

# Colonization of Sport

by *Pierre de Coubertin* (written about 1930)

In the course of the 1923 Session held in the Capitol in Rome under the patronage of the King of Italy, the International Olympic Committee decided to 'conquer Africa' and in order to achieve this purpose created the African Games.

They were to be held regularly within the periphery of this vast continent, their aim being to get the natives to realize gradually the beneficial influence they would gain by the practice of sport. All those who later on remembered the peril which jeopardized the existence of the negroes, realized the valuable asset the Games would be to them and were surprised at the way this new venture was received. The Far-East Games were already in existence, they exercised a deep and prompt pedagogical influence in China, Japan and in the Philippines Islands. Similar innovations were organized in other areas of the world. In India, there was a talk of holding Hindu Games. This happened to be the 'Kindergarten' of Olympism, which the International Olympic Committee approved of on principle right from the start. The January 1912 Olympic Review already dealt with this matter and opposed the view that a victory over the dominant race in the field of sport by the people in bondage may have a dangerous effect and risk to be exploited by the local opinion as an enticement to rebellion. The Germans, settled in their well equipped African colonies, had not been afraid when they introduced sport practice to the natives. The British in India, although not very much inclined to introduce the Olympic Movement among the natives, did not set their face against it. Italy accepted the innovation with good grace although she did not have time to consider the matter thoroughly. It was France who set her face against this idea. Algiers had been honoured with the organization of the first African Games. The Algerians, supported if not egged on by the Metropolis, declined this honour. In this way the inauguration was put off for two years, when Egypt, in her quality of senior country, was entrusted with the task of organizing the first Games. Alexandria built a magnificent Stadium. The Organizing Committee presided over by Mr. A. Bolanaki, performed wonders in order to have everything in running order for the date stipulated, indeed everything was ready in time, when suddenly it was heard that the Great Powers under some sort of pretexts were backing out of facilitating the arrival of the colonial teams. The Games were then cancelled... They are still waiting to take place!

We are not concerned with the undercurrents which caused this failure, but it is now a known fact that the reason which caused this opposition to fail to understand that truth and loyalty would subsist, is the notion that the prestige of the Metropolis might be jeopardized by colonial successes. How is it possible to think that, in our modern world, one can hinder indefinitely the development of sport and limit the practice of sport to certain races and to certain countries? Three years later, we had the Colonial Exhibition in Paris (1931. *Ed.*) which commemorated the centenary of French Africa, it showed the progress realized by sport in that country. Do not be mistaken however, the situation is not yet frank and definite. Sport there meant chiefly spectacular sport manifestations. It did not mean at all that natives were encouraged to go in for sport, nor did it give them facilities and encouragement for their training in manly games but above all, it failed to make them understand the true philosophical value and pedagogic importance of the motto we alluded to the other day, in connection with the African medal created in 1923 by the International Olympic Committee as a medal of encouragement, on it were engraved the following words: 'athletae proprium est se ipsum noscere, ducere et vincere'.

Here we consider the matter only in relation to the main precepts of sportive pedagogy. Are these precepts applicable to the native races? Can they be adapted to their often very primitive mode of living? The answer is yes, even entirely so. The beauty of these precepts lies in the fact that they are sufficiently humane to suit all conditions of men from the semi-savage state to that of the ultra-civilized state. Of course, when dealing with men, one must take into account the difference of temperaments. The Gabon and people of Polynesia do not call for the same régime. One gathers that on the whole, athletic sports, chiefly football, must prevail over others; they are easy to organize and absorb a large number of participants. If, in certain European countries, we outdo the number of team sports and have reached the point where team sports become nefarious to individual sports, an excess which often passes unobserved, a similar state of things has not yet been observed in countries which are submitted to the influence of colonization. Yet it does not mean that individual sports should be neglected in those countries. If the prejudice, which we alluded to above, caused the failure

of the first 'African Games' is to subsist for a certain time yet, it may perhaps be felt in a lesser degree in individual sports than in team sports which always call for an idea of battle and final victory to be obtained by a team of athletes representing a certain country or a certain city. The races on foot, all the different forms of jumping, climbing, throwing, aquatic sports, gymnastic exercises demand, even if we discard all forms of fencing, on principle, a programme sufficiently extensive to absorb a copious element of sport activity.

There are certain forms of sport activities among natives which localized to a region, sometimes even to a district, should not be discouraged, on the contrary, they ought to

be encouraged, but they do not pretend to be anything else but a form of entertainment and recreation. If we want to extend to natives of colonized countries, what we call boldly the benefits of 'sport civilization', it is imperative that we allow them to belong to the vast sport system which entails rules and regulations and competitive sports results performances which form the basis of this civilization.

Many metropolitan administrations still shrink from taking this decisive step, but we must reach a decision... otherwise the natives will be organizing themselves. It may after all be the best solution for them if not for their leaders.