



The Path to the Olympic Games 50 Year Journey on a Long and Winding Road

Chuck Hoey, Curator ITTF Museum



A well-known historical milestone for Table Tennis was its first appearance in the Olympic Games in Seoul 1988. Since that time our sport has grown significantly, and recent tv ratings prove conclusively that Table Tennis has earned those Olympic laurels, ranking among the top five of all sports.

Many will be surprised to learn that the path to the Olympic Games was somewhat controversial within the ITTF, extending as far back as the early 1930s. Research in the ITTF Archives, which are now accessible online via the Museum website, has revealed some rather surprising twists and turns in the long and winding road to Olympic status.

The first reference to considering the entry of Table Tennis into the Olympic Games was in 1931. According to the AGM Minutes: "11(b) a discourse on the Olympic Games was received with appreciation from Dr. Mezz and it was agreed to explore the possibilities outlined." Unfortunately no copy of this report was found in the ITTF Archives.

Then in the 1932 AGM: "9. Steps are being taken to secure the holding of Table Tennis events simultaneously with the winter sports at the Olympic Games in Berlin 1936."

In 1937 an actual vote was taken:
"Agenda item 5.(viii) Jugoslavia and Japan propose, Hungary and Germany support and England opposes that:
The ITTF should immediately get into touch with the Preparatory Commission of the forthcoming Olympiad in Tokyo with a view to the inclusion of Table Tennis in that Olympiad." The AGM Minutes summarize the vote: All countries in favour except England who were against, and the Advisory Committee was so instructed.

Despite the near unanimous vote no further action was taken on this issue! One has to wonder why. About a year later, while installing documents in the Archives website, I discovered the answer, in some detailed minutes of the 1946 London Conference, hosted by Montagu to revive the ITTF after the war. When directly asked for his position, Montagu replied:

"I am opposed to the inclusion of Table Tennis in the Olympic Games. ... Firstly, I think the Olympic Games should be restricted to Athletics and similar events, where athletes vie with each other, not extend to sports of Football or Lawn Tennis type.

Second, I think sports that do not have their own world title competitions need the Olympic Games. We, and similarly Lawn Tennis with the Davis Cup, do not need the Olympics. For us they are a duplication. Lawn Tennis dropped out of the Olympics after, I think, 1924. Third, it is not certain that if we applied we would be successful. If we were refused it would be a rebuff and a humiliation to the game."

Montagu's reasoning requires some analysis. Table Tennis is indeed a sport where athletes vie with each other, though back in the 1940s most players were hardly the well-conditioned superb athletes of Olympic standards.

**"I am opposed
to the inclusion
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**London Conference
1946**



Founding President Ivor Montagu

Regarding his second point, Lawn Tennis did in fact withdraw from the Olympic community in 1924 and did not reappear until 1988. Lawn Tennis leaders felt that the Olympics would become an unwanted rival to Wimbledon. However, it is difficult to accept this argument given the 4-year Olympic cycle, and the participants would certainly gain national and worldwide recognition, as well as an experience of a lifetime. Mr. Ollen of Sweden cited the benefits of receiving a share of funds for training Olympic athletes.

Montagu's third point was certainly a legitimate concern, though A.K. Vint noted the potential prestige of acceptance. A vote was then taken: Yes: Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands, Jersey. No: Czechoslovakia. Undecided: England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and France. Montagu then proposed that each member nation's Olympic Committee should be approached for their opinions, and the results referred to the Advisory Committee for a decision.

Some member nations had concerns about Table Tennis joining the Olympics because of the amateur issue, since the ITTF distinction between amateur and professional was eliminated in 1935. Montagu was rightly proud of this even though it could cause a conflict with Olympic requirements, but he dismissed the issue at the 1946 London Conference:

"On the amateur question, we can easily comply with Olympic requirements in this respect by simply meeting and agreeing by Federation decision that no players shall be included who have been paid for playing."

Six years later, in 1952 the AGM minutes make a brief reference to the subject at hand: "19(i) Resolved that ... enquiries could be made from associations where Olympic Games would take place in the future to ascertain if Table Tennis is likely to be included in the Games."

Then in 1954: "7a. The Secretary received a communication from the Swiss Association requesting discussion on the possibility of having Table Tennis in the Olympic Games. After the President had given an explanation of the Federation's past decisions on this subject, considerable discussion took place, indicating that there were divergences of opinion. It was eventually agreed to accept the President's proposal to ask the incoming Advisory Committee to get as much information as possible from the representatives of Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland, all of whom were members of their respective National Olympic Committees, and report to the next Annual General Meeting."

In 1955: "10. The General Secretary's report was adopted, including the suggestion with regard to the Olympic Games." This report concludes that "no general course of action would be acceptable ... doubtless the Federation will seek to ensure that no action will be taken that would be likely to affect the pre-eminence of the World Table Tennis Championships." Another roadblock to Olympic membership, again caused by a dubious protectionist viewpoint, this time coming from future ITTF President H.Roy Evans. Regardless, some ITTF member Associations stated their intentions of applying for affiliation.

The next year saw the advent of biennial World Championships, beginning in 1957. The sponge bat controversy, which will be the subject of my next article, was also brewing, but there was no further discussion of the Olympic Games issue.

In 1957 the report of the VP of Oceania, Mr Jones, mentions that Australian Table Tennis officials had contact with Jozef Vandurek of the Czechoslovakian TTA during the Melbourne Olympic Games. "Mr Vandurek interposed to say that it was evident from enquiries he had made at Melbourne that the time was not ripe for the inclusion of Table Tennis in the Olympic Games."

The complex Racket Standardization issue dominated 1959, and there was no mention of the Olympics during the early 1960s BGMs. Roy Evans was duly elected President in 1967 after Montagu's retirement – would this end 35 years of resistance to the Olympic Table Tennis concept? Or would Evans maintain his negative views expressed in 1955?

"No action will be taken that will be likely to affect the pre-eminence of the World Table Tennis Championships."

**AGM 1955
Utrecht**



Roy Evans, ITTF President 1967-87

In 1967 the French Association introduced a proposal to investigate the possibility of affiliation with the IOC. During the ensuing discussions "it was pointed out that actual participation in the Olympic Games need not be regular so there was little danger to the authority of the ITTF World Championships."

In 1969 the Advisory Committee recommended the investigations of ITTF recognition by the IOC continue. The 1971 AGM Minutes report "It was clear that the present Constitution of the ITTF would prohibit any recognition by the IOC as they would require a firm declaration written into the constitution that the Federation was an amateur body. It was understood that the eligibility rule was under examination." Then the Chinese delegate stated that his Association was against IOC recognition, yet another discouraging sign.

The 1975 AGM notes that "the IOC had set up a special commission to examine the situation of sports not in the Olympic Programme." The close proximity of Swiss Table Tennis legend Hugo Urchetti enabled him to handle coordination between the IOC and ITTF. His important intermediary work led to some real progress by 1977. The BGM approved amending the ITTF Constitution to comply with IOC requirements concerning amateur and professional status, and an application for IOC recognition was submitted. Evans cautioned that was only for official recognition, not for inclusion in the Games.

In June of 1977 the IOC voted to formally recognize Table Tennis as an Olympic sport. The 1979 Handbook includes a new Constitutional clause: "1.3.2 The general and fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter are applicable and no provision of the Constitution or the Regulations shall be deemed to conflict with or derogate from these principles."

At the 84th session of the IOC in October of 1981 in Baden, Table Tennis was accepted into the Olympic Programme, to debut in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. To guide the transition the ITTF established an Olympics Commission to liaison with the IOC and NOCs, and to supervise amateur eligibility.

With remarkable patience and perseverance the arduous journey on the long and winding road to the Olympic Games finally came to an end, fully 50 years after the concept was first proposed. A new and prosperous era was born, with great benefit to the sport, the Olympic athletes and the ITTF.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roy Evans". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Join the ITTF Museum Team in 2006 with a donation of important historical Table Tennis memorabilia. The Archives need originals of five World Championship programmes: 1928, 1929, 1930, 1933 Paris, 1936. Attention World and Olympic Champions: help the Museum preserve your legacy of honor by donating a bat used to win a major championship!

Contact the Curator: museum@ittf.com