

BARON PIERRE DE COUBERTIN AND HIS

PHILOSOPHY OF PEDAGOGICAL SPORT



Mr. John A. LUCAS, Professor of Physical Education and Sports Historian of the Pennsylvania State University, has kindly sent us the article published below.

Mr. John A. LUCAS has already written a Doctorate thesis on: "Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the formative years of the International Olympic Movement from 1883 to 1896."

At the outset of the Games of the First Olympiad, "Athens bestowed thanks on all who had contributed to their success . . . but forgot their actual promoter, Baron Pierre de COUBERTIN."

Such an admission appeared in the supplement of the "Messenger d'Athenes" April 8th 1896. He had finally received recognition as the innovator of the international games. France and this Frenchman had been acknowledged as the source of inspiration for their creation. "Greece had only been called upon to carry out its realization."

Unfortunately, the completion of the Athens Olympics saw a powerful minority of Greeks absolutely refuse to recognize the contribution of this "foreign usurper."

The main cause of the furore was COUBERTIN'S insistence that the successfully concluded Games not be entrusted permanently to the Greek capital. He insisted and had his way, that a different city be given the honour of staging the Games every four years. Baron de COUBERTIN'S cosmopolitan tendencies had been formed early, as had his conception of the role of sport. The Olympic Games were to him the final test of the educative-ameliorative effects of competitive athletics, both on the individual participants and society. For the remaining forty years of his life, he was to elaborate on this philosophy of "*pedagogical sport.*"

MENS FERVIDA IN CORPORE LACERTOSO

Basic to his philosophy was a consuming belief in the essentiality of an "*active mind in a strong and healthy body.*" Physical recreation and athletic training alone could bring about this nearly ideal state. (1)

More and more, COUBERTIN considered himself an educator. He was often to say that sport was not natural to man, that it was the function of the school to organize and control athletics. (2) National and international organizations must play their part to insure the greatest degree of physical skill by the greatest number. This entire panorama of sports must always be carried out in an enlightened educational manner and on the highest ethical level possible. He felt that sport was a means to an end, that is "*the upliftment of mind, strengthening of moral character and physical power.*" Sport on the scale and level conceived by COUBERTIN furnished a conspicuous example of fair play, sportsmanship, international understanding, regardless of race, religion, or political convictions. The role of the school and college was essential. They were capable of a programme of organized, competitive, "*pure amateur sport,*" that might build stronger, healthier bodies and minds. Such was the vein of his thoughts. As early as 1892, COUBERTIN had discussed the dual role of athletics. He called it "*both recreative and educative.*" (3) Forty-two years later, he was to refer to secondary education as a "*period of intellectual aviation ... and one of passionate devotion to muscular perfection.*" He saw school physical education and athletics capable of two functions, "*the one physiological, the other touching on morality. They both must be habitual, voluntary, and*

intensive to the point of perfection." (5) Through sports, which to him incorporated the disciplines of art, science and hygiene, *"a more intelligent citizenry might be brought together in joyous brotherhood.*" (6) In his book, Pedagogie Sportive, five fundamental lessons to be acquired from well taught and vigorously executed sports are listed. They are: *"initiative, perseverance, intensity, courage, and the search for perfection."* (7) He concludes with the controversial argument that play is not a biological urge, *"being contrary to the animalistic tendency to conserve energy"*.

Thus was envisioned his great compulsion for capable leaders of impeccable character to lead youth in *"play"*. Only then can sport, which partakes of the psychological and physiological, be the agent of social, moral, and physical perfection. (8)

COUBERTIN, the scholar and educator, tempered his enthusiasm and tendency toward specialization in athletics by often reminding himself of the philosophy of the Greek Sophists, *"Nothing in excess."* Verbose and repetitive, he states his "case" in many different ways. Throughout his life he read Greek history, and essentially his view of an *"active mind in an active body"* was a Greek concept. Sport, with its great possibilities, emphasizing grace, beauty, and strength, played a part, but only a part in his grand scheme of things. Avery BRUNDAGE, one of the successors to COUBERTIN as IOC President, interpreted his predecessor's view on athletics as a purely amateur one. He believed that:

"Athletics were not to be a career - they were incidental to a symmetrical and harmonious physical, mental and spiritual development, a supplement and not the goal."(9)

COUBERTIN was often cynical and always dubious about solving the problems surrounding amateur athletics. However, he was positive and lucid about the importance of the spirit of amateurism. Too frequently, he said, it was the letter rather than the spirit of amateur sport that was followed. This spirit of absolutely no material gain was to him, *"a religion, with church, dogma and cult."*(10)

It was his belief that no education, particularly in democratic times, can be good and complete without the aid of athletics. But, athletics, in order to play their proper educational role, must be based on *"perfect disinterestedness and the sentiment of honour."* (11) The Olympic founder had unbounded faith in the power of the *"pure amateur spirit."* At the VIIth Olympiad in Paris, his remark can only be described as superlative:

"In the new world which is rising around us, sport is capable of playing a supreme part in promoting progress and social unity, and therefore we desire to see it purer, more chivalrous, more transparently sincere."(12)

The personality and philosophy of this man of near encyclopedic thought embodied ideas little understood in his day. The educational implications of sport were clear to him as well as the more obvious physical gain. Pierre LORME called his fellow countryman *"the creator of one of man's most profound human accomplishments . . . the revival and transformation of pedagogical sport."* (13)

The idealistic COUBERTIN always considered his form of *"pedagogical sport"* a *"revival of the Greek ideal."* He knew that their mythological gods were not only wise and intelligent but physically perfect. *"Athletes, sculptors and poets walked common ground,"* he once said. He eulogized the *"eurhymic harmony"* of the Greeks. It was his aim to instill this feeling and action into the Olympic Games. (14) He knew it would be a long time coming. Yet, as always, his restraint was buoyed by the promise of a brighter future:

"On the world at large the Olympic Games have, of course, exerted no influence as yet; but I am profoundly convinced that they will do so. May I be permitted to say that this was my reason for founding them? Modern athletics need to be unified and purified." (15)

A contemporary periodical insisted that COUBERTIN not be reproached in his optimism and desire for the

"wholesome muscular development of humanity" and in "the cultivation of social peace and universal brotherhood." (16) On COUBERTIN'S death, a Paris editorial declared that he had devoted his life effort to teaching mankind the gospel of body and mind harmony. *"That he failed to do so does not detract from his greatness,"* apologized the writer of the obituary. (17)

THE TRINITY OF BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

The Olympic philosophy had deemed sport as a means toward an end rather than an end in itself. The gradual spread of athletic interest throughout late nineteenth century Europe was, to COUBERTIN, a new form of *"pedagogical revolution."* Not for centuries had physical education been looked upon as an instrument capable of increasing human happiness and improving social adjustment. In fact, COUBERTIN firmly believed that *"political and social stability among nations is less possible without mutual understanding of the worth and inseparability of the mind, the body, and the spirit."* (18) To the Baron, sport was one of the most effective means of strengthening individual human personality. *"It was for this very purpose that I have revived the Olympic Games."* (19)

The concept of unity dominated his life and became part of Olympic philosophy. COUBERTIN'S faith in the usefulness of amateur athletic training and competition was based on the assumption that man's mind, body and *"spirit"* were somehow interdependent. It was a concept as old as the supreme civilization of the fifth and fourth centuries. COUBERTIN had read widely in Greek history and philosophy. His works are filled with references to the religious-like veneration of the Greeks for sports.

He was profoundly convinced that athletic training and games were an ancient and integral part of Greek culture and religion and one of the reasons for her greatness. It was his hope that modern societies might begin again to emulate the Greeks.

Throughout his vast writings one can find frequent references to philosophers who advocated the development of the tri-une man. His monumental four volume "L'Histoire Universelle" talks of the social realism of MONTAIGNE and

John LOCKE. The eighteenth century, ushering in a form of intellectual liberty, gave the world ROUSSEAU and BASEDOW. In COUBERTIN'S own lifetime, Herbert SPENCER had stressed the need for "*complete living, physically, morally and intellectually.*" (20) COUBERTIN had read and was impressed by this spokesman of the nineteenth century scientific movement. (21) The idealism and consumedly fervent belief in the trinity of man prevented Pierre de COUBERTIN from viewing sport as the mere apotheosis of physical strength and skill. It was in addition, he felt, the striving for greater intellectual perspicacity and moral integrity.

COUBERTIN'S conception of sport was the most obvious aspect of a grand attempt to fuse academic training with moral and physical education. The catalyst would be sport. It always remained the "raison d'être" of his elaborate plan of educational reform. An example of the breadth of his thinking is found in the article titled "Pierre de COUBERTIN - Sportif et Pedagogue." It was eulogy appearing in "L'illustration" of September 11th 1937, shortly after his death. An elaborate picture of new French educational procedures had been outlined by COUBERTIN. The author, Pierre LORME, called it an "*enseignement nouveau, an original and dignified homage to man.*" (22)

LORME and many others felt that COUBERTIN'S philosophy of pedagogical sport incorporated a wide understanding of the aspirations and needs of youth. It was his conviction that the Olympic Games and all pure amateur athletics form the "*corner-stones of progress and health for the youth of our day.*" (23) They are capable of acting as a "*noble and generous outlet for those age-old instincts for battle that lie within us all.*" (24) He was convinced that there is nothing else upon which young men can employ their strength in their hours of recreation with such advantage both moral and physical. Ideally he felt that this desire to train and compete should be self-motivating and self-sustaining. But he was forced to acknowledge that the individual practice of athletic sports, regularly and perseveringly undertaken for the sake of "*health, beauty and harmony*" was a dream impossible of realization. A few individuals may be capable of this, he said, but the rank and file never will be.

As an educator, sportsman, and historian, he saw but

one solution: a system of organized international competition to dominate athletic sport. However, he added:

"We can give it a counterpoise, a regulator, as did those ancient Greeks, who, we find, had to grapple with most of the problems that perplex us; and their regulator was Olympia.

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I saw the necessity for re-establishing the Olympic Games as a supreme consecration of the cult of athletics practiced in the purest spirit of true sport, proudly, joyfully, and loyally. Anyone who studies the ancient games will perceive that their deep significance was due to two principle elements; beauty and reverence. If the modern Games are to exercise the influence I desire for them, they must in their turn show beauty and inspire reverence - a beauty and reverence infinitely surpassing anything hitherto realized in the most important athletic contests of our day." (25)

Except on the matter of amateurism, Baron de COUBERTIN'S view of sport was habitually "Pollyanna." It was his great weakness yet his greatest strength. His devotion to the concept of body, mind and spirit was scientifically untenable. It was not even unshakable from an ampirical view. Throughout his life, both he and the Olympic Movement were subject to continual criticisms. (26) On the other hand, influential and thoughtful men have devoted much of their lives to the perpetuation of this concept of "educative sport". The view of Paul MARTIN, M.D. is typical. Representing Switzerland in four Olympic Games during the 1920's and 1930's, he was one of the world's greatest middle distance runners. He has continually praised Baron de COUBERTIN and his form of "idealistic sport." "To COUBERTIN, sport education was not a simple physiologiel function. It is total involvement of the body, mind and spirit." (27)

Serious questions must be asked and answered concerning participation in those international amateur sports which are the concern of the Olympic governing body. Are the Olympic Games more than high-level competitions between "super-stars?" Are they capable of improving the national physical education and athletic programmes of member nations?

Do they tend to have a positive effect, generally speaking, on segments of world societies? The proponents of the philosophy of Olympic pedagogical sport would tend to answer "yes" to all these questions. Others would play the role of the iconoclast and point out inconsistencies, chauvinistic outburst, and frequent manifestations of international hostility. One man's answer, implied within the very framework of his question, is given us by a veteran Olympic news reporter:

"Who shall we believe, the sanguinary sports writer chuckling over his opportunity to make an embroglio out of petty differences which quickly melt away, or the athletes who form friendships and treasure pleasant memories for a lifetime?" (28)

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17. Maurice CAPELLA, "Le Mort du Baron de COUBERTIN," Le Figaro, September 3, 1937, p. 4
18. Pierre de COUBERTIN, "Aux Coureurs d'Olympie-Berlin," (pamphlet located in the Olympic Library, Lausanne, 1936), p. 1
19. COUBERTIN, "The Meeting of the Olympic Games," North American Review, CLXX (June, 1900), 802
20. Herbert SPENCER in his "Education, Intellectual, Moral and Physical", (New York: A.L. Burt Pub., 1900), said (the physical underlies the mental, the mental must not be developed at the expense of the physical. The ancient and modern conceptions must be combined), p. 309
21. COUBERTIN refers to SPENCER in his book "Pedagogie Sportive," p. 55
22. LORME, op. cit.
23. Pierre de COUBERTIN, "Why I Revived the Olympic Games," The Fortnightly Review, XC (July, 1908), 110

24. COUBERTIN, "Congres International de Sport et d'Education Physique," p. 16
25. COUBERTIN, "Why I Revived the Olympic Games."
26. George TREVOR exemplifies the perpetual criticism (and reluctant praise) leveled at the Olympic Movement. He said, "To read some of the pre-Olympic blurbs you would suppose an Olympiad was a cross between a Billy Sunday revival and an international love feast. Why not take the Olympic Games for what they really are spirited athletic competitions . . . to measure the respective merits of a few superstars? . . . In the main, however, they have realized the hopes of their idealistic reviver." Literary Digest, April 21st 1928
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