sport of polo worldwide. So the ball is rolling.

And it must be said that there are probably many Olympic sports which only gather an entourage of family and friends, but that does not disqualify them from consideration as worthy of continued Olympic recognition.



Mallets at the ready: the bronze-winning British polo team at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games

Polo has other venues for international competition.

The Federation of International Polo (FIP) holds an international championship tournament which is specifically suited to polo competition by national teams. Since 1987 the FIP World Championship has been held once every 3 years in a different location around the world. It's a competitive tournament from 10 to 14 goals. Horses are provided by the host and pooled among participating nations to give teams equal conditions.

In addition, the World Equestrian Games also might provide a home for international polo competition for national teams, having taken baby steps by including a polo exhibition at the 2014 WEG. So, in fact there are suitable opportunities and venues to test the national polo teams.

However, two responses come to mind in respect of this argument. First, there are plenty of Olympic sports, perhaps most, that have independent inter-nations competition, including swimming, skiing, and ice skating,

just to name a few. Second, there is something very special about "climbing Mt. Olympus" that independent world championships can never offer; no matter how many Cups one wins, it's not like taking a bite of a gold medal on the podium for your country before the whole world as an Olympian.

The Basics. Although there is probably a lot more here than meets the eye, it seems to me that the biggest obstacle to the inclusion of polo in the Olympics lies not primarily in the IOC, but rather within the various national and international entities governing polo. Over 30 years ago national polo associations created a unified international polo association, FIP, but unless the members can come together and present a clear, practical, unified vision of how they see polo in the Olympics, with specific details on special rules and structure of play, then there really doesn't seem to be anything solid for the IOC to consider. Sadly, as matters stand, for a spot on the Olympic roster polo is on the same footing as frisbee! 🐾

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