

OLYMPISM AND THE UNIVERSITY POPULAIRE

by HENRI MAGENAT

A few months ago the XVth. Olympic Games were celebrated at Helsinki. On the pacific battlefield of the Stadium, the Representatives of 69 Nations matched their strength against each other while competing in sporting events. The Olympic Movement has such prestige throughout the world, that sportsmen on both sides of the Iron Curtain, have answered the call and have gone to Finland.

Sport has sometimes been opposed to culture. Thus the athlete would be portrayed as a man of elementary education, in whom muscular strength prevails over intelligence, who is more concerned with the development of his body and his strength, in short a Narcissus well endowed with muscles but devoid of bains. On the other hand, the man who is well read and cultured is depicted as a dried up fossil, an intellectual who has become stunted, speculating on the abstract while entirely wrapped up in his science and knowledge.

In reality the true sport lover, the amateur, does not aim at physical development only, while diverting himself in the pursuit of sports, he seeks further, he looks upon sport as character training, a form of acquiring discipline and developing his sense of team spirit ; in short he endeavours to steep himself in the spirit of true sportsmanship and fair play.

The man who cultivates his mind seeks first of all, while increasing his learning, to define the full extent of the field of human knowledge, thus synthetizing all known facts into a connected whole. The fact that he then becomes better acquainted with the natural phenomena and all the known facts and truths pertaining to the reality of human nature, concedes him the privilege to know better how to stand in the society of men. One draws the ultimate conclusion that only one fact remains : the knowledge that one's place in the community will not be affected by the choice of the line one adopts, be it the study of the exact sciences or the moral sciences, but only the consciousness of one's proper place in society will become modified.

I shall not pretend that sport and study serve the same aim. I only want to say that they are not opposed to each other. In the field of sport, the physical development of the body is not what is aimed at, but it is a way. In education, studying is not the ultimate end but a means to an end. In actual fact, both aim at creating a personality, endowing it with high ideals which must prevail over all things in life.

The real object of the Olympic Movement is shown in the field of open and loyal sport

competitions and to promote peace and harmony amongst the people of the world. Real culture also aims at bringing men together. It is only in the great civilizations of the past, as found in Greece, that men have practised sports and gone in for athleticism, while Barbarians have always ignored sport. On the plane of International basis, sport and culture stand for the antithesis of war and the defenders of peace.

Thanks to his great determination, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, succeeded in renovating the Olympic Games in 1894. He then chose the city of Lausanne as the seat and head quarters of the International Olympic Committee. About thirty years later, instead of resting on his laurels, Pierre de Coubertin prepared himself for the Launching of « another battle » as he used to say. In an article published in a Review entitled « From the Olympic Games to the University for the working classes », the great man preconized the creation of « universities for the use of the people ». Endowed with great common sense, Pierre de Coubertin had already set out the curriculum as well as determined the four fundamental principles of culture. He wrote the following :

« The cultured man will not necessarily be the man who has mastered the art of rhetoric and sharpened his sense of knowledge while coming in contact with certain masterpieces, but it will definitively be the man who is clearly conscious of the four fundamental truths : a general notion of astronomy or the notion of the incommensurable universe in which our planet revolves. — The historical notion represented by the systematic recording of the achievements made by the past generations. — The notion of hygiene, dealing with the principles of health and how to maintain it in order to reach the highest degree of efficiency. — The notion of philosophy or the thirst for ideals, thus striving to find justice, truth, as well as studying the problem of after life which has always been the source of preoccupation and worry to the mind of the thinking man, thus differentiating him for evermore from animals.

» In this vast programme of studies what you propose to teach to manual workers ? How absurd ! will you say. They have neither the time nor the inclination for such extensive studies. I know all this, I am perfectly aware of the scorn and irony displayed by the public in general. When I wanted to restore the Olympic Games, people thought me mad ! ».

Without a doubt, Baron de Coubertin would be highly pleased to know that Lausanne, the seat of the International Olympic

Committee, possesses today her own « University Populaire » and that in proportion for its size, it is one of the most flourishing University in Switzerland. He was right in thinking that in order to create the citizen of the world, sport and culture, when made accessible to the working classes would, one day, become the best solution to secure universal peace. Sport and culture instil in men the hatred of destruction, the respect of the individual, the love of the community and the want of a friendly understanding amongst all men of goodwill.