



### **BRINGING THE 'NATIONAL PASTIME' TO THE OLYMPIC ARENA: LESLIE MANN AND THE DRIVING FORCES TO BASEBALL INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE 1930'S**

Abstract – The main objective of this study is to trace historical efforts to include baseball in the 1936 Olympics, paralleled with the internationalization of that sport. This study is presented in the format of a historical narrative. The research material was mainly drawn from primary sources located in the United States of America and Canada. Results show that Leslie Mann, a former American player, was one who significantly contributed to make the 1936 baseball Olympic exhibition distinctly better organized than previous experiences. The 1936 Olympic baseball demonstration was one of the most important accomplishments to the internationalization of baseball and an important benchmark to Baseball in the Olympic scenario.

Keywords: baseball; Olympic Games; history.

### **TRAZENDO O 'PASSATEMPO NACIONAL' PARA A ARENA OLÍMPICA: LESLIE MANN E AS FORÇAS CONDUTORAS PARA A INTERNACIONALIZAÇÃO DO BEISEBOL NOS ANOS 1930**

Resumo - O principal objetivo deste estudo é traçar esforços históricos para incluir o beisebol nos Jogos Olímpicos de 1936, em paralelo com a internacionalização do esporte. O estudo é apresentado em formato de narrativa histórica. Os dados são, principalmente, fontes primárias localizadas nos Estados Unidos da América e Canadá. Os resultados demonstram que Leslie Mann, um ex-jogador profissional americano, foi um personagem que contribuiu significativamente para tornar a exibição do beisebol nos Jogos de 1936 distintamente mais bem organizada do que em experiências anteriores. Argumenta-se que aquela demonstração foi um dos esforços mais importantes para a internacionalização do beisebol e sua inserção no cenário Olímpico.

Palavras-chave: beisebol; Jogos Olímpicos; história.

### **LLEVANDO EL 'HOBBY NACIONAL' A LA ARENA OLÍMPICA: LESLIE MANN Y LAS FUERZAS CONDUCTORES PARA LA INTERNACIONALIZACIÓN DEL BÉISBOL EN LOS AÑOS 30**

Resumen - El objetivo principal es estudiar los esfuerzos históricos para incluir el béisbol en los Juegos Olímpicos de 1936, en paralelo con la internacionalización del deporte. El estudio se presenta en un formato narrativo histórico. Los datos son principalmente fuentes primarias ubicadas en los Estados Unidos de América y Canadá. Los resultados demuestran que Leslie Mann, un exjugador profesional estadounidense, fue un personaje que contribuyó significativamente a hacer que la exhibición de béisbol en los Juegos de 1936 fuera claramente mejor organizada que en experiencias anteriores. Se argumenta que esa demostración fue uno de los esfuerzos más importantes para la internacionalización del béisbol y su presencia en el escenario olímpico.

Palabras-clave: béisbol; Juegos Olímpicos; historia.

*Doiara Santos*

*Federal University of  
Viçosa, Brazil*

*doiarasantos@yahoo.com.br*

*[http://dx.doi.org/  
10.30937/2526-  
6314.v4.id107](http://dx.doi.org/10.30937/2526-6314.v4.id107)*

*Received: Aug 06, 2020*

*Accepted: Sep 12, 2020*

*Published online:  
Sep 15, 2020*

## Introduction

According to Cava<sup>1</sup>, “[...] baseball has provided some of the most fascinating and underexplored corridors of Olympic history (p.7)”. After being part of the Olympic program as an official medal event in four consecutive editions of the Games, baseball was voted out of the 2012 London Olympic program. This decision was made during the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Session on July 7, 2005. Baseball made its farewell at the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Following a 12-year hiatus, the sport would return to Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which was rescheduled to 2021 due to the pandemic world.

In fact, Baseball Olympic history has been difficult. Long before receiving its official medal status by the IOC for the 1992 Barcelona Games, baseball already had a history in the Olympic Games. Labeled as an exhibition or demonstration sport, baseball was in the sports program of the Olympic Games in the beginning of the twentieth century (1904 St. Louis and 1912 Stockholm), as well as in Melbourne 1956, Los Angeles 1984, and also in Seoul 1988<sup>1</sup>.

Already consolidated as the 'national pastime' in the American Culture in the mid-nineteenth century, baseball's pathway to internationalization in the twentieth century included at least two factors: 1- the formation of an international federation along with the establishment of regular international competitions; 2 - efforts to integrate existing multi-sport competitions<sup>2</sup>.

By the 1930s, the Olympic Games were already one of the most recognized international events in the world, serving several purposes, including the promotion of certain sports, and expressions of political and nationalist character<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the 1930s produced a significant increase in the contingent of American baseball supporters and entrepreneurs aspiring not only national recognition, but international relevancy to baseball. Those people advocated for making baseball a sport with a multinational constituency and international prominence. However, little is known in academic literature about the importance of baseball Olympic exhibition in Berlin nor its supporters to the later developments of the sport, including its Olympic affairs. Thus, this study seeks to contribute to the history of Baseball in the Olympic scenario.

## **Methodology**

This investigation is presented in the format of a historical narrative. A historical work demands interpretation and understanding of events, documents, processes, and symbols. In the writing of history, the researcher seeks a credible account of history based on the quality of collected data<sup>3</sup>.

The research material for this study is mostly drawn from primary sources, gathered from different archival collections from the United States of America (USA) and Canada. Data gathered to this study includes Olympic Official Reports of the 1912 and 1936 Olympics (accessed at the International Center of Olympic Studies, at Western University, Canada); files from the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, located in Cooperstown, USA. Finally, newspapers reports obtained in those archival collections that relate to baseball internationalization in the 1930s were also included.

## **Growing pains: baseball preludes in the Olympic program**

Although little was recorded - no official report was written - some historians include baseball as an exhibition or demonstration sport in the 1904 St. Louis Olympics. As the 1904 Games happened in conjunction with the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, virtually, every amateur sporting contest in St. Louis that happened between May and November in 1912 is usually packaged as part of the Olympics<sup>1</sup>. In that context, baseball's debut in the Olympics was undermined by the small number of participating nations in the events of the 1904 Games, and the limited organization of the matches.

In 1912 Stockholm, baseball officially appeared as a demonstration event in the Olympic program. The Swedish Olympic Committee declares that the impetus to organize a baseball match between a Swedish Club and American Olympians was received with only minor deliberations by the Club, as pointed out in the Official Report of the event<sup>5</sup>

The game of baseball is one of no very ancient date in Sweden, Vesterås, in 1910, being the birthplace of the first club formed for the practice of the game that is so very popular in America. When, in the spring of 1912, the Vesterås Baseball Club received a communication from the Swedish Olympic Committee, inquiring whether the Club would be willing to take part in an exhibition game one evening during the Games, the question awakened both pleasure and doubt in the hearts of the members for, though the highest wish a Swedish athlete could entertain was that of being able to take any part in the Olympic Games, there were doubts if the Club could get a team of good players (p.823).

According to the Official Report<sup>5</sup>, the Sweden organizers managed to put together a “[...] sufficiently skillful team to be able to give their opponents a fairly good game (p.823)”. However, some facts indicate that the 1912 baseball match at the Olympics was one of minor significance. For example, the match was not played at the main Stadium because the date was reserved for horse riding competitions. Moreover, there was no great crowd of spectators, and those who were present were mostly Americans or Swedish-Americans. Irrespective of the result, the Official Report presents a positive assessment of the match for Sweden sports culture

It is impossible, of course, to learn to play baseball thoroughly in a couple of seasons, and none of the Swedes taking part in the match had ever before seen a game played by an experienced team. The result showed, however, that baseball can be played with advantage here in Sweden<sup>5</sup> (p.824).

Four years after the Olympic baseball contest in Stockholm, the Olympic Games were cancelled because of the outbreak of the World War I. Baseball is mentioned on references about the 1924 Paris Games and the 1928 Amsterdam Games, but it seems that no credible sources concur, more importantly the official reports<sup>1</sup>.

The subsequent attempts to make baseball an Olympic sport are more evidenced in the 1930s. From the sources selected for this study, it was possible to note that Leslie Mann, a former outfielder who played in the Major Leagues from 1913 to 1928, was one of those who envisioned the Olympic Games as an important step toward the internationalization of baseball<sup>6</sup>.

Although ‘Les Mann’ - as dubbed by media reports<sup>7</sup> - is mentioned in different historical accounts about baseball, most of the academic literature accessed for this study does not provide an assessment of Mann’s contributions to include baseball in the 1936 Olympic program.

### **Leslie Mann and baseball Olympic journey in the 1930s**

Leslie Mann was born in Lincoln, Nebraska on November 18, 1893. In ‘Portrait of a Champion’ - a Tribute to Leslie Mann authored by his brother Channing R. Mann- the early years of Les Mann athletic life and life achievements are described<sup>6</sup>.

Leslie Mann had an early connection with baseball, which continued when he attended the International Young Men Christian Association (Y.M.C.A) College in

Springfield, Massachusetts (later known as Springfield College). In college, he was described as a fine all-around athlete, and also as someone very committed to the principles and values of Y.M.C.A educational system<sup>6</sup>.

Mann's professional career started when he was a 17-year-old and he retired in 1929. Evidence shows that Leslie Mann directed his interest to amateur baseball and pursued at least two ideas: 1 - the creation of baseball schools for young boys; 3- and the promotion and internationalization of baseball (with the immediate objective of including baseball in the 1932 Olympic program). These ideas dominated Mann's activities in the beginning of the 1930s<sup>6</sup>.

Leslie Mann became the secretary-treasurer of the National Amateur Athletic Federation in 1929. In 1930, Mann went on a tour throughout the United States for a series of lectures named 'Inside Baseball'<sup>8</sup> at the request of the National Amateur Athletic Federation. A Standard Union newspaper report of May 28, 1930 specified that Leslie Mann's lectures, with "[...] marvelous motion pictures taken in big league ball parks", were presented in "Greater New York for the first time in history".

Les Mann continuously invested in the process of making connections and gathering support of baseball's insiders, sports manufacturers and amateur organizations such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), and the Municipal Baseball Association of America. In 1932, the Amateur Athletic Federation combined with the US Amateur Baseball Association and the Municipal Baseball Association, became the USA Baseball Congress, which established its headquarters in Miami, Florida.

Despite Mann's fierce in maneuvering through different groups and the formation of the U. S. Amateur Baseball Congress, baseball was not in the Olympic program of the Los Angeles Olympics that year. But, Les Mann would spend the next four years working to make sure that baseball would appear in the 1936 Games.

In 1933, Les Mann formed his first baseball school in Miami, Florida. In the meantime, Leslie Mann "[...] always kept up his earlier contacts with college coaches and A.A.U officials, and these efforts enabled him to interest the World Olympic Committee in baseball as a possible team sport"<sup>9</sup>.

By November 1934, Mann already had an invitation from the German Olympic Committee - firmly under the control of the Nazis - "to send a team of American amateur

baseballers to play a demonstration contest as part of the Olympics in the Capital of the third Reich (p. 168)”<sup>10</sup>.

Mann's ambition to attract international attention to the American pastime matched with the ambition of the German Olympic Committee (GOC) to make the Berlin Olympics the biggest international event in the history of sports. The American's opponent team was also invited by the GOC: Japan.

Baseball was introduced to Japan in the 1870's and two men are largely accredited with its introduction in the country: Horace Wilson - an American professor teaching in Tokyo; and Hiroshi Hiraoka - a Japanese engineer who studied in the United States and organized a team with his co-workers when he went back to Japan in the end of the decade. By 1908, American all-star teams began traveling to Japan to play exhibition games and promote baseball. The American teams usually played against Japanese amateur or college teams. There were also tours in 1913, 1920, 1922, 1931 and 1934<sup>10</sup>.

In 1934, Connie Mack - a long time manager of the Philadelphia Athletics - was asked to organize a team of some of the best players in Major League Baseball and take them to a tour to Japan to play against the Big Six University League. The outcome of the 1934 tour is usually seen as a contributing factor to the development of professional baseball in Japan. A big part of the trip success is attributed to the 'Babe Ruth effect'. Babe Ruth left Japan a legend. He was exalted in Japan during and after the trip.

With a good sense of networking, evidence shows that Leslie Mann took advantage of the image and credibility of Babe Ruth to strength his plans for the 1936 Games. Figure 1 is a photograph of Leslie Mann shaking hands with Babe Ruth. The picture was published in a newspaper report found in Leslie Mann's files at the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library in Cooperstown, NY. The subtitle under the photo reads: "Les Mann and Babe Ruth at a recent meeting to discuss plans for trip to Berlin".

Figure 1- Leslie Mann and Babe Ruth



Source: St Louis Sporting News Newspaper Archives<sup>9</sup>. April 09, 1936, p.7

The 1934 tour to Japan was not the last before the Berlin Olympics. Mann approached private organizations into sponsoring an all-American team for national and international tours intended to promote the sport and prepare the Olympic team. The 1935 tour was, in effect, organized by Mann. His leading position in the 1935 tour brought together Americans and Japanese at a time when those governments were becoming estranged over Japan's military ventures in Asia. Mann put twenty American baseball players together to compete against the Japanese Meiji University's team. In that occasion, more important than the game was the fact that the plans for having an Olympic contest between Japan and the United States in 1936 were firmed up between the Japanese and American amateur-sports officials<sup>10</sup>.

In the meantime, Mann continued to give form to the USA Baseball Congress - a national governing body of 'amateur' baseball. As the organization evolved, Mann got the endorsement of the United States of America Olympic Committee (USOC), presided by Avery Brundage at that time.

The formation of the Congress was a defining factor for guaranteeing the support of the USOC. As a former professional baseball player, it could have been more difficult to Mann - as a leading figure of the Congress - to secure the endorsement of the idealist Avery Brundage, who was very resistant to commercialism in the Olympic Games and an outspoken defender of the amateur ideal.

In fact, Official documents of the International Baseball Federation indicate that Mann knew that the game he loved was enjoying growing interest, but he also knew that the President of the USOC, Avery Brundage, was “a firm believer in the idea that there was no such thing as an amateur baseball player (p. 168)”<sup>10</sup>.

Mann's approach to pursue his plans for bringing baseball to the Olympics continually involved commercialism, as exemplified in his willingness to find financial support to the 1935 tours. The American players who toured to Japan under Mann's leadership in 1935 wore a jersey bearing a corporate logo (Wheaties), an approach that conflict with the 'spirit' of the Olympic Movement. Thus, it seems that a key factor for securing the support of the USOC was that the U.S.A Baseball Congress conveniently established amateurism as an issue of concern in its agenda.

The fact that Mann became the secretary and manager of the baseball American team that went to the 1936 Games illustrates the importance of his role in bringing the national pastime to the Olympic arena. Mann's report to the American Olympic Committee emphasizes that the “interest and enthusiasm ran high among the baseball commissioners all over the country when it became officially known that baseball was upon the Olympic program ”<sup>11</sup>.

Trials for recruiting the American Olympic baseball team were organized by the US Baseball Congress. They were held in Baltimore, Maryland, from July 1 to July 12, 1936. According to Mann, players, teams and leagues which “never had such a goal to play for, were preparing for the biggest baseball year ever to be experienced”<sup>11</sup>.

The Japanese last minute withdraw forced Mann to rearrange the original plans. Mann sent a special notice to all colleges and commissioners who were members of the American Baseball Congress to put together outstanding players of their territory because the Americans would play an intra-squad contest in Olympic Berlin. In his report to USOC, Mann states that a few games were played but “no profit was collected, partly due to the bitter antagonism towards the United States participation in the Olympic Games in Berlin”<sup>11</sup>.

The two American teams were named the US Olympics and the World Champions. The days Les Mann would spend in Berlin with the American teams were carefully planned by him.

### **Bright baseball in a Dark night**

On July 15, 1936 baseball players, coaches and officials sailed to Berlin. Mann was the secretary and manager of the team and Dinty Dennis, Miami Herald sports editor, was strategically appointed assistant manager at Mann's request. In his report, Mann states: "[...] it was through his [Dennis] efforts that the press was kept in touch with our activities (p.302)"<sup>12</sup>.

Before the Games started, Les Mann gave lectures in schools for teachers and coaches from Germany and other countries. According to Mann's record, two hundred people attended to a series of five lectures on: 1) Science of baseball; 2) Organization and contribution the game offers to the player; 3) Educational values; 4) Individual and group benefits; 5) International adaptation.<sup>12</sup>

The exhibition game was played on August 12, 1936 at 8:00 p.m. Mann planned to have a spectacular evening for baseball. He reported that before the two teams entered the Olympic Stadium, two American flags were erected on poles, and that, despite the poor lighting of the stadium, the game was well played.

Mann stated that<sup>12</sup> "[...] the scientific elements of the game naturally were not understood but when a smart play was executed, the players received a hand (p.303)". In fact, according to the Official report<sup>12</sup>, "[...] baseball was given its chance on the Olympic program and came through successfully (p.301)".

Immediately after the end of the exhibition, Dr. Carl Diem - the secretary of the German Organizing Committee - officially advised Mann and other delegates of the U.S team that the baseball demonstration of the 1936 Olympics had been "the finest of any sport that any nation ever put on at any Olympic Games (p.303)"<sup>12</sup>.

Although Japan bowed out of the contest, Matsumotto - participating in Berlin Games as a Japanese officer - served as one of the umpires. The Japanese authorities, immediately after the game, officially notified the U.S.A officials that they voted baseball on their program for the 1940 Olympic Games<sup>10</sup>.

### **Conclusions**

The 1936 Olympic baseball demonstration was an important accomplishment to the internationalization of baseball and its introduction to the Olympic World. The exhibition game played in Berlin was critically different from previous experiences of the

sport in 1904 and 1912. Leslie Mann's ability to build an influential networking, to plan and organize activities before, during and after the exhibition contributed to the realization of successful steps toward the promotion of the sport in international basis, culminating in the formation of the International Federation of Baseball.

By the end of the 1936 Olympic venture, Mann<sup>10</sup> remarked that the fact that “[...] so many nations were interested and joined the International Baseball Congress proved that Baseball was headed for world-wide play and competition ending on the Olympic program (p.305)”.

Any historical examination of the internationalization of baseball and its integration to the Olympic Movement must be aware of the influence and contributions of Leslie Mann.

## References

- 1 Cava P. Baseball in the Olympics. *Citius, Altius, Fortius*. 1991; 1 (1): 7-15.
- 2 Keys BJ. *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 2006.
- 3 Howell M, Prevenier W. *From reliable sources: an introduction to historical methods*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; 2001.
- 4 Müller N, Todt N. *Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937). Olimpismo: Seleção de textos 2015*. Porto Alegre: EDIPUCRS; 2015.
- 5 Swedish Olympic Organizing Committee, *Official Report of the Games of the V Olympiad, Stockholm: SOOC; 1913*.
- 6 Travaglini ME. *Olympic Baseball 1936: Was es Das?* Cooperstown: Society for American Baseball Research. 1985.
- 7 Mann CR. *Portrait of a champion: a Tribute to Leslie Mann* [cited feb 2013]. Available at <http://springfieldcollege.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15370coll2/id/8959/>.
- 8 Standard Union. *Leslie Mann Will Lecture with Movies*, (Brooklin: NY, 1920): 17. Weldon Library. Western University, Ontario, Canada. Available at <http://fultonhistory.com/Newspaper%2018/Troy%20NY%20Times/Troy%20NY%20Times%201927/Troy%20NY%20Times%201927%20-%2000420.pdf>.
- 9 National Baseball Hall of Fame Library. *Leslie Mann Files*. Cooperstown, NY: (undated).
- 10 Sayuri G-S. *Transpacific field of dreams: how baseball linked the United States and Japan in peace and war*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina; 2012.
- 11 Leslie M. *Demonstration events: Report of Manager of Baseball team*. American Olympic Committee *Official Report of the Games of the XI Olympiad: 1937*.
- 12 American Olympic Committee. *Official Report of the Games of the XI Olympiad: 1937*.