

With the absence of suitable post-war polo fields in Antwerp, polo matches at the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games were held in the city of Ostend



HIGH MORALE

David Agie explores why Belgium has polo to thank for the opportunity to host the post-war Olympic Games in 1920

It was a polo player who was instrumental in bringing the Olympic Games to Antwerp in 1920. Alfred Grisar, the father of Belgian polo, was part of a small committee focused on bringing the international sporting event to Belgium, in order to boost the spirits of the country following the end of the First World War.

Grisar was adamant that polo be featured in this edition of the Olympics, as it had been played previously when the Games were held in Paris in 1900 and London in 1904, and he believed it to be an excellent sport to foster the Olympic spirit.

But there was one small problem – the actual polo matches were not played

in Antwerp. In 1913, Grisar had started a new club in the Kapellen district of northern Antwerp, with an intention to form the Antwerp Polo Club. However, during the German occupation, the grounds were used as vegetable gardens. Fortunately, before the war, Grisar had also taken over the presidency of the Ostend Polo Club. The coastal city of Ostend was, in those days, a fashionable holiday resort for European high society and a polo club had been started there at the beginning of the 20th century. With polo games planned in the 1920 schedule, there was only one solution: to use the Ostend field, which had been less damaged by the war.

Four teams entered the competition: England, Spain, USA and Belgium. The tournament began on Sunday 25 July, with Spain easily defeating the United States by 13–3. The next day was windy and rainy, but the match between England and Belgium still took place, with the British winning 8–3. Two days later, the United States defeated the Belgians for third place. The 35-goal English team, led by Lord Wodehouse, won the Olympic championship on 29 July, defeating Spain 13–11 in a very closely fought match.

In 2020, Belgian Polo will celebrate the 100-year anniversary of the Antwerp Olympic Games, with a unique event commemorating this part of its polo history.