

Some Case Studies on How Media Constructs Olympic Legends

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Abstract

During the entire history of the modern Olympic Games, from their renaissance in 1896, when the first edition had been held in Athens and until the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, the present paper makes an analyse of the real facts and of the legends created around them. The sports journal and the other publications are important factors in the distortion of the reality and keeping the legend. From the athletes heroes like Spiridon Louis, the first winner of the marathon and the myth build around the way of winning this race, to the story of the 100m won by Jesse Owens at 36 Olympic Games who have been held in Berlin and the fact that Hitler refused to shake the hand of the Olympic champion, the purpose of this paper is to combat the myths developed since. The facts are substantiated by using the chronological datas, using the notes and minutes of meetings, as well using photographic means.

Keywords: *sport, history, olympism, myth, legends.*

Rezumat

De-a lungul istoriei Jocurilor Olimpice moderne, de la renașterea lor în 1896, când a avut loc prima ediție la Atena și până la Jocurile Olimpice de la Berlin din 1936, lucrarea de față face o trecere în revistă atât a faptelor reale cât și a legendelor create în jurul lor. Presa sportivă și publicațiile de gen sunt factori importanți în menținerea legendei și distorsionarea realității. De la eroi sportivi precum Spiridon Louis, primul câștigător al maratonului și mitul creat în jurul modului câștigării cursei la povestea câștigării probei de 100m de către Jesse Owens la Jocurile Olimpice din 1936 și a faptului că Hitler a refuzat să dea mâna cu el, scopul lucrării este de a demonta aceste mituri. Prin folosirea datelor cronologice, a însemnărilor și minutelor ședințelor, la fel ca și mijloacelor fotografice se argumentează faptele enunțate în lucrare.

Cuvinte cheie: *sport, istorie, olimpism, mit, legend*

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I was pleased to hear I have the opportunity to refer about the Olympic legends. I always fought against all these legends, which are often just fairytales and always tried to show, the sometimes more exciting and correct view of the reality. Due to the fast speed of changes, this was often an effort in vain. A lot of our journalistic colleagues just quickly copy the stories out of their Olympic books, which appeared 20 years ago to make sure that the historical articles will appear before the beginning of the games. It should not be forgotten to mention, that the facts were often correctly described in scientific publications. Anyhow we should not give up our hope. Sometimes historical facts push through. It is difficult to find somewhere else so many myths and stories talking about the Olympic champion of 1896 and the discipline of marathon. In the following we see him in an uniform of the Evzones. It is a picture which was taken after his victory. And below the coloured sketch of John Makropoulos, who crosses the finish line like Louis, appears. There must be a rule somewhere in the Olympic Charta that I have not found it yet: what dictates that Olympic Marathons always have to take place in the heat of August. The poor athletes are forced to bear the 35-40 degrees Celsius. In 1896 the Games took place in April 10th and it was bitterly cold. Even the rowing competitions were cancelled the day before. It was definitely not the first marathon as we can see. Either the Greeks made two preparations for the marathon, which were titled marathon. In England runs of 25 or 26 miles were not a rarity. Louis, with his 2:48:50h, did not run a world record; this was already postulated since 1885 with 2:39:39h. It is not true, that Louis became tired during the run and that he took a rest under a tree to have a fifteen minute nap or went into a coffee shop (Kafeneion) for a fifteen minutes break, drank a Rezina (Greek wine) and had a chat with the guests about his

winning chances. What for a World Record would have occurred if this was true?

What was his profession? Was he a soldier, a farmer, a labourer, a water sprite or a postman? For once the stories are nearly correct! He practiced all of these professions. He was a soldier. He earned his daily bread as a poor labourer on farms. On Sunday he sold water in Athens and earned a couple of Drachmes (Greek money) when he distributed letters. One of the legends, the most beautiful of those, is true: the love story. Louis was attracted by a rich farmer's daughter Heleni Kontoi. The family was not very impressed by a wedding with this poor devil. But after his marathon victory, Louis became a popular hero, so the parents finally gave Heleni their permission to marry. Two movies about this opera soap came out in the US. The female protagonist in the first one was performed by this woman. Who knows her? The movies show her dressed a bit more decently. Unfortunately I could not get hold of a picture, which shows Jane Mansfield as Heleni. The second movie, produced by Gary Allison, Heleni and even Louis could look like both in reality. I visited the family 15 years ago in Marussi (name of a village).

Time and again the assertion raised up, that this was the start of the 100m final. This picture attracts because it shows different starting positions. With a bit more effort the original photo from the final run could have been found. Further the Magazine *Sport im Bild* mentioned under the above picture "Second 100 m start of the run". It is unpleasant that the company *Pro Sport* proposed the idea to sell this as a 1896 picture. A quick check of the *Athletic Yearbook* of 1907 would have been enough to find out that this was a caster of the Second International Olympic Games 1906 in Athens.



Figure 1. Spiridon Louis, the first winner of the marathon

The similar temple entrance in the background clearly shows a relation to 1906. I cannot remember how many colleagues approached me with the amazing news of newly discovered pictures from 1896. I am already sure in advance, that they are talking about 1906 pictures.

Within the period stipulated, I received this 1906 photo for my presentation in the Olympic Review, the IOC magazine.

Let us come to the medals and decorations! Today it must be difficult for a sports historian to understand, that the organizer of 1896 requested a gold-, silver- and bronze medal for the Olympic Games. Due to the fact, that gold was a rare commodity, the medals in Athens were made of silver. In accordance to that time the runners up were also rewarded with a copper medal.

But gold-, silver- and bronze medals were copied. Further several decoration, diploma olive twigs and cups existed. Thomas Burke, winner on the 100- and 400m distance, was at pains to handle his devotionals. On the left side below we can see the cup, which was sponsored for the Marathon.

As we talk about the subject regarding the environment of the games, one sentence about the measurements. In the result schedules of the past Games you often find times like for example 11, 2°sec. This is almost always wrong. Where could they have found clocks, which could count a tenth second in this time? These chronometers could count a fifth- or quarter second. So 11 °2/5 sec would be correct. Of course 11, 25 sec is also wrong. An electronic measurement did not exist, so 11¼° sec is correct. Sometimes it should be written instead of 11, 6°sec “two feet behind”. In Athens the organizers only had two watches for example. One of these often did not work properly; so the distance to the third and fourth were indicated in feet or yards. Also the Olympic Games in 1912 in Stockholm did not have ability to measure this electronically. This assertion still could not have been weeded out. It is true that an electric watch was used, but this stop watch was operated by hand. And now we have arrived at the Olympic Games 1900 in Paris. Even here I have to start with the marathon. This discipline is a lethal competition, in which very few make it – today there are “just” several hundred thousand a year. It is a very tempting topic for every single sports journalist to spread interesting stories.

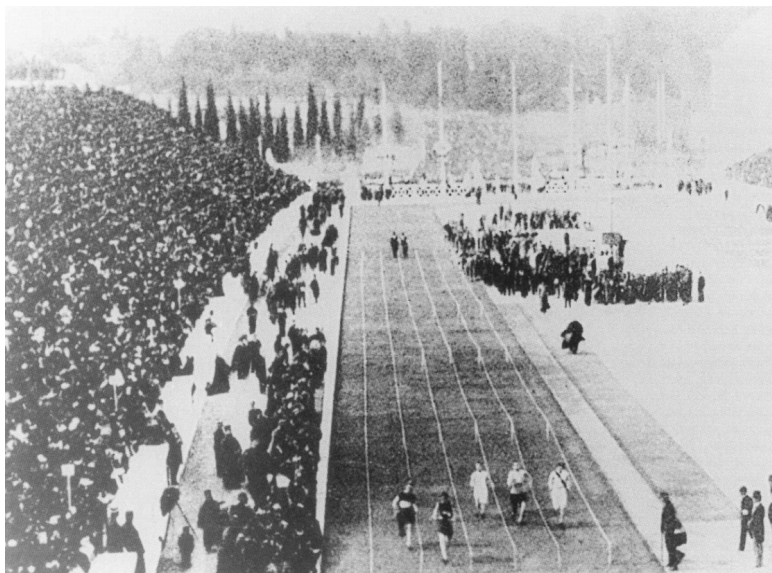


Figure 2. The first edition of Olympic Games, Athens, 1896 (from: Carl DIEM, *Olympische Flamme*, 1942, p. 235)

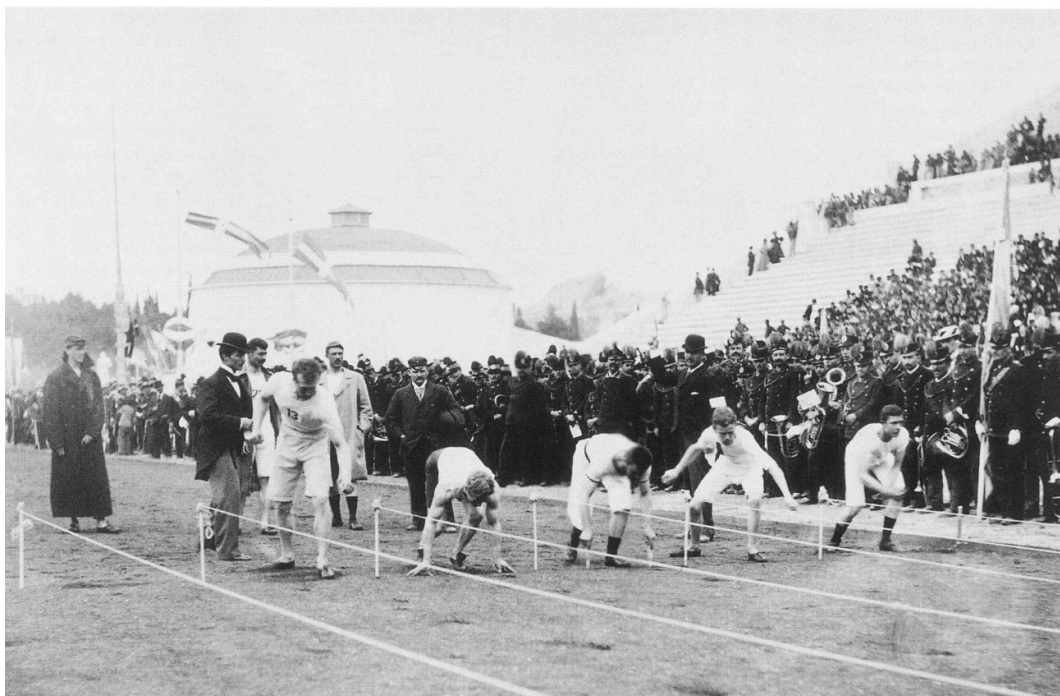


Figure 3. Sport im Bild: „Start to the second heat about 100 m“ 15th May 1896, p. 326

In 1900 a certain Michel Théato won. He was a French baker, who distributed rolls every morning and in consequence knew the circuit perfectly well. Nobody took notice of the fact that he found a way to

take a shortcut. In reality he came from Luxembourg, as a foreign worker, not a baker but a carpenter. There are no rolls in France. In the morning the French buy their baguettes on their own.

I would be pleased to meet the baker, who serves his clients running every morning in a 40 km district. By the way the distance - which is highway ring today - included six control points. The runners were never alone. Every runner, like Théato with the number 3, was accompanied by someone else, who ran a part with him and there were several cyclists, among them even journalists! Anyhow the other comments are correct.

Now I will come up with a real nice example. The athletic competitions took place in the Bois de Boulogne on the ground of the noble Racing Clubs.

Hardly changed until today! There were meadows and very old trees in the surrounding area. In almost all the Olympic books you can see this photo, accompanied by the comment: *"This is an unusable ground, the disks become entangled by the branches!"* The winner from Hungary Rudolf Bauer, threw 36, 04° m. In the background there are in the first place the spectators and behind them the trees are visible.

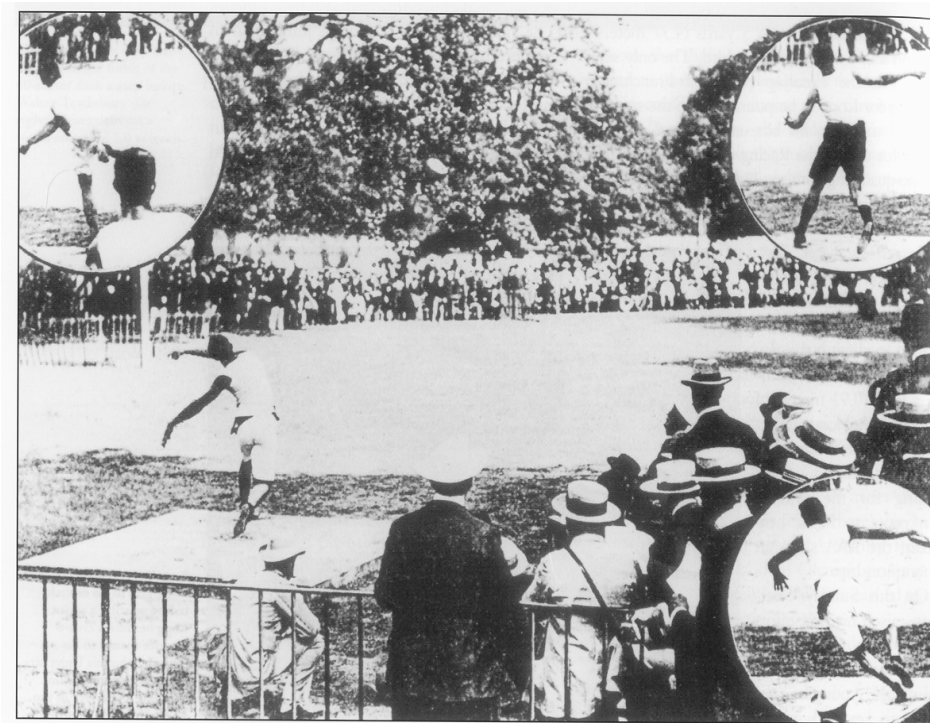


Figure 4. Paris 1900, "Diskusses in the trees", Rudolf Bauer (HUN), 36.04m

Bauer's disc might have landed at around 2/3 the length of the meadow. I was the so called fact checker or lets translate it with the "legend killer" for the movement of a 25 volume history of the Olympic Games. Without success I tried to modify this text. The writer of *Time Life* was so in love with this story that it had to be true. Nearly every book about the

Games in 1900 contains the information, that no spectators were present and that the athletes had to run on grass, which was considered as awful. Did Boris not play on grass when he won in Wimbledon? You still find athletic grass grounds in England. By the way the track in Paris still exists today, and as you can see it was used by these joggers a few years

ago. It is an impossibility that nobody knew how a decent stadium must look like. In the antiquity you just ran straight forward. The stadiums in 1896 were reconstructed so that you had to run very narrow curves. The organizers in 1908 in London believed that they finally found the right measurements. In this construction, which included a huge playing ground, a 100 m long swimming pool, a third mile long running track and a 660 yards long cycling track nearly everything could be done. At that time also other disciplines like gymnastics, wrestling, boxing and weight lifting were carried on outside. The disadvantage: the spectators on the south curve were not able to see what happened in the north curve without field glasses. Not until in 1912 when in Stockholm the actual format of today was fixed. Nearly no author wanted to accept, that there were no regatta at sailing competitions, but every other competition – also in the same class – had to be scored separately.

Except the bigger ships, which cruised in front of Le Havre had a regatta lasting three days. As in football: four games with a french team against foreign teams were planned, where So that there were a few Olympic champions in each just two of them met. Every game was concluded by a presentation ceremony. Since then it is nearly impossible for every football journalist to reconstruct the first three winners of the competition. This is the same for both rugby games. Unfortunately there are no photos about those two football matches so I have taken in substitute the French rugby teams. In this place I can point out the first coloured Olympic winner. Probably you will always read, that the first coloured medal winner first became third in hurdling in 1904 in St. Louis. Today it is difficult for us to imagine, that there were 21 balloon racing competitions and 16 disciplines in taxi driving and 3 – and 4 wheeled motor cars...



Figure 5. St. Louis 1904, Anthropology Days

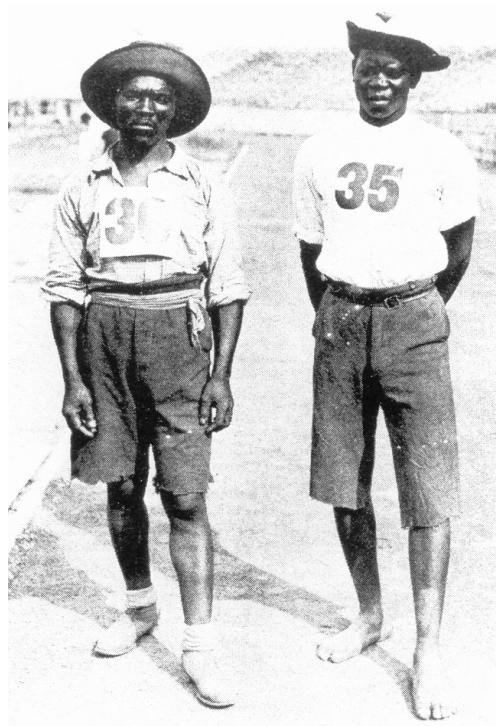


Figure 6. St. Louis 1904, Anthropology Days

When you consider the reports about the Games of St Louis in 1904 everybody was shocked about the Anthropological Days, where natives from different regions started. It was awful, that the white race wanted to demonstrate, full of arrogance, its superiority in the sportive area.

The Olympic Games anyhow did not have too much to do with this. This was an event of the department of World Ethnological Exposition. Unfortunately this happened not only in 1904. In 20th century “themed wild life” were showed time and again at fairs and circuses. The last time pygmies were showed like animals in the zoo in an exhibition was in Brussels in 1958.

Those both gentlemen you saw there on the right were two workers at the world exhibition. At these anthropological days Zulu-“Kaffer” from South Africa, who started, or were forced, to participate in the marathon of the “right Olympic Games” and finished at least ninth or twelfth. The gentleman on the right, the winner Thomas Hicks, who was totally exhausted, was then taken for examination. The doctors, who accompanied in the car experimented with him and gave him drugs. They drugged him, as they were convinced, that no human being would be able to run a marathon without such support. They took careful note of exactly what they gave him and placed this in their report. You will read everywhere that they fed him with strychnine sulphate, the salt of strychnine. They indicated even the amount. Hicks received 1/60 Grain. What is a Grain? A Grain is a chemist’s weight unit. Converted it means 0,0648 gr. And 1/60 Grain is about 1/1000 gr. Our colleagues translated “Grain” with “Gram” so Hicks took became twice the dose, which was an absolutely lethal amount, more or less the 15th dose. Nobody forgets to mention, that the American Fred Lorz gave up, drove a couple of kilometers by car, got off the car then and trotted into the stadium to

finish the race. But nearly nobody reports, that he had shouted loudly: *“I am not the winner, I got off earlier.”* Who knows about the fact that he won the marathon one year later in Boston – by running?

Just one additional sentence about the Olympic Games in Athens 1906! It is strange that they are considered time and again as intermediate Games. But they did not have this name. Anyhow they were very important for the continued existence of the Olympic Games. After the problems, which occurred in 1900 in Paris and 1904 in St. Louis the end of the Olympic movement was indicated. If the Games in 1906 would not have been the first ones, where the world’s elite participated and where the nations marched in and where only representatives of the NOK participated and where the IOC – in absence of Coubertin – came to an agreement with the NOK to carry out the games two years later in London. If this had not been the case we would know nearly nothing about the Olympics and we would not be where we are today.

This gentleman, a devoted christian, ran in the Olympic Games 1908 with a Bible in his hand to protest against a start which was on a Sunday. He won the race with the excellent time of 15 sec. But the final was on a Saturday and no competitions took place on Sundays in 1908. Smithsonian demonstrated with the help of a cardboard cut out as a support to show the correct posture of the upper part of the body to overcome the hurdles. And an another indication! In London the first Olympic Winter Games took place. At least the competitions of rugby, football, lacrosse, boxing, hockey and figure skating were called so. The winter sports did not start first in 1924. Until 1928 they often took place for several months with many interruptions. At first the Olympic congress in 1930 in Berlin reformed the program and fixed a period of 16 days, like we are used to today. Yes, let’s stay in London for a bit. Of

course it is a must to deal with the breakdown of the Italian by the name of Dorando Pietri and not Pietri Dorando. He is always known as a baker or better known today as a pizza baker. But in fact he was a butcher's assistant. Most of the German speaking authors do not know, that butchers in France and Italy offer pies, and sausage meat spread, which has not so much to do with the art of baking. At best the amount of bread is too high, like our meatballs. The gentleman did not come from Capri, but from Carpi close to Modena. Why 42,195 km were run? Everything possible and impossible was written. It was very easy after all. The marathon was supposed to be 25 miles at that time. In the USA and in England this had already been established for a long time. The organizer was asked to start in Windsor. The Royals and their children at that time wanted to observe the start from the terrace of the castle. Those responsible estimated a distance of 25 miles to that point. But the result of the correct measurements was a starting point in Barnespool bridge, close to Eton, about a mile away from Windsor and definitely unsuitable. According to the motto – people who are able to run 25 miles will be able to run a bit more” – the distance was lengthened to 26 miles. By the way the idea occurs in the surveyor's mind, that it was necessary to run from the stadium entrance to the royal lodge, which was the finish line: so 26 miles and 385 yards or 42.195 km. And this can be found in any book. Since then the marathon has been 42.195 km. By no means! The amateurs still ran 25 miles. Dorando Pietri, who broke down and was also disqualified because of drug consumption, and the winner – the American John Hayes – used the moment and started in a rematch marathon in the Madison Square Garden against each other. Of course the distance of 26 miles and 385 yards must be respected. The start of only two runners is too boring

so more runners were necessary. For years a professional's circus toured the world and ran 26 miles and 385 yards. The amateurs joined the competition time after time, but only in 1921 the IAAF fixed the actual length of 42,195 km. People were too stupid to run the 400 m on marked out tracks. Why should they? No problems had occurred until that moment. The change of rules comes only when there is a necessity. In London there was a naughty American who hindered a Briton in running. The US-Boy was disqualified and the run was repeated. Because of several arguments between British and American athletes, lanes were drawn for the second finale, which are still used to this day. To be honest it would not have been necessary. The both US-runners Robbins and Taylor showed solidarity with Carpenter and did not start. The Briton Wyndham Halswelle had to run alone and won in consequence. The development in swimming was similar. On the 100 meters long pool the swimmers often lost their sense of direction and hindered the adversary. So here also fixed lanes were soon introduced. We should not make fun of these ridiculous controls. Who knows how underdeveloped we will be considered in fifty years when further rules and modifications will be set to guarantee equality. Let's get to this gentleman, who seemed, like many photos show, always old. But there are nevertheless several pictures, which show him as a sportive guy. He has this attribute in common with "Turnvater" (the father of gymnastics) Jahn, who looked already in 1811 with his 33 years like 70. Coubertin was not a saint like he was often described. He would have felt very much at home in the husbandry (cliques) of Cologne. An example: We read everywhere, that Germany as the loser of the First World War was excluded from the Olympic Games between 1920 and 1924. From whom and how was it done? What happened really? In 1919

the IOC met for the first time after the war. Only 9 out of 35 members were present, 5 of them were winner nations. To avoid the participation of especially German athletes the decision was taken, that only nations, which were represented by a member of the IOC were allowed to participate at the Games. But Germany was represented by two members, who were not invited by Coubertin. So these gentlemen simply took the decision to create a new member list and forgot the representatives of the loser nations: Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey. It is strange, that Coubertin mailed a circular, where he praised the lifelong membership. Two years later all of them, except Germany, were condescendingly admitted. When Coubertin wrote his *Olympic Memories* he probably was embarrassed so he declared both German members dead although they only died in 1922 and 1931.

Let's go back to the decorations. It took a long development, not before 1924, that the gilded, silver and bronze medals were allotted as we know them today. At least since 1928 the obverse of the medal remained unchanged, which was designed by the sculptor Giuseppe Cassiolo, even though he was considered a second class artist by the Italians. I still can't understand how relationships can be seen between gladiator fights, hounding of animals and the Christians burning in the Coliseum in Rome and the Olympic Idea. Finally 2004 in Athens a new label was accepted. But the text "*XXVII. Olympiad*" is still incorrect. Between 1906 and 1920 the IOC made great efforts to get back the 24 undamaged challenge prizes, which were mostly not of high artistic value. They had been often donated from royal families. In 1924 they were eventually returned to the Olympic collection. No doubt in a short time I will receive the first mails from the USA, where approval will surely be demanded, that this

gentleman had invented the torch run. Doubt and anger are on the order of the day, when I point out, that it was this guy, Carl Diem. Unfortunately I have to disappoint those, who still believe, that he was a Nazi.

So we have arrived at the Nazis-Olympics?! It happens quiet often, that this photo is used as evidence for Hitler's Games supervision. Can we blame this wicked demagogue and dictator to take the opportunity in following his crowned predecessors (bottom right 1906, but also 1908, 1912, 1920 and 1928) to receive the homage, as the athletes march in? It was not 100,000 Germans, who shouted "Heil" (German Nazi salute) and lifted their arms. A third of the spectators were foreigners. Today the gentlemen and sometimes ladies have to be severely guarded when they use the supplier's entrance and when they speak the opening words behind bullet proof glass. Why did journalists and functionaries become so angry, that Bush said a bit more in Salt Lake City? Historians knew already for a long time, that a minority including Hitler only speak out the stipulated sentence. The governor of New York and future US-President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke for more than five minutes in Lake Placid in 1932.

Back to Diem: The circled gentleman, like the Express (yellow press) claimed, is not Diem but an IOC member from South America. But anyway if the mayor of Würzburg simply claimed, that Diem was an anti-Semite and took care of it, that the Jewish high jumper Gretel Bergmann was not allowed to start in Berlin it must probably be true.

Also the rules for the march in procedure were modified. Not 51 teams, but only the Greeks, Swedish, British, Indians, Japanese, American, Austrians, Italians, French, Swiss and the Germans were allowed to march in. The proof: The movie *Fest*

der Völker (Festival of the Nations) produced by Leni Riefenstahl.

Without doubt requests to confirm will come in again, that Hitler refused to shake Jesse Owens's, the great star of the '36 Games, hand. When Owens won the finale the second day of the Games on the 100 meters distance Hitler was not in the stadium. One sentence must be added, about what maybe did escape Hitler's notice and certain sports historians, that until 1928 the head of government celebrated the presentation ceremony in the last day of the stadium games. Here in 1928 the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina. In 1930 the IOC-President Baillet-Latour conducted the presentation ceremony with a little set of stairs at the first Empire Games in Hamilton. Don't worry the three athletes do not show the fascist but the Olympic salute. Baillet-Latour was so impressed by this form of honoring, that it was imitated in Lake Placid and Los Angeles during the Games in 1932. This form was not fixed until the end of the Second World War in the text of the Olympic Charta. According to the presentation ceremony Diem wrote about an obligatorily Olympic protocol. Probably in order to anticipate the craving of the GRÖFAZ (Grösster Führer Aller Zeiten, Greatest Leader of All Times, Hitler's mockname) to avoid political conflicts between the IOC and the NS regime and not to satisfy more future sports historians. Does the Giving of oak crowns and little oak trees to the winners can be considered a typical NS gesture reflecting on the games? The gymnastics knew the oak wreath since the 19th century. At nearly almost Olympic Games "greenery" was distributed. In the antiquity, 1896, 1906 and 1968 olive twigs, 1908 an oak twig – the oak tree was considered as the typical English symbol – In 1912 an oak wreath- typical Swedish symbol - so said the official version, 1956 there was edelweiss in Cortina d'Ampezzo and a little maple tree 1976 in Montreal.

The little oak trees were planted in private gardens, schools, universities and sport areas and grew up into magnificent trees. As did the Merkens-oak, which grew up at the cycle rack in Cologne. Also the bunch of flowers, which was offered to the lady medal winners in 1996 and 2000 had its importance. Every flower stands for a special attribute of the American South States respectively a countryside of Australia.