
Man, sport and nature

Conference given by Mr. Giulio Onesti, president of C.O.N.I. and member of the I.O.C. since October 1964, on the opening of a symposium organized by the Dante Alighieri Association in Rome.

It is not up to me to define the essential points of a debate that great speakers, experts in philosophical, sociologic and medical science will conduct with certainly more capacity and specific competence. As president of the National Italian Olympic Committee, I will refer to the part — which at one time was very small and is now becoming increasingly bigger — that sport is being recognized by scholars and investigators of the facts of human society. But before entering into the merits of this speech, I feel it necessary, to define certain basic concepts, so as to avoid that these be confused or badly used.

When we speak of sport, many persons direct

their thoughts towards Olympic Games or international football matches. The idea immediately comes to mind of a competitive event at high level, in which few participate and which many attend. Now the exceptional event is sport, but not everything is sport.

It is a question of competitive or agonistic sport that became famous in antiquity through the means of the periodical games in ancient Greece and which now finds its main interpretation in the modern Olympic Games.

There is also a sport of pleasure which excludes the competitive aspect as it is found to please because of the movement, ability, and capacity involved for the purpose of well-being and recreation.

There is an educative and formative sport which serves, above all, for children and youngsters to better their physical qualities and to

educate them towards respect for hygienic rules, to prepare them for discipline and obedience.

In a very general way, these are the categories of sport. They are all useful and they are all linked together. But if educative sport is missing, that of entertainment loses its principles, and that of competition loses the basis of development and concentration. This is why, even though the C.O.N.I. represents the sports federations and the societies that practice competitive sports, we have never ceased to urge, for some 20 years now, the State to dedicate attention and means to institute and spread educative sport.

Almost no one ignores the famous wording of *mens sana in corpore sano* and all use the precious citation with satisfaction. But is it lived up to ? That is the question.

But let us come back to our point. It is that sport is of prime importance for the health, hygiene, and physical and moral well-being of the young generations which, after all, are the main source of wealth of any nation.

Sport, in its essence, supports the return to nature, or even better, maintains contact with nature. The present concentration within cities now prevents millions of young human beings from being able to enjoy the vision and pleasure of fields, grass, and rivers ; they become insignificant inhabitants of a jungle of cement, which unscrupulous speculation has defrauded of any sign of green. Sport might provide a shelter to these "orphans" by offering youngsters the possibility of exercising or playing in parks, or at least in those areas of recreation or green that the most up to date cities should absolutely include within their precincts.

You will well remember how our lately lamented secretary general, Dr. Bruno Zauli, dedicated himself to the fight against certain basic errors in our town-planning system, invoking the safeguarding of green areas to be offered to youth for the most innocent of all distractions. We can but hope that his voice will not remain unheard.

A sports ground is but a representation on a small scale of a natural scenery ; the swimming pool is but a sea or a lake in miniature ; the less natural area is that of a gymnasium but the exercises that take place in a gymnasium should be integrated with those that take place in a gymnasium should be integrated with those that take place in the open air. An excellent exercise, in any case, is that of cross-country sport. Even boxers, who generally speaking are the best prepared athletes, undertake much footing exercises in the open and, when it is necessary, go and chop wood. Give children the possibility of practising their exercises in natural surroundings and you will note how they will acquire joy and vigor.

This connection of faith to nature, or at least to a surrounding which reproduces and imitates it, is destined to continue and to become habitual. The young child living in the city, once he is

brought into contact with nature, re-discovers something wonderful which had perhaps already existed in him but which had been taken away from him. A society that forbids the happiness of a connection with nature to children is certainly committing a crime. As Jose Maria Cagigal wrote, the present day inclinations, to the contrary, tend towards a mechanization of youngsters also ; so that a young boy who dedicates all his time to study is looked upon by his parents to be perfect, almost like a machine, *that never misses a beat*. The desperate race towards sport and nature is an attempt of salvation by man who does not wish to become a member of Huxley's "New World". Sport, in other words, acts as an anchor ; sport provides entertainment and distraction, educative sport is a cure.

It is thus that we sportsmen, who are generally considered to be maniacs, and at the best of times, nice maniacs, to be preachers of useless things, today suddenly find ourselves centered within matters of topical interest. We are moved by the zeal with which theorists of "spare time" include sport amongst the activities that could fill in that time. They arrive very late and miss part of the main theme ; in effect, before sport of entertainment, society should have faced and found a solution to the problem of basic sport. It is this that creates a sports consciousness and gives to human beings, young and receptive, an initiation which will remain with them for the rest of their lives.

The return to nature is indeed a noble idea, which found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau its liberal prophet. But isolation from nature is really a crime that should never be committed. Having lived in a period of industrial revolution, Pierre de Coubertin foresaw the function of sports in the society which was forming around him. Emerging from the melting-pot that was beginning to burn him, Coubertin invoked a sports education for young children and a practice of sport for both young and adults.

The international sport movement, to which we belong, has given us an ideology which is often ridiculed by men of culture. The fact of not wishing to examine the sense of such an ideology, claiming it to be something inferior and secondary, has of consequence brought about an aggravation of the problems, in the face of which the most brilliant and trained minds are beginning to wither.

The men of sport have always preached the symbiosis of sport and culture whereas too many men of culture prefer to leave sport in the dark. Nonetheless sport will go on and affirm its nature of a complementary, but useful, activity and continue along its path for the good of all. Perhaps the man of tomorrow will extend a hand to it, invoking its benefits and accepting those incredible antitheses that are, for example, foot-racing in an epoch of jet traction and rowing by oar in a century of atomic turbines. G. O.