

BACK TO OLYMPIA

by Jean-Francois Brisson, Paris

Imperturbable, the Olympic pendulum swings at intervals, each equal in time to the four years of the Olympiad, but unequal as regards size, physical aspects and geography which play a lesser role than politics in picking the cities where the Games are to be held.

After a hop, skip and jump shift from London to Helsinki, a modest post-war start, the distances between the host cities, Melbourne, Rome, Tokyo, Mexico City, all have

exceeded 6,000 miles. And so the Games have gone since, from continent to continent, quite natural in the rocket age.

With distance no longer a factor, the question of climate remains. Only a few degrees above and below the tropic of Cancer separate Tokyo and Mexico City, yet here it is altitude that presents a problem, not latitude. The Mexican capital is 7,347 ft., a mere nothing of some 1½ miles, above sea level.

Science is at a loss, for, at this height you relax easily but are short of breath. Since biology has been trailing astronautics, acclimation of athletes has proved to be more difficult than adapting Bengal tigers and polar bears to countries in the temperate zones. To get used to Tokyo, some Europeans will go take up residence in Japan forty days before the opening ceremonies. Will getting accustomed to the rarefield air of Mexico City require several months ?

Eight thousand champions from a hundred and twenty nations are at this moment preparing for the 19th Olympiad of Modern Times, and this sort of preparation is yearly becoming more exacting and more frenzied.

In less than a century, our Games are already being menaced by the kind of breakdown that spelled the death of those of ancient times. Bigness is a sign of degeneration and the lack of sense of proportion is definitely apparent as much in the size of the assemblage as in the desperate competition for medals.

After Mexico City the pendulum will undoubtedly swing toward Europe, as neither Africa nor South America are yet economically strong or stable enough to organize such an event. However, for 1972, Moscow will be a competitor. Paris, like Lyons, let its chance go by and the stubborn insistence on cluttering up the Bois de Vincennes with a giant arena, as anachronistic as it is costly, won't make any difference.

What is necessary to save the Games and even, perhaps, to attract them to French soil, is a new idea which is, at the same time, a return to their origins. A return to Olympia. Not to the site but to the spirit of Olympia.

Here it is. I offer it, without any illusions, to the venerable gentlemen upon whom the fate of the institution depends :

Once and for all remove the gathering of the world's top athletes from the sprawling, polluted, urban complexes. The cities will take a back seat in favour of the country. There should be recreated, around what, in the words of Hébert, had already become nothing more than an international muscle fair, the atmosphere of a village festival, the atmosphere prevailing in the springtime of man's history, according to Coubertin's wishes.

For this, provide a perimeter staked out in a setting close to nature, as far as possible from a city. A rustic, bowl type stadium, like the very first one, just a hole with the excavated material shaped into tiers of seats.

This high point would be the theater for all contests. No roof-covered spaces. The swimming pool would be next to the track inside the stadium. For protection from the weather, a thin roof supported by taut radial cables. No roads around the site, no automobile traffic. For the competing athletes and spectators camping grounds, villages of canvas or light structures. The only concessions to the century and progress would be hygiene and communications facilities, water supply lines, electric cables and telegraph wires.

Television would reach those who preferred the comforts of home. The only people on the spot would be the young, and true sportsmen, selected because they are used to the open air and to travelling on foot.

This bucolic setting without frills would call for cutting down on ceremonies, anthems and standards, happily compensated for by extra dividends of joy, enthusiasm and fraternity.

Once the Olympic flame was put out, with the crowds dispersed and the return of silence, life would go on.

A new city, born of the Games, would develop as dictated by circumstances.

It would be called Olympia.