

# THE MARATHON

## OF AMATEURISM

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Nearly 80 years ago in Paris, in 1894, Pierre de COUBERTIN summoned a Congress of the world's leading sports specialists, who - during several days of lively discussions - attempted to discover a remedy for the sham amateurism that was like a gangrene spreading through the otherwise healthy body of sport.

The reviver of the Olympic Games and his team of eager helpers believed that they had found the solution in the creation of the modern Olympic Games. Unfortunately, their illusions were doomed to be shattered as the years went by. The "Monster" (as COUBERTIN called professionalism in disguise) loomed up once again on a tremendous scale, directly proportional to the growing popularity of spectator sports and the progress of individual performances.

From Athens, where in 1896 the revival of the ancient four-yearly festivals of athletics on the banks of the River Alphaeus was celebrated, until the Antwerp Games in 1920, those eligible to compete were "the amateurs of unquestioned integrity recognised by the Olympic Committees of their respective countries". The rule was an elastic one and vague, to say the least.

The first definition of an amateur was made on the occasion of the Games of the VIIIth Olympiad held in Paris in 1924. It took up half a page of a small booklet devoted to the organisation of the Games. The first sentence gives a good summary of it: "The definition of an amateur for each sport is drawn up by the International Federation governing that sport". This rule continued, under many different headings, until it became known as "Rule 26", to define the notion of amateurism, or more exactly "the conditions governing the eligibility" of an athlete for the Olympic Games.

But the criteria of amateurism have suffered the setbacks and deterioration of age. They vary from one federation to another, very often possessing very deep divergencies. That is why in 1970 the I.O.C. decided to revise Rule 26.

The three Vice-Presidents, Lord KILLANIN (Ireland), Comte Jean de BEAUMONT (France) and Jonkheer Herman A. van KARNEBEEK (Netherlands) were asked to take up the problem with each of the International Federations. After these meetings, they compared their observations with the reports of the two commissions set up by the I.O.C.: the Eligibility Commission (a commission composed exclusively of members of the I.O.C.) presided over by Mr. Hugh WEIR (Australia), and the Joint Commission on Eligibility (formed of members of the I.O.C. and the N.O.C.s) under the chairmanship of Mr. Alexandru SIPERCO (Rumania). On the basis of their findings, they will present a new draft of the rule at the next meeting of the I.O.C. to be held in Luxemburg in 1971.

What worried Pierre de COUBERTIN when he summoned the Paris Congress still remains a source of serious concern for the present President of the I.O.C., Mr. Avery BRUNDAGE.

In 1890, sport as we know it today was still in its infancy. In eight decades, technique has progressed by leaps and bounds and, in addition, physical activity has become general in all countries on our continent. In spite of this, the two periods share a common denominator in that the best athletes seek to turn their physical ability to financial profit, and even to make it the main source of their income.

Today, most international sports officials state that it is no longer possible to consider sport as a pastime. Top athletes have to devote the bulk of their time to training and competitions; their professional activities naturally suffer a great deal. They are therefore entitled to expect some compensation.

Two other reasons are given for this belief in the right to remuneration. Firstly, the equipment the athletes use is subsequently popularised and sold on the world markets, and this is of vital importance to their respective countries' trade. Why should the sports equipment manufacturers grow rich at the expense of the athletes without giving the slightest compensation to those whose feats have acted as invaluable publicity for their products? Secondly, big sports meetings attract huge paying crowds and the fees from television, radio and cinema rights are often quite astronomical.

Athletes consider it unfair that only the organisers, the State, the federations and officials - in fact, everyone except themselves - should share in the proceeds resulting from their efforts, their performances and the quality of the show they have provided. Questions of local or national prestige also come into consideration in the demand for compensation, since the honour of the association, the town or the nation is at stake.

This, then, is one point of view, the acceptance of which would obviously spell the end of true amateurism.

Must we conclude that all athletes are 100% in agreement with this theory? Far from it. There are a great many champions, whether contenders for an Olympic title or not, whose thoughts are quite different and who consider their sporting activity as quite subsidiary to their professional career or studies, a hobby in fact, even if, gradually, this hobby becomes so captivating and so thrilling that it takes up all their leisure time.

Let us take as an example a very recent case - one among many. At the United States Indoor Championships in Washington in January 1971, one of the competitors in the 60m dash was a young doctor specialising in haematology at the Baltimore Cancer Research Center. Although 27 years old, he had run his first race less than a year before. He knew nothing of the finer points of sprinting technique. His start in particular was disastrous. He was also using new shoes which hurt him terribly. He got into the finals, beating the famous sprinter, Mel PENDER, world record holder and Olympic Champion in Mexico in the 4 x 100 m. relay. He came second in a time only one-tenth of a second slower than the world record.

His name: Delano MERIWETHER. Before that he had never even imagined appearing as a champion in the sports records. After the Championships he continued to "explode". Within a few weeks he has become a great figure in American athletics. The international press considers him a likely winner at the Munich Games.

Now this tall, loose-limbed black, with his long legs and handsome face lit with the joy of living, had had neither exceptional trainers nor sports scholarships, nothing special in fact.

Born in Charleston (South Carolina), he had had to work hard to overcome considerable material difficulties in order to finish medical school.

Obviously, without his truly remarkable, exceptional gifts as a sprinter, he would undoubtedly never have known the fame of victory. But let us stress that until last year he had done very little sport except - and not at all regularly - a little volleyball. He was deeply involved in his studies and had very little free time.

Why did he suddenly take up running? Because one evening, going out with a few colleagues who were training, he discovered that, without any equipment even, he just left them standing and that violent efforts on the track formed



Delano MERIWETHER

the best antidote to long days spent in the laboratory. Gradually he became very keen on racing. Without neglecting in the slightest his career, which is still by far the most important thing in his life, he began to train two or three evenings a week, giving up all his earlier forms of entertainment: television in the evening, parties ...

In half a season he has raised himself to the level of the best. Now every weekend he can be seen on indoor tracks all over the United States, travelling by plane along with his team-mates. On the track he is easily recognisable by his original attire: canary-coloured trunks held up by braces standing out against the white cotton vest with his hospital's colours.

The Munich Games! With his shy little wife Myrtle, he dreams of the possibility of taking part but he will never let sport take precedence over his work. "For the analysis of a rare blood specimen, I would stay up all night, even if I were running in the most important race the next day".

Another sign of the wind of purity blowing through the United States: the students of a New England and a New York college, quoted by *"Sports Illustrated"*, who decided to found an association excluding anyone receiving so-called sports scholarships ...

And how about those Swiss wrestlers, craftsmen and builders by profession, the three MARTINETTI from Martigny. They went last year, at their own expense, to take part in the World Championships at Edmonton in Canada. They devoted their holidays to this trip, carefully planning the return route so as to get to see new countries and learn more about the world, in this way combining the physical and intellectual, according to the best traditions of Olympism.

Who will win the long, fierce battle of amateurism?

The merchants in the Temple perhaps ... But why not believe that a new Miltiades will appear at the last moment? Just as the international trumpets have begun to proclaim the death of amateurism, a modern soldier of Marathon, in the form of a flood of news agency despatches, will announce that the Coubertinian tradition is saved.

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