

## USOC President Douglas MacArthur and His Olympic Moment, 1927-1928

John A. Lucas\*

The United States Olympic Committee (USOC), from the inception of the Twentieth Century and through the years of the so-called Great War (1914-1918), was called the American Olympic Committee (AOC), and it met infrequently, only during the year of the Olympic Games (1900, 1904, 1906, 1908, 1912) and always in New York City. The great universities of America in concert with a score or more athletic clubs recruited athletes, trained them, nurtured them in local, national and even some international competitions, and several months before the Olympic Games delivered the young men to the AOC for transport overseas. The strange arrangement worked for nearly twenty years, but the war years and post-war disfunctions resulted in wholly unsatisfactory arrangements in organizing and sending an American Olympic team of men and women to war-ravaged Antwerp, Belgium in 1920. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to call the AOC lack of preparation an organizational disaster. Something had to be done and in 1919-1920 the AOC became the American Olympic Association (AOA) and rewarded the person who had worked the hardest for the change - Gustavus Town Kirby (1874-1956) - as president of the organization, serving until 1922, when Colonel Robert Means Thompson (1849-1930) began a familiar, but unfamiliar role as Olympic committee president. Thompson had served as AOC leader from 1912 until America's entry into the war, and then, at age 73, became the full-time president of the AOA, a trying time for the elderly but vigorous multimillionaire Annapolis graduate. He took the American team to Paris in 1924, returned home pleased but exhausted, and turned over the AOA presidency in 1926, to 39-year old, William Christopher Prout (1886-1927), a veteran Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) man, and prominent Boston lawyer-banker. He served for the shortest time and died suddenly on August 4, 1927. It couldn't have come at a worse time, as major preparations had begun to send a winning American team to the Second Olympic Winter Games in St. Moritz, Switzerland, and the Games of the Ninth Olympiad in Amsterdam, Holland - both in the year 1928. An immediate and intense search by the AAU and the AOA began, and a young general of the Armies, on leave of absence, was selected. Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) took charge and immediately set the agenda for his athletic "army" - to win the double Olympic Games a year from his ascendancy.

\* John A. Lucas is Professor of Sport Science at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, USA.

## General MacArthur and His Olympic Commitment, 1927-1928

For twenty years, at West Point, and later, as a rising star in the American Army, Douglas MacArthur supported competitive athletics for men. U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General Charles P. Summerall gave his junior officer permission to accept the Olympic committee presidency because, as Summerall correctly gauged: "Favorable publicity might accrue to the Army from MacArthur's [Olympic] participation." In his autobiographical *Reminiscences*, MacArthur recalled that "General Summerall agreed to place me on detached service" and in so doing serve the nation in a different way. "I had never lost my keen interest in sports, and attention had been attracted by the intramural system of athletic training which had been installed at West Point during my tour as superintendent . . . a system largely adopted by the leading colleges of the country..." remembered MacArthur.

The 47 year-old MacArthur was fully aware of growing tensions between the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the AAU, and the AOA. It was another challenge for the highly intelligent, imperial army officer, who found the non-war years of the 1920's "a spiritual desert." The phrase was that of William Manchester, who wrote in his *American Caesar*.

Like Charles de Gaulle and Winston Churchill, he [MacArthur] had come to regard the late 1920's as a spiritual desert. He needed something to engage his attention, and in mid-September 1927 an unexpected opportunity arrived.

The general's considerable knowledge of high-level athletics, his twenty years of administrative experience, and his authoritarian commanding presence helped pull together a strong American Olympic team. "We had frequent mini-victory speeches by General MacArthur on our Atlantic crossing aboard the S.S. Roosevelt," remembered Raymond Conger, American 1500 meter champion, in an interview I had with him and his wife Bernice, in 1993. Mrs. Conger was on the trip to the Amsterdam Olympic games as chaperone to the first American women's track and field team. "We all feared and admired the general," they both agreed. MacArthur had helped forge an effective, although temporary coalition of NCAA, intercollegiate track and field (IC4A), AAU, and Olympic committee forces - an unbeatable army of American Olympians, he said. "I told them," MacArthur recalled, that "We represent the greatest nation in the world." He continued to challenge them about individual and the country's manifest destiny:

We have not come so far just to lose gracefully, but rather to win, and win decisively. I rode them hard all along the line. Athletes are among the most temperamental of all persons, but I stormed and pleaded and cajoled. We have not come 3,000 miles just to lose gracefully.

Once in Amsterdam, the Americans found formidable opponents, more so than at any previous Olympic Games. The Germans, all the Scandinavian countries (especially Finland), Britain, Canada, Italy, and even Japan, sent superb athletes. Of

course the Yanks won a great many gold, silver, and bronze medals. MacArthur never let up, and when the U.S. boxing team manager threatened to withdraw from the competition over what he regarded as an unfair decision, MacArthur refused, snapping back "Americans never quit." One journalist, who failed to identify himself, wrote that MacArthur's sessions with coaches and managers "had about the same chilling spiritual temperature as a bank director's meeting." Altogether, the general's approach to these Olympian Games was to treat them as a national crisis, a patriotic "war without weapons."

MacArthur hailed America's experience at Amsterdam as "victorious," and graciously received from Holland's Queen Wilhelmina "some beautiful MacArthur red roses named after the general's father." Setting foot back on American soil, MacArthur exclaimed:

Our victorious team returned to New York with the plaudits of the Country ringing in our ears. The team was feted from coast to coast, both the press and my superiors being most generous.

Of course, MacArthur submitted a report to the American commanding officer, the President of the United States, President Calvin Coolidge. History does not record his reaction to the general's letter. Here is a small portion:

Dear Mr. President:

In undertaking this difficult task, I recall the passage in Plutarch wherein Themistocles, being asked whether he would rather be Achilles or Homer, replied: 'Which would you rather be, a conqueror in the Olympic Games or the crier who proclaims who are conquerors?' No words of mine can even remotely portray such great moments as the resistless onrush of that matchless California eight as it swirled and crashed down the placid waters of the Sloten; that indomitable will for victory which marked the deathless rush of Barbuti; that sparkling combination of speed and grace by Elizabeth Robinson which might have rivalled even Artemis herself on the heights of Olympus. The American team worthily represented the best traditions of American sportsmanship and chivalry. Imperturbable in defeat, modest in victory, its conduct typified fair play, courtesy and courage... 'Athletic America' is a telling phrase. It is talismanic. It suggests health and happiness. It arouses national pride and kindles anew the national spirit. In its fruition it means a more sturdy, a more self-reliant, a more self-helping people... Nothing has been more characteristic of the genius of the American people than is their genius for Athletics. Nothing is more synonymous of our national success than is our national success in athletics. If I were required to indicate today that element of American life which is most characteristic of our nationality, my finger would unerringly point to our athletic escutcheon.

‘To set the cause above renown  
 To love the game beyond the prize,  
 To honor, as you strike him down,  
 The foe that comes with fearless eyes.  
 To count the life of battle good,  
 And dear the land that gave you birth,  
 And dearer yet the brotherhood  
 That binds the brave of all the earth.’

With expressions of respect and regard, I remain, my dear Mr. President,

Very cordially yours,  
 Douglas MacArthur  
 President, American Olympic Committee

When popular American journalist of that day, Bob Considine, read MacArthur’s report, he wrote: “He dipped his pen into his purple ink pot, his gorgeous report probably confounded Calvin Coolidge.” MacArthur’s immediate superior, General Summerall, was almighty proud and delighted with MacArthur’s brief interlude as Olympic committee president, and wrote him: “I can best voice what is universally recognized that you alone are responsible for cementing the bonds between disorganized and factional organizations.” In any case, General Douglas MacArthur’s brief and somewhat extraordinary one year leave of absence was over, and he returned to even more familiar duties in the Pacific Theatre. Waiting in the wings for his chance at Olympic leadership was the equally formidable, but less flamboyant and eloquent, the 1912 Olympian, Avery Brundage.

In closing, the author wishes to refer the reader to the following sources upon which much of the discussion above rests and which, in general, capture Douglas MacArthur’s “moment” in Olympic history.

Frederick W. Rubien, “MacArthur Elected to AOC Executive Board,” *AOC Report Ninth Olympic Games 1928*, pages 9-15.

D. Clayton James, “Olympus and Beyond.” Chapter 12, volume 1, *The Years of MacArthur* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), pages 325-331, and page 673.

Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), pages 86-87.

Douglas MacArthur, “A Father’s Prayer,” *The Christian Science Sentinel*, 73 (July 31, 1971), 1356.

Douglas MacArthur to General Palmer Pierce; telegram dated July 14, 1928; reproduced in *The New York Times*, July 14, 1928, p.8.

Vorin E. Whan, ed. *A Soldier speaks: Public Papers and Speeches of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur* (New York: Praeger Pub., 1965) pages 23-29.

Bob Considine, *It's All News to Me. A Reporter's Deposition* (New York: Meredith Press, 1967), pages 267-270.

Richard H. Rovere and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The General and the President and the Future of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951), pages 30-31.

MacArthur's extraordinary report to the President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge; see note number one, *AOC Report 1928*, pages 1-7.

Gavin Long, *MacArthur as Military Commander* (London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1969), p. 37.

William Manchester, *American Caesar. Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1978), pages 137- 141.

Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 1065.

Gustavus Town Kirby to Avery Brundage; letter dated November 7, 1930. "MacArthur must be stopped at all costs in any effort to re-gain AOC presidency." See Avery Brundage Collection, Boxes 29-30.