
CO-EXISTENCE IN SPORT

Wide though the gulf may be, it is by no means always easy to distinguish between nationalism and patriotism, especially in sport, where the temptation to make political capital out of athletic performances has – to put it mildly – not always been resisted. Thus the news that a committee of enquiry has been set up in India to find the reasons for the poor showing of Indian athletes in international contests is of much interest, for it admits by implication that sport today carries an ambassadorial function. In fact, a champion runner or a world-beating football eleven often achieves for a country more than a whole sackful of friendship treaties.

Yet however acute the sense of ‘nationhood’ in the world today, it has not succeeded in stifling the spirit of sportsmanship which, like art, knows no frontiers. We expect this spirit in large measure of course at the Empire Games, but it was also in evidence at the recent European Athletic and Swimming Championships. Even in the World Cup – and football has a notoriously explosive effect on emotions – the competition was played

this time with remarkably few ‘incidents’. By the time the Final was reached, most nations had finished weeping over the failure of their idols and were ready to accord the laurel wreath to the team which so richly deserved it.

There will always, of course, be some element of nationalism in an international contest, and it would be naïve to expect human beings to be above such feelings. True, in the past, nationalism has led to many ugly happenings in the world of sport, but we must also remember that rivalry between nations has also helped to raise standards to their present level. In any event, international contests have proved to be so popular that, if anything, their number will increase. In the circumstances, then, we should remember that, although love of country is by no means synonymous with sportsmanship, one does not have to exclude the other. Co-existence is not only a political term.

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