

# Pierre de Coubertin

Born in Paris on January 1st 1863

Died in Geneva on September 2nd 1937

In memory of the 20th Anniversary of his death

*by Carl Diem, Cologne.*

(Translated from German)

Pierre de Coubertin belonged to a French aristocratic family who owned land and a castle. Somewhat of a dare-devil character, he was destined for the Army to which he was called by family tradition, but he soon gave it up. After studying in Paris and London, and travelling extensively in the United States, he decided to promote a vast movement of educational reform of the youth of his time : 'Youth deprived of all sports wastes away when it assumes a purely intellectual formation.'

When speaking of him, learned University professors shook their heads, but could not reproach him with opposing all kinds of intellectual formations since Baron de Coubertin was himself an erudite who possessed wide knowledge both in the field of science and in sociology dealing with the evolution of nations. He was capable of conversing with equal ease and knowledge on art, history or on the psychology of the mind of the people. He had a great command of the language, blending refinement with supercilious irony, he wrote with a vivid and racy style had a keen sense of humour and possessed a sound judgment in matters of politics. He had no thirst for glory nor did he seek any educational post of professorship... his only concern was to reform the system of education.

He was an original character, who paid a daily visit to his club in order to practise fencing, he also attended the riding school, he even conceived a new kind of sport : fencing on horseback. He organized races

in the Bois-de-Boulogne and football matches as well as regattas on the river Seine.

He became a fervent admirer of the genial British pedagogue : Thomas Arnold who was Headmaster of Rugby School and who succeeded in bringing about an outstanding transformation in the modern educational system of England. P. de Coubertin followed his example later on, when he aimed at introducing sport in school in France in order to counteract the effect of an exaggerated intellectual formation, he laid stress on the training of individual willpower. He even went the length of suggesting a new method of teaching geometry as well as giving new directives for teaching geography and history. Fully aware of the need for social reforms, P. de Coubertin became a precursor in the struggle for social reform and justice.

'The new world needs men who have new ideas, we must evaluate towards a new system of education.' The change observed by him in the educational system in Britain, Pierre de Coubertin also found in the United States, where he was sent by the Ministry for public Education. A vast exchange of ideas took place between professors belonging to universities on both sides of the Atlantic, and led him to believe in the necessity of introducing and establishing a real reform of the educational system based on the new concepts. In his mind, already steeped in the spirit of culture and his love for Hellenism, the idea of reviving the Olympic Games took root. Moreover, Pierre de Coubertin affirmed that this project had been brewing for

sometimes, he mentioned that plans to this end had been put forward by a few originals living at that time. But P. de Coubertin is the only one who actually effected a practical realization of the great idea.

Carried away by Pierre de Coubertin's enthusiasm and forcible persuasion, the International Sport Congress which he summoned in 1894, decided that the Olympic Games were to be revived in a modern form modelled on his suggestions. Throughout these Conferences, de Coubertin managed to deal diplomatically with the participants, allowing them to squabble over trivial matters as long as they agreed to support him in the acceptance of the fundamental principles of Olympism. He was always profoundly respectful of the truth, he even declared : 'Germany brought to light the ruins of ancient Olympia, why should it not be the turn of France to restore the splendour of former days ? !'

Pierre de Coubertin's project for the revival of the Olympic Games contained the all important measure that they were to be held every fourth year and according to the Olympic ideals and principles. *The aims of an Olympic champion must be : to honour his family and his native town but he must exclude all material GAIN for himself.*

P. de Coubertin did not in anyway wish to rebuild historical ruins, as he expressed it : 'The Games of our modern era are to be performances of modern sports as understood and practised in our age.' *According to him and his concepts the programme of the Olympic Games must of course be modifiable and adapted to circumstances ; the sites where the Games are to be held must also vary since the world of today does not possess a sanctuary in common to all as in former days : the universal character found in the Games of ancient times must be retained in the Olympic Games of today.* Therefore, it can truly be said that P. de Coubertin accomplished a great humanitarian work when he created in our times the true universal meeting of all races, according to his words : 'All games, - and all nations !'

Baron de Coubertin had another inspiration prevailing in his mind : the Games were to be a type of modern Festival but ruled by the laws of art. They were not to be a mere temporary meeting of "world champions, but the interdependence of sport with the unity found in civilization had to be maintained. The Games celebrated in Athens in 1896 were over when he began to put into practice the idea that sport must be linked with art, since the sport Programme had to be enhanced by music and show a harmony of body

Thus the Olympic Games in de Coubertin's mind were a form of Congress scientifically organized in sport championships based on art and becoming a real Festival of all nations. I can proudly say that on the eve of his death, Baron de Coubertin could

reflect that this aim had been reached on the occasion of the Olympics celebrated in Berlin in 1936.

He suggested that the Opening of the Games should be marked by the singing of a new *Olympic Hymn* (from Richard Strauss) his wish was fulfilled when they performed the *Halleluja Chorus* of Haendel, and at the Closing Ceremony, they performed the *Ninth Symphony* of Beethoven accompanied by works by Egk and Orff. Thus in one single performance were to be found intermingled, masterpieces of Antiquity and works of our modern times. Nations did not content themselves with sending their best athletes, but they also sent to the Games their youth including folkloric groups and students, when Sven Hedein was called upon to address them.

P. de Coubertin no longer held the presidency of the International Olympic Committee which was founded by him but he never failed to go on guiding it with tact and prudence, while giving it the benefit of his experience as a distinguished humanist. No better proof of his noble conception of mankind could be given that, at the age of sixty-two, he relinquished his functions as president while reserving himself the right to advise as to the choice of his successor. To the surprise of all present, when he pronounced his farewell speech at the Congress of Prague, in 1925, he laid stress on the necessity of keeping the Olympic ideals intact and he concluded by the following warning : '*The organization of the Games must be simplified, we must have calm and serenity and less festivities... Fair or Temple... it is up to the athletes to choose... Sportsmen make your choice !...'*

A true sportsman with a creative mind. P. de Coubertin died at the age of seventy four and a half. He left to posterity numerous writings, summing up the histories of various sports as well as writing a kind of Universal History and works on Pedagogy. According to his wish, the German Government appointed an International Olympic Institute which, among other tasks, was charged with the publication of the Coubertin's works. After the War, for some unknown reason, this Institute was transferred to Lausanne and sank into oblivion. Thus the essential factor is missing : the means of conceiving and supervising all the events pertaining to the Olympic Movement. Without this central control, Olympism does not run its proper course. We are aware of the fact that, today, the true Olympic spirit is dying. The three Executive Bodies (The International Olympic Committee, the National Olympic Committees and the International Federations) lack the determination to see that the ideals conceived by de Coubertin are respected since they are the requirements found in all cultures and all civilization. Proof of this is given by the fact that Art Competitions have been

abandoned, science has been cast aside and there is a lack of active resistance against the noxious influence of professionalism.

Now, the Olympic idea remains a living desire, an ideal.

State amateurism and Professionalism are inevitably bound to destroy the Olympic principle and lead it to its ultimate end. Another danger is looming ahead : the overcrowding of the Olympic Programme. The sense of measure displayed by the Greeks when the Games had to be adapted to human capacity is no longer respected by the officials of today. Everybody fights for his own ends and to secure his right of participation to the Festival ; as soon as the desire to revert to right proportion is felt, a group of self-seeking people oppose the measure.

The Programme is overloaded with all types of competitions and individual contests,

the real team events are disappearing. The larger the celebrations of the Games, the greater the number of officials and the less likely we are to find the qualities wanted in a true amateur sportsman... The press turns this state of affairs to account and profits by it though it does not give a true picture of the Games as they ought to be conceived by cultured people.

Let us be clear-sighted... every sentence uttered by de Coubertin lays special emphasis on the fact that the 'Olympic ideal is an ardent desire of man to reach a superior formation. Failing the realization of this ideal, the Olympic Games may well vanish in smoke and in noise.'

For the future too. let us recall the meaning of his message when he said : 'Fair or Temple, it is up to the athletes to choose, as it is impossible to have both... a decision must be taken... Sportsmen ! make your choice !'