

# THE FIRST OLYMPIC CHAMPION

By James B. Connolly

The excerpt is from *SEA-BORNE: THIRTY YEARS AVOYAGING* (Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., Garden City, NY, 1944) by James B. Connolly, the first Olympic champion of the modern Olympic Games. In this autobiography Connolly recounts his experiences in the 1896 Athens Olympic Games. This excerpt, submitted by **Rusty Wilson**, begins with his seeking permission to leave Harvard University to participate in the Games of the 1st Olympiad in Athens.

**I** went to see the chairman of the athletic committee about a leave of absence. One peek at the chairman's puss told me that here was no friendly soul. I piped down on any talk of violet-wreathed Athens, of marbled Athens, or the bard Homer chanting his sonorous periods before the customers of the market-place inn. I put in a bold request for eight weeks' leave of absence to compete in the Olympic games at Athens.

Said the chairman right off the bat: "Athens! Olympic games! You know you only want to go to Athens on a junket!"

A pilgrimage to ancient Greece a junket! Competing for my country for an Olympic championship a junket! I held myself in, and he continued: "You feel that you must go to Athens?"

"I feel just that way, yes sir."

"Then there is what you can do. You resign and on your return you make re-application for re-entry to the college, and I will consider it."

To that I said: "I am not resigning and I'm not making application to re-enter. I'm getting through with Harvard right now. Good day!"

It was ten years before I again set foot in a Harvard building, and then it was as guest speaker of the Harvard Union; and the occasion nourished my ego no end.

In that day our amateur officials had no say as to who could or could not compete in games abroad; which was a good thing for athletics. I recall one official who

did not know where to look for Athens when I spread the map of Europe before him. Of our American colleges, only Princeton, and of the big clubs, on the Boston Athletic Club, were sending teams. Of the little athletic clubs, only the Suffolk Club of my home town entered anybody. I was their entry and I was paying my own expenses. I preferred it that way. I had never in my athletic life had even an entrance fee paid

out for me. Why so? Oh, I felt better so. I was at the time a member of the powerful Manhattan Athletic Club of New York, elected to it without my knowing it . . . ; but it was still the little home-town club for me.

Our little American contingent - ten athletes in all - sailed from New York on March 20, 1896, on the 8,000-ton German steamer, the *Barbarossa*. A good sea boat she; and how the stewards did throw the vittles at us! We would have four weeks to the games or so we

thought. The voyage had a bleak beginning for me. I was never so much for indoor work, but I had been taking light exercise for several weeks in the Harvard gym. Two afternoons before sailing I had strained my back in the gym and for eight days after leaving New York I had to use my arms to raise myself out of a chair.

I had a horrible fear that I was out of the games, yet despite that I wasn't downcast. After all, the games were only part of the voyage. Here I was sailing the high seas, and Athens would be there when I got there. And so I stayed stretched out in my steamer chair by day in and day out, content with just sitting there and looking out on the blue sea through the

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James B. Connolly - the first champion of the modern Olympic Games

open rails. It was swell. Just to be gazing out on the deep blue waters was satisfying something deep inside of me.

My exercise for eight days consisted of circling the promenade-deck house six time before lunch and dinner. And then? One sunny magical morning, the ship entering the Straits of Gibraltar - Homer's Pillars of Hercules I got out of my chair with ever pain and ache gone and me feeling loose as ashes.

The steamer had no spacious deck room for real exercise. All our fellows could do was to get into track rig with rubber-soled shoes and bounce up and down on the well deck, where no passengers were. After

arriving in Naples, being then twelve days at sea, we put in our two days there walking art galleries and museums and observing the fishes in the celebrated aquarium.

On our second day in Naples, I missed my wallet from my hip pocket. I said nothing of my loss to the hotel people, nor did I report it to the police; yet the next morning when we were getting out of the hotel bus at the railway terminal, a man in uniform stepped up to our crowd and pointed me out to a plain-clothes man, who asked me in good English if I had lost something.

I had lost a wallet, yes. With money? Yes - five sovereigns.

"Then you must come with me to the police station."

I said no, no. We were taking the eight o'clock train to Brindisi, and it was now seven-forty.

"But you must. The police is here in the terminal."

"Oh! So near!" I went with him to where a man of obvious authority sat behind a flat desk. That one said in not so good English that my wallet had been recovered and I must stay and prosecute the thief. I said no, no, I must take the eight-o'clock train to Brindisi. There was a clock on the wall, and the long hand was on the ten-minutes-to-eight mark. I pointed to the clock saying: "Train to Brin-dee-see. Otto! Otto! Eight o'clock."

The man kept urging me - his subordinates all but pinned my arms behind me to stay and prosecute the thief, and I kept yelling: "No, no! Brin-dee-see train. Otto! Otto!"

At one minute to eight by the wall clock, and me praying it wasn't slow, I broke loose and ran for the train. It was a spacious railway station, and I did not know which platform to run to, but I kept yelling, "Brin dee-see! Brin-dee-see! Otto! Otto!"

A plump porter picked me up, pointed the way, and ran with me till his breath gave out. Another one picked me up a younger and thinner one shouted: "Brin-dee-see! Si! Si!"

He stayed with me. The train was pulling out. I thrust two ten-lira notes at him and yelled: "Dees lire por voo! Dees lire por votre comarade," hoping he understood my "French," and also that he wouldn't do the plump porter out of his ten lire.

The train was now under good way, and the Boston gang were leaning out of a compartment window and yelling for me to come on, come on. A guard tried to block me off, shouting "No per-mish-ee-one," or something like it. I sidestepped him and made the running board of the coach with one last long flying stride. Three good pals Barry, Burke, and Blake - grabbed me so I wouldn't fall back overboard and hauled me through the compartment window.

I did not know it then, but if I had missed that train

I would not have reached Athens in time for my event in the games.

It was across Italy through countless tunnels to Brindisi, a steamer down the Adriatic to the Corfu, a stop there, then on to the port of Patras, then a ten-hour train ride from there to Athens.

A committee in frock coats and tall hats received us at the station in Athens, put us into open carriages, and hurried us to the Chamber of Deputies, where the athletes of a dozen or more nations were already seated. Speeches were made, wine was passed around, and healths drunk. We stayed clear of the wine until the German crowd stood up, held their glasses high, looked to us, gave us three loud "Hochs!" and "Amerikanische!" and emptied their glasses.

Burke, Blake, Barry, Bill Hoyt (the champion pole vaulter), and myself were sitting together. We were teetotalers, or practically so, but the honor of our country demanded that something be done now; so

we filled glasses, gave the Germans nine "Rahs!" and an "Allemande!" and emptied our glasses.

We were next put back in the carriages and paraded through cheering packed streets. It was nine o'clock when we made our hotel. It

was ten o'clock when we sat down to dinner. At one o'clock we called it a day and went to our rooms.

Tom Barry, Tom Burke, and I were rooming together. We lay awake talking for an hour after we got to bed. At four o'clock we were awakened by a burst of martial music. We got up. Our hotel, the D'Angleterre, was across the square from the Royal Palace; and under our window a marching band was whaling away and a column of soldiers marching by. What looked like the entire Greek Army and all the military bands went marching past our hotel before that parade ended.

It was no more sleep for us; so we shaved and washed. Tom Barry, a chum of mine, was making a joy ride of the trip said Tom: "A lucky thing you two got twelve days to get in shape before the opening day of the games." Burke and I agreed that Tom had said something. We were at breakfast, when two members

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go to Athens on a junket!"**

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of a committee entered and passed around programs for the day. I glanced casually at my program; and then less casually. Here was a business! The date set for the opening of the games was according to the Greek calendar, not ours. There were no twelve days left for our training. The games opened that very day! Zoops! After six thousand miles and sixteen days of travel some of us would have to compete that day. The trial heats of the 100-meters would be held; and Garrett of Princeton and I were in for the trials and finals both - Garrett in the discus, and I in the triple-saute (hop, step, and jump or two hops and jump). The program was in French.

Well, there it was. We put away a light lunch - almost atop of our breakfast that was - and then all hands took passage for the stadium in a fleet of low-built cabs.

Athens that day was surely the liveliest and most colorful city in the world. The Greek enthusiasm for the games had been mounting for months; and now from every window and balcony varicolored streamers and ensigns were flying. The streets were jammed with Greeks in full length tight-fitting white woolen drawers and black velvet coats that stopped short of the waistline. Puffed out white frilled shirts were also in order.

Lines of soldiers held up all vehicles at two hundred yards from the stadium. Only the athletes were allowed to drive to the stadium entrance.

We were curious to see what the stadium looked like. What we saw was a long, gracefully proportioned structure of pure white marble; and it was packed solid. Eighty thousand people were in the marbled seats when we entered so we were told and what looked like as many more were standing on the slope of the high hill surrounding the curved end and one side of the stadium. Thousands of them had been standing there since early morning.

A tunnel led under the seats next to the curve of the bowl to the dressing quarters, Here were small open dressing

rooms surrounding a graveled oblong court At each long end of the court was a refreshment booth. Everything to eat and drink there was free to competing athletes,

The idea was to recruit the weary bodies after the fatigues of competition. When we entered the court, two bearded German wrestlers were already recruiting the bodies prior to competition with large beakers of beer. They saluted our crowd with uplifted tankards and a guttural "Hoch!"

There was a big bathroom with silver-mounted plumbing, with crash towels six feet long, soft towels twice as long, and a score of attendants standing by.

From the stadium came a loud bugle call. Then a bugler in army uniform strode smartly into the gravel court and echoed the stadium call. That meant all out for the 100-meter trials. I stood at the tunnel entrance

to see how our fellows - Burke, Curtis, and Lane - made out. They made out all right, all three qualifying.

Next came the bugle call for the triple-saute. My name was the last on the program, and as one after the other jumped before me I noticed that three made a hop, step, and jump of it, all the others two hops and a jump.

Those two-hop jumpers recalled to me the Hibernian

and Caledonian athletes of my boyhood days. They too used a two hops and jump; and they had it that the two hops and jump was the ancient Olympic form; and likewise a stiffer test of a jumper, that the modern hop, step, and jump was a corrupt form of it, made to fit athletes who depended on running speed, as in the single broad jump, rather than on the spring and rhythm that the ancient form called for.

As a boy I had practiced that two hops and a jump in imitation of the big fellows, and I had been pretty good at it. I hadn't jumped it since I was twelve years old.

Spring? Well, I was marked by spring rather than speed. For rhythm, meaning timing, the fellows back home had it that timing was the best part of my hop, step, and jump. So my thoughts ran when I stepped out for my first trial jump.

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We weren't allowed to use a measured run. I guessed, as did those before me, at the proper length of run; and there I stood waiting to gather my energies. A rush of energy, a warm wave in his blood will come to a fellow before a supreme effort if he will but wait on it. I waited and while waiting I looked up and around. There was color aplenty in the stadium and on the hill slope outside. Women and men were wearing red fezzes, and a tassel was hanging from every fez; and there was what else of the native Greek costume to go with the fez. Thousands of men were there in army and navy uniforms. One group was from our cruiser San Francisco, then at anchor in Piraeus.

It was a cloudy day, but my last look up and around disclosed a patch of blue sky beyond the highest slopes of the hill outside; and against that blue patch a man's head and shoulders were outlined. Just that one man. He stood balanced there by himself on the very pinnacle of the hill.

I breathed on my hands, rubbed them dry on my jersey, gripped them hard, sprinted for the take-off. And here is one for the psychologists: I came to Athens all set to do a hop, step, and jump; yet in that stadium that day, in contest for an Olympic championship, I shifted at the last moment to a two hops and a jump, which I hadn't jumped since a boy against other boys.

The rules forbade the judges' telling a competitor how far he jumped; but the track coach of the London Athletic Club named Perry, was smoothing the earth in the pit after each jump. After my second try I said to Perry: "They ought to let a fuhla know, how far he jumps," His answer: "As far as you're concerned, you can go on back to your dressing room and take your barth. You have this event in your pocket right now."

It was looking that way to me too; and I let my second jump ride.

When the other two finalists were done, the judges checked up, and Prince George of Greece, the chief field judge and the one who talked English, came to me saying: "You are the victor. You have beaten the second man by a meter (3 feet 3 inches)."

My winning jump was 45 feet, which may not read like much; yet under the conditions soft new-laid running path, jumping heel going two inches into the soft cinders, a gray chilly day and wind against us it

wasn't so bad. Bob Garrett, intercollegiate champion, fell two feet short of his best broad jump record under the same conditions next day. The second man to me, a Frenchman, had a home record of better than 47 feet for the hop, step, and jump. Later that year, in New York, I did 49 feet ½ inch; yet, allowing for the conditions, I've always called that 45 feet in Athens a better performance.

There was a lofty flagstaff midway of the arena, and grouped at the foot of it was a band of two hundred pieces. I had worn a sweater and trousers over my athletic rig and I was pulling on my trousers, standing on one foot and enjoying the cheers of the 150,000, or however many were cheering, when that band of two hundred pieces boomed into sudden action. I was meantime looking around the stadium. Most of the crew of the U.S.S. San Francisco were massed in the stadium bowl. Like one man they arose and stood at attention. The eighty thousand spectators in the seats were rising.

I then came alive and stood to attention. The 200-piece band had broken into the "Star-Spangled Banner" and two Greek bluejackets were hoisting an American ensign to the top of the flagstaff. Slowly, reverently, the Greek sailors were hoisting the ensign, and except for our National Hymn the stadium and the hill slope outside was all a hush and every spectator there was standing.

The thought next came to me that our National Hymn was for my winning my event. To myself I said: "You're the first Olympic victor in fifteen hundred years." A moment later: "The gang back home will be tickled when they hear of it!"

The last note of our hymn was played out, the ensign halyards were made secure, I swapped handshakes with eight or ten competitors and headed across the stadium to the dressing-room tunnel. A man in the front row of the stadium bowl waved his program at me. A woman beside him waved her gloved hand a white glove. I waved back at them. Later I was told that they were the King and Queen of Greece.

I went floating, not walking, floating across the stadium arena on waves of what sounded like a million voices and two million hands cheering and applauding.

At the tunnel entrance I was grabbed by a half-dozen bearded Greeks. One after the other they kissed me

on both cheeks - guys I had never seen before - and their whiskers were oily. Five men - one of them left-handed - poised their pencils above their sketch pads, and one shouted: "Attunday, seel voo play!" And I attounded until they all had done with sketching pictures of me.

I moved on through the tunnel to the dressing quarters. An attendant at the refreshment booth was slipping me a stoup of wine. I said no, and moved on to the shower room. There I allowed two attendants with twelve-foot soft towels to dry me off, and two others with six-foot hard towels to scrape me briskly. They all the while were saying, "Nike! Nike!" Victor, Victor.

As I dressed I found myself saying: "Am glad I made this voyage!" And then: "And you are lucky! S'posin you missed that train to Brindisi!"

**O**ur team of ten men won nine of the eleven championships. Pretty good, I thought, and still think, considering that in five of those events none of us had had a single day at outdoor practice since the previous fall. The records

made do not compare well with records made since, but the conditions were against the athletes. The great Tom Burke's time in the 400-meters was 54 seconds. It was a new-laid track, with the runners cupping deep at every stride. In the jumping events we dug inch-deep holes in the soft dirt run to the takeoff, and in the triple-saute our spiked shoes went two inches deep with every stride into the loose dirt of the runway to the take-off.

After the games the Greek Government and the citizens at large went all out to entertain the athletes. All the champions were heroes. For myself, I saw nothing of the violet wreaths of the ancient poets; but marbled Athens was there many marble houses and many marble statues in the museums. And here was the city where Homer walked - the thrice-wrecked

sailorman, blind Homer, landing in the port of Piraeus and making his way over the dusty road to Athens.

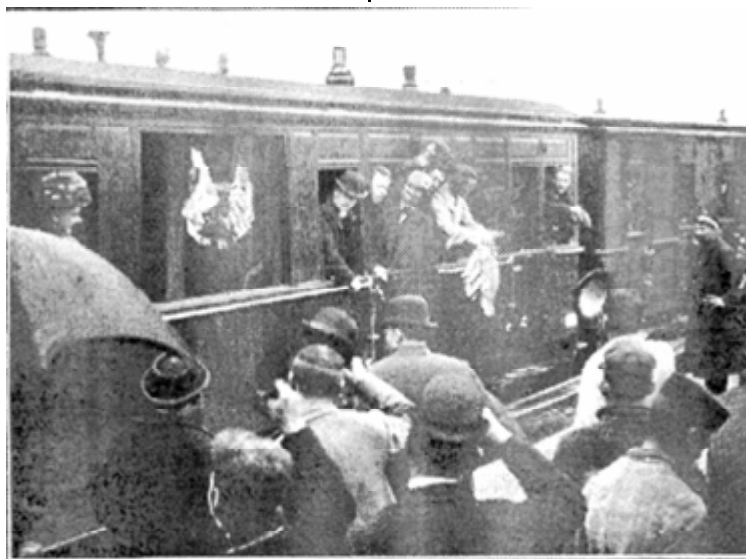
The American team stopped over in Rome, Paris, and London. When the Boston members arrived home, the city took high notice of their arrival. The railway station was mobbed, there was a public reception in historic Faneuil Hall, and a great dinner with many resounding speeches by important personages.

I wasn't among those present in the City of Boston celebration. I had stayed behind in Paris. I had read too much about Paris to be leaving it in a hurry now that I found myself there.

I had bought round-trip transportation before leaving New York, and a fellow could live cheap in Paris then. After four weeks in Paris, I still had enough left for a

fortnight in London. A city worth while, London. Not a vibrant city like Paris, but things to be learned there too.

When I hit home, the citizenry of South Boston decided to do something about it. "In the ancient days of Greece,"



The successful American team departing Athens by train

said a member of the Common Council, who happened to be a good neighbor, Jack Dunne, "Mayors, or whatever they called them then, breached the walls of their cities for the entrance of their home-town by returning a victor from the Olympic games. There's no wall to breach around our home town, but we can do other things."

And they did so, Caesar riding the Appian Way after knocking the Gaulesians end over end had nothing on me riding up Broadway on my return from Athens. Centurions in their brass hats lined the streets for Caesar; South Boston gave me cops with spiked helmets stretching from curb to curb before me. Caesar rode his four-horse chariot - noble prancing steeds, without doubt; me in Tim Sullivan the

hackman's new barouche with four not bad-looking plugs. The Romans strewed the roads with sheafs of bright blossoms for Caesar; for me the proletariat of South Boston set red and blue lights burning and flaring and sputtering all along Broadway; and the drugstores and barrooms were there with special light effects.

The Romans slipped Caesar a crown and then bumped him off. The citizenry of South Boston handed me a gold watch and let me live; which left me one up on Caesar.

It was swell hearing the old gang say: "Boy, were you good!" and having important citizens stepping out of their way to greet me. Swell, and conducive to a fellow's chest development. But when I took time to look around, there I was done with college and my money spent. I did not regret the college or the spending, but there was my living to make."

### A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BRENDAN CONNOLLY

*(28 Oct 1868 - 20 Jan 1957): 1896: Triple Jump (1), High Jump (2), Long Jump (3). 1900: Triple Jump (2).*

James B. Connolly was a 27-year-old freshman at Harvard University when he left school to participate in the Games of the First Olympiad in Athens in 1896. With his winning jump in the triple jump he became the first Olympic champion of the modern era, and the first in nearly 1500 years. He followed that victory with a second place finish in the high jump, and a third place in the long jump.

Four years later, after planning a trip to Paris, discovered that the Games were going to be held at the same time. Connolly and a friend, Dick Grant, decided to give the Olympics another try - Grant in the marathon and Connolly once again in the triple jump. Both men paid their own transportation in steerage to Paris.

"The story of our Olympic days in Paris is the tale of a couple of tramps living in a room on the top floor of the tallest apartment house on the Rue de Rome; and no lift in the building," remembered Connolly. "Our room included a breakfast of one egg, one roll, and coffee and milk. We ate fifteen-cent lunches in Montmartre restaurants, split a five-cent loaf of bread for supper. So for four days, meantime walking miles across Paris to the

athletic park in the Bois de Boulogne for our exercise and placating our landlady for her advance money every morning before we set out for our hike to the Bois. . . A friend of my southern days had a machinery exhibit in the Exposition. A twenty-franc gold piece borrowed off him kept us alive for another week; but no more than that. When it came to my day to compete in my old event, the triple saute, I walked five miles to the Bois park for want of cab fare. Atop of that I had to go without lunch that day. However, I got second place, which wasn't bad, considering."

Dick Grant's finish wasn't so successful. Running on one of the hottest days in Paris history Grant finished three-hours behind the winner. Eight years later, Connolly was once again at the Olympics, however this time as a correspondent for Collier's magazine.

Following his Olympic experiences Connolly made a life as a writer of sea stories. From the fly paper of his autobiography: *After the Spanish-American War* he sailed with the Gloucester fishermen, went to England as a hand on a cattle boat, fished with German fleets in the North Sea, went whaling in the Arctic, crossed the Atlantic in a racing yacht. He has lived aboard warships, submarines, and in World War I covered U-boat actions for Collier's. His vast experience has made him the foremost American authority on salt-water sailing, and he has lived aboard every conceivable kind of craft in all the waters of the Globe.

Although Connolly never returned to Harvard after the Athens Games he was presented with an honorary Harvard athletic letter sweater during the 50th reunion of his class in 1948.

#### Note by the Editor:

*It seems to be time for one of our American members to write a biography of this first Olympic champion of the modern era. When I read his autobiography from which the above excerpts were taken, I was surprised about the fame this man must have had in the highest circles of the American society at the beginning decades of the past century. Connolly must have had a very high regard of himself but I wonder how the rest of the world looked at him?*

**R**usty Williams submitted the enclosed transcript of an original letter, written by an American visitor (Mr Austin S. Garver) to Athens during the time of the 1896 Athens Olympic Games. Because of its authenticity and the connections with the previous article about the 1896 Games, we decided to show part of the original letter, plus the complete transcript, in this issue of the Journal

*The Editorial Team*

[Letterhead: GRAND HOTEL D'ANGLETERRE, ATHENS (Greece),  
Electric Light Throughout The Building]

Athens, April 9, 1896  
My dear Lloyd -

There has just been a new issue of handsome Greek postage stamps for the Olympian games. And I enclose some of them thinking that you may like to have them for your collection. The full set includes also one for two drachmas, one for five & one for ten. If you want these, or if you know any body that does, I shall be glad to send them. I expect to remain in Athens for a month or six weeks, and that would be time enough to hear from you. A letter addressed in care of Basing Brothers London will reach me.

You would enjoy being here now in account of the Olympic Games which are in progress this week. The city is decorated for the occasion, and the streets & squares are very gay - flags and banners & garlands. And at night the illuminations are more beautiful than any I ever saw except at the Columbian Exhibition. The Greeks, poor as they are have done everything to make the Games a success. The Ancient Stadium has been restored for the purpose, and has seats for 40 000 people. The opening on Monday afternoon was a great success. You can judge of the crowds when I say that the Stadium was mostly filled from bottom to top. It is thought that there were from 30 to 35 000 people there. While looking over the top of the wall & on the sloping hill above the walls, were thousands more enjoying a cheap look. The tickets are not dear, only two drachmas for the best (about 25 cents) and one drachma for all of the upper half of the Stadium, and it is said there is not a poor seat anywhere.

It was a fine sight when the King & Queen with the Royal family, came walking in such a simple & dignified way. The immense crowd rose, and waved their hats or clapped their hands. The King announced that the Olympic games were revived, there was music by the bands, and then the events, with races of 100, 400, & 800 yards, the throwing the discus, & the triple jump. The contestants from the U.S. gained most of the honors, so that we were almost ashamed of our countrymen. Burke of Boston astonished every body by his running, & had everything his own way. The stars & stripes were run up the mast everytime one of our men won, & the dear old flag was floating most of the time. Of course we became excited as any body else did, & did our share of the shouting.

The great event that is coming is the run from Marathon - 25 miles. Every one hopes that a Greek may win, but I do not think there is much hope of that.

Athens is a very beautiful city & is wonderfully interesting. We have made some excursions, & have yet much to do. Mrs. Garver joins in warmest regards to your mother & father, & to the boys.

Cordially your friend  
Austin S. Garver.

