

SPORT— AN INDIVIDUAL AFFAIR

by Roger Bannister



The "Quaderni dello Sport" — the handsome bulletin of the Italian Olympic Committee — published in June last year the lecture given by Roger Bannister during a conference organized by the International Council for Sport and Physical Education in Paris in October 1963. We reproduce it here with kind permission of the C.O.N.I. Roger Bannister was born in England in 1929. Plow a doctor, this splendid athlete was first to run the mile in less than four minutes in 1954. His analysis of man's attitude and feeling towards sport is remarkable for its intelligence and perception.

How is it possible to describe the meaning of what we enjoy, whether it be Mozart, Cézanne or sport. One would need to be a sociologist and philosopher as well as a doctor to do justice to this subject. At the centre is the problem of a mind-body relationship, and considering our relative ignorance about the workings both of the body and the mind, it is hardly surprising that the relationship between the two of them should stretch us to our limits of comprehension.

I can still remember quite vividly a time when as a child I ran barefoot along damp, firm sand by the sea-shore. The air there had a special quality as if it had a life of its own. The sound of breakers on the shore shut out all others, and I was startled and almost frightened by the tremendous excitement a few steps could create. It was an intense moment of discovery of a source of power and beauty that one previously hardly dreamt existed.

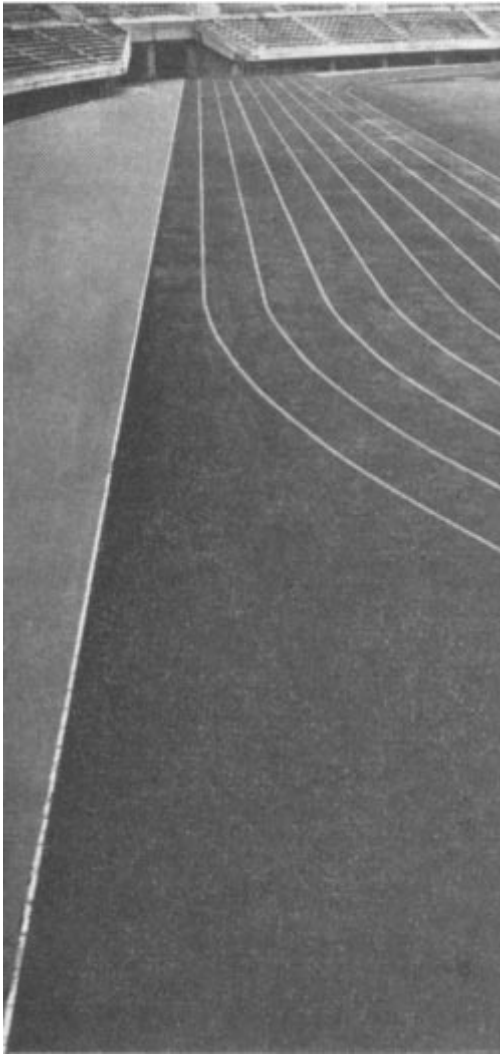
Now a scientist may attempt an objective explanation of all this. The sense of exercise is an extra sense, or perhaps a subtle combination of all the others. It is one which many ignore; although the Englishman has always had the reputation abroad for playing games with an intensity he seldom devotes to real life.

When we exercise, small electrical impulses pass all the time between our contracting muscles, our moving joints and our brains. The pattern of the electrical disturbance in the brain is presumably a source of pleasure, because like that caused by music, it has some interplay with rhythms inherent in our nervous system. But no explanation is satisfying that does not take account of subtler feelings. I think the scientific attempt is just about as successful as trying to describe a rose to someone who has never seen one.

For an athlete the mystery of this simple situation always remains. He cannot explain it further, or if he could, he probably would not run well any more. He would not need to. The paradox is as simple as that.

It is some years since I competed in any track race, and so perhaps now I can make a little more sense out of it all. Like life, the problems of sport and a sporting career only make sense in retrospect. What significance does sport have for the individual? I think, early on, adolescence can often be a time of conflict and bewilderment, and these years can be weathered more successfully if a boy develops some demanding activity that tests to the limit his body as well as his mind.

Each adolescent has to find this demanding activity for himself. It may be mountain-climbing, running or sailing, or it may be something quite different, it may not even be sport at all. But by



An utter loneliness, a lifetime's intensity...

absorption in this pursuit, he forgets himself and it fills the void between the child and the man. And later, when he finds a career or some other loves, he will be surprised at the extent to which he has grown. By then, he is no longer in a position to make the sacrifices which he previously hardly noticed.

The meaning of games as opposed to simple physical exertion is an even more difficult problem. Our satisfaction from games is a complex one. We enjoy struggling to get the best out of ourselves, whether we play games of skill requiring quickness of eye and deftness of touch, or games of effort and endurance like athletics. There is a desire to find in sport a companionship with kindred people. Friendships which are formed

under this baptism of fire, if I can use that phrase, have a curious permanence. I know that I have found all these things.

The sportsman can certainly enjoy his sport even if he has no prospect of becoming a champion. In fact, it may be thought of in the sense that an unsuccessful sportsman is perhaps the truest sportsman of all, because his love of sport is for its own sake and untarnished by any thought of success.

But the formative influence of sport on character does not end there. Sooner or later in sport, the serious striver after some sort of excellence will meet a situation that is almost too big for him to master. Such situations occur in ordinary life, and can often be dodged. We can play hide-and-peek with reality, avoiding facing the truth about ourselves; but in sport we cannot do this. It shakes our roots with its confusing pattern of success and failure.

As a result, sport leads to the most remarkable self-discovery, of limitations as well as of abilities. This discovery is partly physical — one learns, for example, that feeling tired does not mean that one is reaching the limit of exhaustion. But mainly the discovery is mental and brought about by the stresses which sport imposes. The self-discovery is most rapid if we set out on the early stages of this journey alone.

In time we learn how far from being self-sufficient we are, we realize the value of co-operation and assistance from others. But unless we start out alone, we never learn the questions others can best answer and those which we must answer for ourselves.

To many of us, action may not come easily. We can allow ourselves to be blown along like leaves in a wind, or on the other hand, we can try to impose our own will on external events. For all of us there comes some time a moment

when we are called upon to face the metaphorical equivalent of a starting pistol. Trying to bring the finishing tape nearer us, which we sometimes may do in later life, is the alternative and direct contrast to what the athlete is attempting to do, attempting to reach a rather idealistic goal more swiftly.

These are my reasons for reiterating in a modern context Baron de Coubertin's views of the educational necessity of sport, as he conceived it, on a universal scale. There is no section of any community that cannot benefit, except the most socially impoverished one, and even under these circumstances the prospect of international competition may act as a spur to enlightenment and progress. Physical deformity is not a barrier, as Dr. Guttmann has shown by his "Olympic Games" for men and women who have lost the power and use of their legs, so-called paraplegics, giving the Games the name "the Para-Olympics". Sport is a vital part of maturity too. There may be deeper reasons for its satisfaction that we hardly dare admit to ourselves; some reasons that lie locked away in the more primitive part of our minds. Thoreau once commented "the majority of men lead lives of quiet desperation". We may strap-hang in the morning travelling to work to reach our polished world of desk-top size, or we may tighten endlessly nuts on a new motor-car, but we all of us must still seek instinctively some of the freedom our far-off ancestors knew.

The meaning of physical exertion to the individual is difficult to disentangle from its sociological meaning. The need for adventure may at first have been satisfied by the struggle for survival. But now that natural dangers have been mainly conquered, we all of us seek further trials. And unless men find them, is it not possible that a drift towards crime may be the result of the thwarting of these impulses. Breathes there a man with soul so dead that he has lost the urge to impress on the world some indelible mark of his personality.

In sport man finds a trial for life which is more active than a game of chess, more exciting than digging his garden. We have used machines to conquer land, sea and air. Athletes realize that if this quest for speed is worthwhile, it might as well take place too on the running-track. There we can still feel our bodies have a skill and energy of their own, apart from the man-made machines which they spend their time driving. There we can fight a pitched battle against the claustrophobia of our time. The new Don Quixote can tilt a vaulter's fifteen-foot pole at the crazy windmill of modern life, or defiantly hurl his fifteen-pound shot.

I believe that a collective restlessness, even violence can safely extinguish itself in the games

we play. Sport provides an alternative to the drag of passive leisure. It provides an outlet for the craving for freedom, an outlet which will become more important, the more restricted, artificial and mechanized our society becomes.

And of all sports, I think, athletics has great advantages. You can do it in your own time, whether you work during the day or night. You can choose your own event among the many which suit different physiques, the long and thin, the broad and strong. While most ball games demand great natural aptitude, this, I think, is less important than industry and perseverance. Except in terms of energy and effort, athletics costs no more than a pair of running-shoes, and no one can say you may not run faster than this or jump higher than that. The track is yours and there is no limit.

So far I have talked about the meaning of physical exertion and of competition as a form of self-trial. The excellence of the performance in absolute standards is hardly relevant to its value in character building. It is a relative matter; the victory being over self and previous performance or over fellow-competitors of comparable standard rather than against an arbitrary standard or a record.

What effect does the roar of a crowd of 50 000 people in a stadium have, crying out for more effort and identifying themselves with each runner's success or failure? What does it mean to wait weeks or months for a race which may last only a few minutes or even seconds — to travel thousands of miles for a few seconds of supreme exertion? For me, and I think for all athletes, the Olympic Games have a special place on a plane apart from all other races, all other competitions, national or international. In part, this stems from the authenticity of the games and from their roots in prehistory.

The ancient Olympic Games, historians have suggested, emerged from a primitive anxiety lest with winter the earth might never come to life again. With soil bare and food scarce, who could give an assurance that another year would bring a fresh harvest? The saviour of the harvest was the person with the magic of victory in him, the athlete born of Zeus, the Sky God. And, for a

time, the simple foot race was the way to choose this man. Later the search broadened for the man who embodied the Roman word "virtus", goodness or excellence.

The modern Olympic Games have still tended to produce a champion of champions — a Nurmi, a Zatopek, an Elliott — a modern hero, not altogether shorn of magic, emerging as a symbol of the Games. We still need him as a reminder that body and mind can fuse in this highest athletic achievement.

For a moment I want to consider what Olympic competition itself means to athletes who are taking part, and to do this, I divide Olympic athletes, arbitrarily, but I hope not unkindly, into three groups. The first, those who have barely secured a place in their national team and are certain to be outclassed; secondly, those who have a sporting chance of a medal, and thirdly the favourites for victory.

The first group with no chance of a medal are, strange to say, in a way to be envied, for to him whom least, in a relative sense, has been given, least is expected. Not that they are indifferent athletes — far from it, they have fought hard to win a place in their team. Though they are free to experience the Olympic competition, these athletes perhaps do not savour the real quintessence of the Olympics.

The athlete with a chance of a medal is happily placed. He is in a position of strength; he has nothing to lose and everything to gain. He can respect and know close rivals. He has suspense, climax and reactions and will never forget the experience. The public at large hears about the risks, the international skirmishes and silly nonsenses. It never hears of the unspoken understanding that exists between such athletes whose skill as craftsmen can compel a mutual respect no matter what their eccentricities of character or disparity in politics. This has been said often but it can be said again.

At the apex of the pyramid comes the favourite. His public and press expect a gold medal through him. But it is a matter of simple arithmetic that most favourites will return home without one. I think a favourite who does not win knows as much as anyone about Olympic spirit. A favourite for an Olympic title needs stoicism and self-confidence to bear his burden lightly and shed humour and good advice over a team that may look to him for leadership. Perhaps it is understandable if his joviality on departure seems a little forced, his light-heartedness a piece of play-acting as he waves from the aeroplane steps.

In the short space of two weeks his experience is going to be stretched to the limit of what is tolerable. He will reveal to himself and perhaps to others unsuspected weaknesses, but perhaps

discover too a new secret strength. For once in his life he is utterly alone. This situation is all important, immediate and irrevocable. A lifetime's intensity seems to be packed into a few moments. The favourite, win or lose, can never be the same again. And likely as not it may help him to do something else better.

By the time he has reached this point, if he happens to be a track middle-distance runner, he will already have come tantalizingly close to achieving a mastery over himself which it is the aim of every athlete to achieve. He will have learnt to channel his whole energy, mental and physical into a few moments. He will perhaps have mastered the art of finding in himself more than he has got. This, like the knack of riding a bicycle, involves a mental trick. The secret is to lose for a moment one's sense of proportion.

SPORT— AN INDIVIDUAL AFFAIR

This process, in the greatest athlete, unleashes a will to win that remains locked away in his rivals. The presence, or absence, of this is one factor that sets the razor's edge between victory and defeat. The other is some mystical fortune that smiles on a victor and which makes those who were defeated curiously happy for the victor.

The last decade has covered a strange period in the history of sport. It has been the emergence of the new professionalism, not only in the sense of direct and indirect payment for sport, but also in devoting unlimited time and energy to sport, to the total exclusion of any other career, which is rightly deplored.

Every country seeks to enhance national prestige by physical achievements. It may be in establishing new jet plane records of speed or altitude, penetrating the depths of the sea, or scaling the world's highest mountains. Too few questions seem to be asked about the means and the motives, provided the end of national glory is achieved.

Running, less than any other branch of track and field athletics, perhaps less than any other sport refuses to be distorted to fit into a pattern of this kind. Twenty years ago, when Zatopek first ran 60 quarter miles in 60 seconds in a single training session, I wondered whether it was still possible to be an international athlete any more



The favorite, win or lose, can never be the same again.

and do anything except training. But odd as it may seem no one has yet proved to my satisfaction that middle-distance running cannot still be an activity upon which it is neither necessary nor desirable to spend unlimited time and energy.

Fitting sport into the rest of life until one's work becomes too demanding — this is both the burden and joy of the old-fashioned amateur — a path which any athlete is still free to choose, however difficult or rare it may be. The athlete who chooses to be paid for sport is no less truly a sportsman. He too has a choice and often exchanges some short-term advantages for many long-term problems. I think it is our duty to see that he realizes this.

I think sport will survive the ethical and administrative problems that now beset it. And the reason is this. Sport has an individual basis and an individual meaning, and is not a national or moral affair. We run not because our country needs fame, nor yet because we think it is doing us good, but because we enjoy it and cannot help

ourselves. For each of us it gives the chance to release a power that might otherwise remain locked away inside ourselves.

I am sure that this urge to struggle lies latent in everyone, and the more restricted our lives become in other ways, the more necessary it will be to find some outlet for this craving for freedom. No one can say "You must not run faster than this or jump higher than that." The sportsman is consciously or unconsciously seeking the deep satisfaction, the sense of personal dignity which comes when body and mind are fully co-ordinated and they have achieved mastery over themselves.

For a young man there are still few fields in which such perfection can be approached and with such momentary if transient finality. For the athlete the human spirit is indeed indomitable.

R. B.

(The photographs on pages 66 and 70 are from Ringier, Zurich.)