

Sport in Spain

Sport in Spain conforms, as in every country in the world, to the traditions, the customs and the destiny of its people. Hunting, fishing and tribal combat gave birth to races, jumping matches, and jousting and enabled the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula to benefit from the educational and social value which sport, over the centuries, has held for mankind. By reason of its strategic importance, Spain has always been a prey to war and the object of invasions. Thus one after the other, Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Romans left their imprint on the peninsula which, some centuries later, became Spain. The positive contribution of an invasion is to leave the mark of a good civilization and culture. From this point of view it was the Greeks and Romans, who left the deepest imprint traceable in the early Spanish customs, life and language.

The Mediterranean, the « Mare Nostrum » of the Romans, has been the common denominator for the peoples of its eastern and western shores. Thus the Iberian East coast was the gateway of the ancient civilizations.

The beginning.

Spanish sport started in Catalonia. The Greeks, after landing at Ampurias (former Ampurion), were quick to build a stadium on the soil of the peninsula. In the ruins of this Greek city, built on one of the most peaceful sites of what is now the Costa Brava, one can still see amid the traces of Greek roads and the substructures of palaces and temples, the circle of the stadium of Ampurias, which dates back several centuries before Christ.

In 1955, the Second Mediterranean Games began with an important ceremony in Ampurias, where the symbolism of water was made to replace the symbolism of the olympic flame. The athlete in the first stage of the relay took seawater from the site of the former Greek port and carried it in a silver urn. Over the 160 km (100 miles) separating Ampurias from Barcelona the athletes ran in relays to bring the urn to the Montjuich stadium, where the Second Mediterranean Games were held. On arrival the urn was emptied into a large fountain replacing the basin bearing the olympic flame. Thus the water became the symbol of all the countries lapped by the Mediterranean.

Further evidence of the athletic activity of the first inhabitants of modern Spain is to be found. In the north of the country, on the Cantabrian coast, in the famous caves of Altamira, which contain drawings of hunting scenes and bull-fights, ancient history teaches us that man had already achieved a surprising degree of physical maturity.

The Basque people, who were opposed to the efforts of the invaders to integrate them, took refuge in the mountains. In this way they kept their language, their customs and their habits, among which unmistakably sporting practices are traceable which have remained to the present day, like stone-throwing and weight-lifting. The Basque spirit of rivalry made them immediately give a competitive character to their physical actions and gave birth to many events like tree-felling, stone-moving, etc.

Foreign influences and traditions.

The Roman conquest brought us, besides its law, its language and a new view of the world, a new conception of sport. The Roman amphitheatres (Tarragona, Sagunta, Merida) served as a setting for drama but also for wrestling matches, pankratos (a combination of wrestling and boxing) and, later, during the Roman decadence, for fights between men and animals. The latter survived as Spanish customs.

The Roman arenas, gymnasiums and sports grounds had kept up the Greek tradition but had also systemized the physical exercises. It is fair to regard them as the basis of Spanish sport.

But if the Greeks practised sport for a religious and aesthetic purpose, the Romans introduced violence, passion and a spectacular and popular element in contests which could not help but affect a hearty, emotional and passionate people as the Spaniards already were. The life of the "ring", as a part of the national life, became fashionable. Running races, jumping, wrestling, *pankratos*, boxing and chariot-racing were adopted in the peninsula, especially in Catalonia, for if the Greeks had installed themselves at Ampurias, the Romans chose Tarraco, present-day Tarragona, which can claim the title of oldest Spanish capital. Several high-ranking figures of imperial Rome lived in Tarragona (Caesar, Herod, Saint Paul), where the palaces of olden times still stand.

At the same time, a people so essentially Mediterranean and sea-going could hardly turn their backs on the sea. It figured in their leisure pastimes and served for their competitions. Rowing and sailing were honoured sports. The race for four gallions abreast, which the Romans instituted in Tarraco, was immediately adopted by the Catalan people. They practised it incessantly, as rowing slaves and as free men. In the sailing a triangular sail called "Ilatina" was used, which also figured in the inter-city regattas.

Invasion by the Visigoths during the fifth century, with the enthronement of Ataulfe as its first king, led the country into the darkness of the Middle Ages. Life lost its Roman splendour. In the seventh century the Arabs invaded Spain

and this invasion, in spite of the misfortunes that it brought, was very important for the country. The Arabs held fights between athletes and wild beasts and found in Spain the ideal place for bull-fights. Without claiming that bull-fighting is a sport, one must admit that fights between man and beast are often linked with sport and art. For instance, in the arena where fights between "torero" and bull take place, one will watch from the fifteenth century onwards (and sometimes even today) the pass of the "garrocha", which is a sort of pole-jump with a live bull as the vault. Goya magnificently depicted this performance, at the end of the eighteenth century (see the illustration on page 45).

The "pelota basca", running races, and games of skill developed at the same time as chivalrous jousting and tournaments. The horse-riding tradition of Spain goes back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and Cervantes evokes it in his "Quijote de la Mancha", in "Rinconete y Cortadillo" and in his delightful "Novelas Ejemplares".

The conquest and then the colonisation of America prove further the devotion of the Spanish people to horses, which they introduced into America.

Evolution.

Sport as we conceive it in the modern view had its origins in Spain in the middle of the nineteenth century. The "Centre Excursionista de Catalunya", founded in Barcelona in 1870, was the first sports society to discover winter sports and mountaineering, in the romantic vein that was then the fashion. Cycling, tennis, hunting and shooting were select sports, limited to aristocratic circles. At the end of the century football made its appearance, first in Barcelona, then in Madrid and Bilbao. The Swiss and the English played with their Castilian, Catalanian and Basque friends. They founded the three most important all-sports clubs in Spain : Barcelone FC, Atletico de Bilbao and Real-Madrid.

Equestrian sports were organized. Thanks to the Spanish stables and their finebred horses, major competitions and races were organized. Athletics appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century, in a firmly indigenous context. Barcelona saw the first athletics meeting celebrated and the first sports federation founded. Hockey and gymnastics, too, found their efficient and devoted pioneers. The olympic ideal took root easily in this country. On 16 June 1894, during the congress held in the amphitheatre of the Sorbonne, Baron de Coubertin made contact with the Spanish sports leaders. Among the 13 nations represented, Spain took its place beside France, Greece, Russia, Italy, Holland, the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Sweden, Belgium, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

Since the renewal of the Olympic Games, Spain has been closely involved in the Olympic Movement and its activities.

Today.

Spanish sport enjoys a very large popular audience. In spite of the rather modest number of licensed football players (52 000), every Sunday 4 million Spanish people fill the stands in their stadiums. Barcelona has one of the finest football stadiums, capable of taking 110 000 spectators, and Madrid, with its Santiago Bernabeu stadium, is possessor of the largest in the country, holding 130 000. Football is the most popular sport in Spain. If the Second Mediterranean Games were the revelation of modern athletics, the Second Spanish-American Games, which enjoyed an extraordinary success in Madrid, showed Spanish athletes the full extent of their possibilities in large competitions.

The physical education Act was to supply them with the financial means : it makes physical education and sport compulsory at all levels of schooling. They are also a part of military training. Furthermore, the Act gave rise to the National Institute of Physical and Sports Education and obliged the municipalities to build sports facilities to cater for the number of their inhabitants. It also gives legal and tax protection to all sportsgrounds and installations.

Spain's Olympics debut goes back to the 1900 Games and its first award to Antwerp in 1920 when its football team won a silver medal in the Olympic tournament. In 1928 riders won. Spain its first gold medal with their victory in the Grand Prix des Nations.

Spanish sport has so far been distinguished mainly by individual achievements. However its hockey team won a bronze medal in Rome at the Games of the 17th Olympiad.

Before that, the cox Santiago Amat had come third in the Los Angeles Olympic Games, and the Spanish riders had confirmed their superiority in taking another gold medal at the same Games in 1932.

The gymnast Joaquim Blume was one of the great hopes of Spanish sport : alas, a year after being proclaimed European champion in gymnastics, he died in an air crash.

The evolution of Spanish sport continues. Fresh generations continually improve on the performances of the veterans. The tennis-player Manolo Santana has emerged as the best amateur player in the world. He succeeded in showing his form as the incontestable master right on into the inter-regional finals of the Davis Cup which is the true world amateur championship contested by national teams. Miguel Torres, the holder of swimming records for several distances, is considered to be the first in line of a new wave of record-beating sportsmen.

Fortuny and Pujol make up, with Torres, the trio which is giving new impetus to swimming in Spain.

In Tokyo, the sportsman Jose Luis Areta was the first Spaniard to reach the olympic finals in athletics.

The cyclists, for their part, have shown their class in the foremost amateur competitions in the world. Their victory in the "Tour de l'Avenir" and the second place they won in the world amateur road-racing team championship are evidence of their mastery. On the circuit of Anoeta, Mas was proclaimed amateur world champion over middle distance.

The building of swimming-pools in the regions where swimming is an honoured sport is increasing appreciably. In the province of Barcelona four indoor and nine open-air pools were built in 1965 for a population of 3,500,000, financed by the provincial Council and the National Sports Directorate. In the towns where the municipal authorities have provided sports grounds, the swimming-pools remain the property of these two bodies, but the swimming clubs of each district have free use of them.

Financial provision for two indoor and seven open-air pools for next year has already been made.

Certain it is that much will be heard of Spanish swimming in the years to come.

In team sports, one must reckon on certain defections among regular football players. Of course, this sport attracts many spectators to the stands, many children play there, but this popular affection for the game is not borne out in the actual playing of it the moment the practice of this best known of sports has to be taken seriously.

Basketball is witnessing an encouraging development. Real-Madrid has regained its title as European champion. The popularization of basketball is widespread throughout the country.

In this connexion it should be noted that Spanish Television is making a systematic effort to promote sport.

After the olympic achievements, hockey, too, has a larger number of teams and a growing audience.

To conclude, Spanish sport, while observing the strict conditions of amateur sport, is at present in full evolution. It will not be very long — the next Olympics or the Games of the 20th Olympiad — before Spanish athletes mount the tribune of honour. The attachment of the whole country to sport is the best guarantee of that.

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