

# ATHLETICISM, THE FUNDAMENTAL SPORT

by *Michel Clare*

Athleticism is not an ordinary form of sport. Practised as it is in its artificial and colourful setting within the boundaries of the stadia, on its lawns and cinder-tracks, in the quaint and unusual style of its sport fields and with the rules which regulate them, athleticism, on the face of all this, is not only a game but something more that pertains of another order : it is concerned with culture. It is spreading to all the most diverse spheres and opposes a vigorous resistance to all formulas and definitions.

Its roots reach far down in human history. Ever since there existed men who showed a desire to confront their skill, oppose their strength, the rudiments of athleticism came into being. The precise codification of the gamut of athletic sports which is applied to the important international meetings, draws its origin from the first games of men, the former religious memory has been handed down to us as we find it in the initiatory rites of the race, in the Taitin Games in Ireland dedicated to the celtic gods, dating three thousand years back, and in the Olympic Games which were competed at Olympia, every fourth year, at the solstice of Summer and which took place from the IXth century B. C. till the end of the IVth century of our modern era.

Greece was admirably described by Nietzsche as "the country which raised physical expression to the highest pitch." attached so great an importance to these competitions that their glory reflected its light and perpetuated its influence well beyond the centuries to come. The first athletic competitions of our modern era are the rejoinder of the Games performed in ancient days. The "Greek miracle" at Olympia, had already transposed the qualities required by the perfect hoplite who was very fit, who showed skill in throwing the javelin, well trained for war, from a specifically utilitarian basis to a free order, to an entertainment dedicated to the gods. The modern Olympic Games renovated on the initiative of a Frenchman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin are celebrated every four year ever since 1896.

## THE GOLD STANDARD OF THE PHYSICAL QUALITY

Man does not change. He has the same arms, the same legs, the same lungs, the same heart and the same nerves. The standard programmes of athleticism recapture under a more abstract form the elementary gestures of long ago : 100 metres, 200 metres, 400 metres, 800 metres, 1,500 metres, 5,000 metres, 10,000 metres ; 110 metres hurdle races 400 metres hurdles, running broad jump, high jump, pole vaulting, hop step and jump, putting the shot, discus throw, Javelin throw, Hammer throw, Marathon races and Relays.

"No gesture is more utterly natural than running, jumping and throwing." said Jean Giraudoux. "The transition in man from the act of walking to running is a gift that cannot be replaced by any machine." Weight recalls the act of throwing a stone and the long or high jump, the pole, the clearing of obstacles such as walls, hedges or rivers, with or without the help of a baton.

Thus in athleticism man finds himself once more. Without the help of an intermediary, he has the possibility, by means of the decametre and the chronometre (these impartial and pitiless witnesses) to gauge the agility of his muscles, the smoothness of his articulations, the quality of his heart as well as judge for himself the steadiness of his nerves. On the strength of this, athleticism is used to social ends as it stands as the basis of physical education and the physical training of the army. Failing this, one can proceed by delegation. The champion has the key to success in a far away world which can after all be realized. The modest employee who visits the stadium on Sunday, regains and has a glimpse of a world he has been dreaming about. After having witnessed the feat of throwing the javelin at a height of more than 80 metres or seen the putting of the shot weighing 7 kg. 275 at more than 18 metres, as well as the 100 m in 10" 2, he can go home, set himself quietly to sleep dreaming that he also "Could have done it." In our modern world where the opportunity to exercise the body is getting more and more scarce, one can easily guess what impetus can reflect a sport which is, as it were, the last instrument of measure put to our disposal : the gold standard of the physical quality.

One can draw a very fine lesson of humility as well. "What is the position of men in the Universe ?" The best of them all can hardly exceed by more than 200 metres the average set time for 35 kilometres. The record up to date is 20 kilometres 052.

## ATHLETICISM, THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

By means of this mathematical precision through which man is reasserting himself, athleticism has become a universal language. It is used under all latitudes, all round the clock, from the Colleges in Melbourne to the Universities of Los-Angeles, from the high plateaux of Chili to the Russian plains. Athleticism is the sport of pass-words and references. Figures suffice to create solid ties of friendship or awake a feeling of respect and complicity. There is no further need for a civil status. "So and so has won the 800m. in 1 minute 47 seconds," nothing more need to be said, it is a passport to all countries. A thrill of delight runs through the crowds thronging the stadia of Hungary when one

hears there that a British or a Swedish runner has just broken the world's record. This exploit is commented at length and discussed and analysed for hours. This explains the present passion for records which are above all a confrontation in spite of space and time.

Then there is youth, a factor that alone can explain this passion for inutility, this insane chasing after a dream which is usually born in the court of a college or in the familiar stadium, among fervent and enthusiastic friends. The athlete is in a better position than anybody else to embody youth as well as express its plenitude, its brevity, its taste for seriousness and frivolity at the same time its pride and its strength. He possesses an inborn and sometimes fearful lucidity concerning and marked in his own body's limitations. Here it is impossible to cheat with time. One day will come when one knows that one will never regain one's previous form. No champions are to be found lasting beyond the age at which Mozart died.

#### A CENTURY OF ATHLETICISM

Modern Athleticism dates back of one hundred years. It saw day-light in Great-Britain in the middle of the last century. A first sport gathering took place in 1849, organised by the Royal Military School. The following year, Exeter College of the University of Oxford inaugurated its first Championships. The idea caught on and in 1864, the Inter-Varsity Annual competitions between the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge took place of the first time.

In France, the revival of athleticism took an unusual form, it manifested itself in the form of races imitating horse racing. Young men had their meeting place in the Bois de Boulogne. Most of them were pupils at the Condorcet College and had discovered that they had aptitudes for running on foot, which they did by racing at top speed the hall of Saint-Lazare Station.

They organized the first athletic competitions which were run on similar lines to the ones of the traditional horse race meetings. They wore similar clothes, were dressed as jockeys, carried whips, going as far as laying bets on the pari mutual system. In the Spring 1882, the "Racing Club" was founded. One year later, on the Terrace of the Orangerie at the Tuileries, the "French Stadium" was created with the assistance of the pupils of Saint-Louis College. In time, this athletic Movement, still in its infancy, benefited by the influence of the Anglo-Saxon traditions, later on, it became influenced by the Greek tradition. Ever since 1892, Baron Pierre de Coubertin conceived the idea to rekindle the flame of the Olympic Games, they were celebrated four years later in the Stadium of Athens rebuilt on the lines of the ancient Stadium of Périclès. Thirteen nations participated in these Games. At the last Olympic Games held at Helsinki in 1952,

there were sixty-nine nations competing. In the meantime, the athletic movement has become universal and is one of the chief concern of governments.

#### THE BERLIN OLYMPIC GAMES IN 1936 FIX THE START OF THE NATIONALIST ERA IN SPORT

Here are the different phases of the evolution. In 1912, on the occasion of the Olympic Games in Stockholm, the International Federation established precise and strict rules concerning the organizing of the competitions and the homology of the records. The first official records, with a few exceptions, date from that year. After the first World War, athleticism increased its field of action and influence. It evolved from the individual plane to the collective basis. At the Game's held in Antwerp in 1920, twenty-nine nations participated, in the Games in Paris, four years later, the number of participating nations increased to forty-four. But these competitions on a large scale did not suffice. Ever since 1917, the Scandinavian countries are competing among themselves in Oslo.

The International competitions are growing in number. Shortly after 1930, athleticism reached its turning point and entered in its most dangerous phases. It became a State concern, as well as a means of education, of military preparation as well as an instrument of propaganda. The new totalitarian countries, particularly the Facism orders of Hitler and Mussolini, used the athletic movement most skilfully as an admirable scene behind which they could build up their prestige. The Third Reich secured the organisation of the 1936 Games which were held in Berlin. The display of power was gigantic, never before have Olympic Games reached such a pitch of brilliancy and been celebrated in such collective fervour. Such ostentatious display was far from reassuring. A skilful propaganda drew the following conclusions from these athletic performances that is : respective classifying of nations, and this heralded the coming of dangers of a more tragic nature : that is racial ascendancy. Slogans pervaded the stadium. The race after setting records is opened and goes so far as to create alarm within the International Olympic Committee. It condemned the nationalizing of sport to political ends and which foster national exaltation which is not conform to the Olympic Ideal. Scoring by countries is forbidden in the Olympic Games. But the world is on the move. Totalitarian countries spend fortunes on sports. The Western countries attempt to follow suit. In 1937, France appointed her first Under-Secretary of State, Mr. Léo Lagrange charged with directing sport. He decreed that athleticism is to be a "Fundamental sport".

THE ASCENDANCY OF THE  
POPULAR DEMOCRACIES IN SPORT,  
HOLDING 14 TITLES OUT OF A TOTAL OF 21,  
AT THE LAST EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

A new factor illustrate the post war period, namely the entry of the Popular Democracies in the field of competitive international sport, and in the first instance, in the athletic sports.

In few years time, these countries' progress has been stupendous. Thus on the occasion of the last European Championships held in Berne, from the 25th of August to the 29th 1954, out of twenty-one titles awarded seven were won by the U. S. S. R. athletes (400 metres, 5,000 metres, 110 metres hurdles, 400 metres hurdles, hop step and jump, hammer throw and Decathlon) 4 titles have been won by Hungary (800 metres, 3,000 metres steeple chase, broad jump, and relay 4 x 100 metres), 2 Championships were won by Czecho-Slovakia in the 10,000 metres and putting the shot), one went to Poland (throwing the Javelin). The Western Countries shared 7 championships titles among them. After examining the scores, it is possible to draw a graphic showing accurately the progressive trend of the various nations. In 1912, the chief world records for racing were the following : 100 m. : 10" ; 200 m. : 21"6 ; 400 m. : 48"2 ; 800 m. : 1'51"9 ; 1,500 m. : 3'55"8. (All these records were won by U. S. A. athletes) : 5,000 m. : 14'36"6 ; 10,000 m. : 31'20"8, (won by Finnish athletes). In 1935, on the eve of the Berlin Olympic Games, namely at an epoch which marks the end of the liberal era in athletics, the records were as follow : 10"3 in the 100 m. ; 20"3 in the 200 m. ; 46"2 in the 400 m. ; 1'49"8 in the 800 m. ; 3'48"8 in the 1,500 m. ; 14'17" in the 5,000 m. ; 30'6"2 in the 10,000 m. ; the U. S. A. were well ahead of the rest.

In 1954, the situation presents itself in the following manner : 100 m. : 10"2 (Owens U. S. A. ; 1936) ; 200 m. : 20"2 (Patton U. S. A. ; 1949) ; 400 m. : 45"8 (Rhoden Jamaica ; 1950) ; 800 m. : 1'46"6 (Harbig Germany ; 1939) ; 1,500 m. : 3'41"8 (Landy Australia ; 1954) ; 5,000 m. : 13'51" (Kuts U. S. S. R. ; 1954) ; 10,000 m. : 28'54"2 (Zatopek Czecho Slovakia ; 1954).

The U. S. A. has been losing ground and the Popular Democracies have asserted their prepondancy in the long distance racing contests where preparatory work and intensive training play a vital part.

THE CHAMPION INCARNATES THE PRESTIGE  
OF THE NATION

The destiny of Emil Zatopek who won three Olympic Championships at Helsinki, is a striking example of this new trend of thought. He is a wonderful means of propaganda. His triumphs for the Czechs represent and foretell of the prestige of a new

world. He is looked upon as a herald and precursor of the times to come. At Prague, the portrait of the champion is displayed at the streets' corners. His biography is read in the schools.

The causes which have brought upon these achievements in athleticism by the Eastern countries are simple. Sport is looked upon as a vital national activity there and has its own Ministry. Considerable sums are devoted to it. The Champion enjoys a privileged existence. The delicate problem of Amateuism which has been the stumbling block of athleticism has been settled at long last. According to the international rules, it is strictly forbidden for an amateur to derive a pecuniary gain of the practice of sport, as this would cause him to be disqualified. Thus as it could be proved that the world record men, Jules Ladoumègue in 1932 and Gunder Haegg in 1945 had accepted cash prizes for running, they have been disqualified for life. The U. S. S. R. and her satellites have created the title of the athlete-official such as policemen, military or physical training? Professors. In private life, the factory or the syndicate take charge of the Champion. The Rules are thus respected virtually. During the period when the competitions take place, the champion is at liberty to go in for training as he wishes. The progress and the achievements in contemporary athleticism are determined precisely by improved methods of training both in quality and quantity. According to the scientific data and more particularly medical data, methods are improving. It is known that saturation dots not exist in this respect. Heart specialists namely have discovered that the heart is the muscle which adapts itself best to effort and is the easiest to exercise. The foot runner can train for five or four hours per day without incurring any risk to hurt his organism. When all is said and done, winning form comes to those who have spent most hours on training their leg muscles when they are called to run in a race. The remaining factor is a matter of selection and in the Popular Republics, nothing is left to chance. This year in Hungary (9,000,000 inhabitants) more than 300,000 school children have been participating in athletic competitions. Outstanding talents are thus easily detected. The best performers are retained. They are then put in the care of national trainers, even put in the hands of skilful experts. Training camps are operating where the prospective athlete finds the best conditions for attaining perfection. He has no anxiety for the future. The champions once their career is over, help train and form the ranks of the coming generations. Posts of trainers and instructors in the army or in the factories are offered them. In those countries, nobody is discarded as one finds elsewhere, among the "sham amateurs" who have benefitted by their athletic achievements and who find themselves defrauded of any social standing once their youth has vanished.

Nothing is overlooked. The people are invited to attend fetes, mass demonstrations and are joining in this enthusiasm. Propaganda blows the trumpets of Prestige. Stadia are being built, and collective work makes it possible to have them perfect. On the days of the huge athletic demonstrations, forty, sixty thousand even up to hundred thousand people tush to throng the seats. The staging and scenic effect are perfect and carefully thought out. The sport gatherings over there, do not resemble our meetings with their monotony and slowness. A new form of romanticism has been created. The events take place with clock like precision and are conducted like an orchestra. The opening and the closing ceremonies are outstanding in their magnitude and brilliancy :

parades, flags hoisted everywhere, folklore dancing, resounding brass bands, all this pageantry is illuminated by huge projectors piercing the nights shadows.

How can we counteract this state of things? the liberal nations have in their majority disappeared from the international foreground. The countries where the sport tradition is over one hundred years old, alone retain their place, as they look upon athleticism more in the nature of a cultural attainment than an entertainment. These countries are Finland, Great-Britain and the United States. The last two countries retain their place chiefly on account of their recruiting system from their Colleges and their Universities, where their pedagogy is based for the greater part on athleticism, sport is considered as a complement to the intellectual work.

But for how long will it last ?