

Will the Olympic Games

survive ?



Raymond GAFNER

Member of the International Olympic Committee and president of the Comité Olympique suisse.

I

EF Speaking to members of the Executive Board of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and representatives of the International Sports Federations at a meeting in Lausanne in 1965, I reminded them how natural it was for this country, the headquarters of modern Olympism, to be concerned about the future of the movement whose reviver, Pierre de Coubertin, lies buried in Swiss soil. I defined as follows the conditions for the survival of Olympism, which has proved itself one of the greatest moral and social forces of the 20th Century: a desire for permanence, a readiness to evolve.

The 50th Anniversary of "Sport", a publication that has continually backed the Olympic cause with great force and far-sightedness, has given me the welcome opportunity of taking up this subject again in the light of five years' experience and a world in full evolution, with all traditional values being questioned, in many cases most forcefully.

I am going to try to discuss the subject without dwelling on the necessarily fleeting personal aspects or the vicissitudes of the moment, which no matter how spectacular at the time are none-the-less contingent and short-lived. In fact, it seems to me that the future of the Olympic Games should be considered calmly and on the broadest basis.

II

Do the Olympic Games deserve to survive? This is the first question to answer, for it is fundamental.

And this question raises right away the dilemma between the end and the means. Are the Olympic Games an end in themselves, or are they merely a means of attaining a goal that lies outside them?

A return to the source of the thoughts of Baron de Coubertin makes it possible to give a clear and unambiguous answer: in spite of the size to which they have grown, the Olympic Games are only a means. The goal lies elsewhere.

Faced with the evils of the industrial era just beginning, seeing all around him a youthful generation whose bodies and minds threatened to atrophy, de Coubertin, returning to the ideals of Ancient Greece, wanted to re-create the conditions for a harmonious balance between an ardent soul and a healthy body.

To rouse the enthusiasm of the young for the practice of sport, to give them in this way an opportunity of hardening their bodies, strengthening their character, learning to surpass themselves in fair contest, to use for peaceful ends their combative spirit and their instinct to dominate - these were the main elements of the prophetic and at the same time realistic vision of the reviver of the Games, which he intended to use as a lever on the youth of his day. He knew in fact the ennobling value of example, he knew that youth only gives itself up wholeheartedly to absolute causes, that its inner fire burns with a pure, bright flame. In his view, Olympic medals were to be the rewards, all the more prized as they were gratuitous, which would go to the best, to those whose deeds would inspire the crowds of admirers, drawing them, even if only a little way, along in their wake.

Who therefore would dare to suggest that the task of Olympism has lost a lot of its topicality? Everything tends to show the contrary. While the practice of sport has developed and spread tremendously since the beginning of the century, the dangers that threaten our civilisation have grown even more rapidly, endangering the health, the mental equilibrium, and even the very existence of our children. The deep dismay revealed by the exterior signs of present-day protest constitutes a desperate appeal for a life that is healthier, more just, freer, more harmonious, outside and beyond the collective drabness that threatens to stifle mankind.

De Coubertin would hear this appeal today just as he heard it in his day. The reasons that caused him to act are even more pressing today than before. The goal he pursued is as valid as ever. It justifies the loyalty we should feel towards his work.

How about the means then? The Olympic Games, as I stressed, are a lever, that is to say a tool. A tool is

adapted and converted, according to the needs and evolution of technology. To turn a tool into an inviolate fetish would obviously be a sign of sclerosis.

The Olympic Games will deserve to survive only if the IOC makes a very clear distinction between the immovable goal towards which it strives and the continually perfectible instrument represented by the Olympic Games themselves, the former justifying its desire for permanence and the latter its readiness to evolve.

III

Four main dangers threaten the existence of the Olympic Games. Their combined force is a formidable one. We must therefore examine each of them in turn.

Gigantism has two aspects: the setting and the programme.

Gigantism in the setting is a result of the organisers' policy of prestige and their desire, legitimate enough in itself, to make use of the Olympic Games as a powerful incentive for equipping a whole region. It is a matter of going one better, in all fields, than their predecessors and at the same time of investing in townplanning schemes large sums of money which it would have been quite impossible, without the magic wand of Olympism, to mobilise in such quantities and at such a rate.

With the exception of the winter events, this escalation of splendour, size and technical perfection risks restricting the possible organisers to a few large countries, a few cities so huge that it is practically impossible for the Games to retain their original atmosphere of communion and fraternity.

*

Gigantism in the programme is a direct result of the very success of the Olympic Games. Every sport wants to be included, in each sport every event, in each event a steadily increasing number of competitors. If we persist in giving in to this trend, the only possible alternatives are to prolong the Games beyond the two weeks originally planned or to multiply the number of events held simultaneously. In both cases, attention is lost and interest diluted, to no one's benefit.

* * *

For nationalism, the Olympic Games are a veritable culture medium.

There are those who go on repeating that the Games are a competition between individuals and not between nations, but the wave of enthusiasm or disappointment sweeping through even the most remote cottages, as the results of each event become known, soon shows the falseness of this pious affirmation.

Competition at Olympic level thus tends to become a weapon in the hands of a growing number of governments, a magic mirror destined to give a flattering, even if distorted, image of a system, a regime or a race. And no one could seriously attempt to deny that in this concert of glorification, the people dance gaily to the same tune as their government.

* * *

Commercialisation is a favourite theme not only with the critics but also with the vestals of Olympism. It too has two faces: that of the organiser and that of the athlete.

The organiser, bogged down by the financial consequences of the gigantism he could not or would not avoid, is sometimes tempted to sign profitable advertising contracts in the most varied fields, and to exploit to the full all possible sources of income, including the use of the Olympic emblem for commercial purposes, which undoubtedly detracts from the majesty of the Olympic Games, to which the IOC attaches so much importance.

*

The athlete, very much against his will, finds himself at the centre of a debate whose significance escapes him, especially since - as experience has shown - he is often unaware of the rules applicable to him with regard to his participation in the Olympic Games. Even if he does know of them, he could not care less about them, so flagrant does the contradiction seem to him between these texts, which he considers of another era, and the reality of everyday life around him. This is what has been proved almost unanimously by the opinions collected by the Swiss Olympic Committee in the course of a survey carried out recently among Swiss participants in the 1968 Olympics. Their answers reflect the atmosphere in which the athlete of international value moves today. They are a logical consequence of the considerable efforts he has to make to reach the level demanded by Olympic competition with a reasonable chance of creditable performance.

What is expected of him today is thus quite different from that demanded when the texts that we persist in continuing to apply to him were first conceived.

Now laws are an expression of the actual state of custom and usage at least as much as they determine it. Laws that are flaunted, openly and daily, are bad laws, for they draw down upon themselves indifference, sarcasm and even contempt. The serious threat hanging over the rules of admission to the Olympic Games is one of powerlessness and hypocrisy. The Olympic world risks lowering itself in the esteem of public opinion if it persists in trying to preserve, against all the evidence, a number of rules which everyone knows are incapable of enforcement, for the simple reason that they no longer correspond to the legitimate aspirations or

the real needs of the athlete of 1970. This athlete is no longer willing, and rightly so, to put up with paternalism, that is to say rules designed for him but without regard to him.

* * *

The structures of the Olympic movement are becoming the subject of increasingly violent attacks.

Here too, the dilemma is to know whether loyalty to the idea of Baron de Coubertin consists in trying to preserve, blindly and in spite of all arguments to the contrary, the methods chosen by him at the time of the revival of the Olympic Games, or rather in attempting to discover which method would meet with his preference today.

In 1894, the idea was undoubtedly apt and even brilliant in order to spread the practice of sport throughout the world by the organisation of Olympic Games, to give the latter an imposing façade, to have them patronised by a completely independent body, consisting of famous personalities, appointed for life, themselves selecting their colleagues, without any thought of national or proportional representation.

But, since then, other forces have arisen. The International Federations governing each sport and the National Olympic Committees incarnating the permanence and the reality of Olympism in their respective countries demand to take part - in keeping with their responsibilities, which are great - in the running of a movement which cannot hope to survive and prosper without them.

For several years now moreover, sport and the organisation of leisure have assumed such proportions at government level that the latter too is insisting on not allowing the striking force represented for them by Olympism to escape their sphere of influence.

Finally, attention should be called to the profound desire of the young to take an active part in the decisions that concern them directly, but it must be clearly seen that this desire will not remain without effect on the structures of the Olympic movement for much longer.

Consequently, the IOC is up against the stupendous task of helping these structures to evolve while at the same time avoiding the two-fold danger of sticking at all costs to the positions gained and a recourse to solutions which, in the name of progress, would nevertheless lead to confusion, weakness and opportunism.

IV

Now that the dangers have been described, it is necessary to suggest a line of conduct making it possible to avoid them.

What therefore is the golden rule, to which the whole of Olympic life would have to conform?

To me the answer seems simple, at least to express. From what in fact do the young, to whose aid we wish to come, suffer? Lack of adaptation to a world in which they discover too few reasons to live and to hope; whose social, economic and political structures grip it as in a vice especially as the much vaunted freedom proves illusory when it comes to the crunch. They want to be able to breathe, to develop freely and surpass themselves. They must be able to know that this is still possible, but they must also know the cost.

Olympic sport - among others, of course - is one of the most striking, most convincing ways of offering the young this proof. But for it to be effective, the examples that the young see in it and which are to inspire them must be genuine and not tainted. The athletes competing in the Olympic stadium must give joyous and striking proof that it is quite possible to win while remaining free, provided one knows how to accept the discipline and sacrifices without which no one will ever be capable of triumphing over himself or others.

*The golden rule for Olympism is therefore to devote it-
self to creating a type of human being in which the young of
our day would like to recognise themselves and are keen to
resemble.*

It is by seeking under all circumstances to place the emphasis on such a human type that the demons of Olympism will most surely be exorcised. In the rest of this chapter, we shall try to show this.

* * *

The athlete is the main victim of the gigantism aimed at by the organisers, who reduce him to the role of a performer in a big show whose interest lies outside him. For him, all he wants is for the organiser's efforts to be concentrated on a few precise requirements: comfortable and welcoming Olympic village, where he can feel at home among his fellow athletes from all countries; sufficient, well-planned training grounds in the immediate vicinity; short lines of communication; frequent means of transport; impeccable sports facilities; faultless technical staff and judges; and finally, so that the publication of the news may be worthy of the performances, a dense and diversified network of communications.

Provided these conditions are fulfilled, all the rest could very easily be condensed, to the greatest relief not only of the host of competitors, spectators and journalists, but also of the public authorities responsible for financing the Games.

It is gratifying to see that for 1972, the organisers of the Munich Games - without touching on the more restricted and therefore simpler problem of the Winter Games - have started along the right way, with their desire for concentration and the original and even bold solutions they are seeking in all fields. After Munich, the ambition, the great chance of Montreal in 1976 should be to organise Games in which everything would be made subordinate to the effects of the message that the young, through their contests and their deeds, would convey to other young people, in the four corners of the earth. A country endowed with two cultures, a land of liberty, independence and adventure, Canada is capable of offering us the wonderful gift of Games at which the golden rule of Olympism would appear a living and convincing reality.

*

If there is a field in which the IOC commands, it is that of the programme for the Olympic Games. It is up to the IOC therefore, while opening the gates of the Games to the largest number of different sports, provided they have a worldwide following, to avoid a surfeit of events and athletes, and with the help of the International Federations to balance the programme evenly and fairly between the various sports.

This means that we must absolutely refuse to allow the Olympic Games to become the simple juxtaposition of a series of different world championships held at the same time and in the same place, with all their traditional events.

On the contrary, the ambition of each sport should be to show itself at its best within the framework of the Olympic programme, not by being dispersed among a host of events but by concentrating on a few characteristic ones. This is even more true with regard to mixed sports with both men's and women's events.

Furthermore, in a world so quickly blasé, only the highest standards will allow an athlete to play his role of example properly and with due brilliance. As those taking part in the Olympic Games will always be only an infinitesimally small part of the sporting youth of the world, mediocrity must be banished and the events reserved to the elite among the elite. It is up to the IOC to impose its policy if necessary and up to the International Federations and the National Olympic Committees to determine according to what criteria and as a result of what qualifying events - of which they must remain sole judges - they will respect the limits laid down by the IOC for the participation of their athletes, for both the individual and the team events. In this way alone will the gigantism which weighs so heavily on the Olympic programme be brought to an end.

* * *

It is useless for Olympism to claim to be alone in escaping the effects of nationalism. Tribal chauvinism is as old as mankind. It is rather therefore a matter of putting across the idea that national pride, which is understandable, even though frequently too loudly expressed, is in no way irreconcilable with a respect for one's opponent.

The diversity of the sports and the multiplicity of the events featured in the Olympic programme are moreover a factor favouring balance and proportion. Whenever nationalism becomes concentrated on a single competition, with a single winner, the consequences are much worse than when the large number of medals to be won gives most countries a chance of doing well in one speciality at least, thus avoiding the contest turning into a clash between giants, liable to convert national chauvinism into explosive material. In this respect the editor of "Sport" has pointed out the fundamental difference he noticed between the Mexico of the 1968 Olympics and the Mexico of the World Football Cup in 1970.

It is up to the IOC working in conjunction with the organisers to take the steps which, in direct answer to the wishes of the vast majority of the athletes, place the main emphasis, in all circumstances, on what tends to bring them closer together and not on what drives them further apart. In this connection, one has only to note the contrast existing between the opening ceremony, a triumph of official protocol centered round the national teams, and the closing ceremony, a triumph of the unrestrained collective joy of the athletes, without any regard to distinction of nationality, creed or race.

Olympism can provide the real answer to chauvinism by directing each of its acts along the lines indicated by the athletes themselves. Thus, even in 1972, if it succeeds in bringing together the athletes of the whole world without distinction as to political regime provided its own rules are respected, the Olympic movement will arouse the enthusiastic support of the young by showing itself true to the ideal it shares with them.

* * *

The commercialisation of the framework of the Olympic Games can be kept within reasonable limits, either by cutting down expenditure on items of pure prestige, or by strengthening the controls exercised by the IOC on the prices policy practised by the organisers and on the advertising contracts signed by them. Television, by the financial relief it brings to these organisers, should favour the moderating action that the IOC has the power of exercising if it wishes.

*

As to the attraction of commercialisation for the athletes themselves, the imperfections of human nature make it impossible ever to eliminate its effects completely.

But the importance of making allowances for each athlete to enjoy a fair situation, while expecting him to represent a shining example for others, must lead to the laying down at Olympic level of a few simple rules, which would demand of the athlete:

- his independence with regard to his club or his federation, shown by his right to resume his freedom at any time, without being bound by a contract restricting him in any way in return for material advantages;
- his independence with regard to anyone who might try to exploit his sports performances for commercial purposes, which precludes the existence of any contract whose exterior effects can be easily seen, if the trouble is taken to look carefully and closely;
- his independence with regard to the practice of competitive sport, marked by the fact that, except for special personal circumstances, he already has a job or is training for one capable of ensuring his livelihood.

These three conditions lend themselves to a reasonable supervision. On the other hand, the many tricks thought up by man's never-failing ingenuity, the different conditions reigning in each sport and the diversity of political systems make it perfectly pointless to demand more than these.

This is the opinion too expressed by the vast majority of Swiss Olympic athletes during the enquiry made among them in 1968. And if other countries were to carry out a similar, equally free and precise enquiry among Olympic athletes in 1972 for example, one would undoubtedly obtain a similar answer. How could it be otherwise in fact? The time devoted by such athletes to their preparation and to competition is so considerable that it leads inevitably not only to the generalisation of the practice of compensation for loss of wages but also to the adoption of other means of direct or indirect financial aid. Such measures, suited to the particular conditions of each individual, each sport and each region, and applied under the active supervision of the National Sports Federations and National Olympic Committees, should aim to reduce the shocking discrimination existing between athletes today, from the point of view of their economic and social situation.

Obviously the youth of today, with their highly critical attitude towards an only too visibly profit-oriented civilisation, will undoubtedly not look for their models among athletes acting as sandwich men or instruments of political or commercial propaganda. But this younger generation, so ready, in spite of a few spectacular exceptions, to demand immediate financial rewards for its every activity, will not object, on the contrary in fact, to top athletes' being treated with understanding on the financial level. And if anyone doubts

this assertion, I would be prepared to defend it: let the IOC, by an enquiry offering the proper guarantees and with the help of the International Federations and the National Olympic Committees, collect on a wide base the opinion of those whose adhesion it intends to obtain. Only then will the conditions of Participation it lays down be taken seriously for they will no longer have the artificial character of conditions imposed from above, which inspire less and less respect.

* * *

The structure of the IOC has proved its strength and its effectiveness in many circumstances, but it now rests on an ambiguity. In fact, its members are supposed to represent only themselves, and to be the spokesmen for Olympism not only in their own country but also throughout the whole of their geographical area. The national factor should therefore not enter into consideration. The reality however, and this is inevitable, shows the existence of linguistic and political blocs.

Since, owing to the pressure of circumstances, national and regional concerns have made their appearance within the IOC, it is difficult to see what would prevent it from slipping towards a system similar to that of UNO, except for the feeling, based on experience, that such a system might lead more to satisfying the ambitions of official circles than to serving the interests of the athletes taken individually.

Before arriving at this extremity, which would sound the knell of Olympic originality, it would be a good idea, it seems to me, to attempt what I shall call the operation of direct contact.

What I visualise is members of the IOC, backed by the very real prestige of their institution, intervening directly, with the support of the International Federations and the National Olympic Committees, among the young people living in the part of the world lying within their sphere of influence, and more especially among the candidates for the Olympic Games, so as to start with them a real dialogue which, by plunging Olympism into a veritable fountain of youth, would free it from the burden of outdated myths and make it what its reviver wanted it to be, a movement in the service of the youth of the world.

I see the IOC composed, according to a continental and not a national system of representation, of members selected in accordance with the present principles of co-optation and age limit, but after a trial period of a year at least, which would allow the IOC, sole judge of the final choice, to carry out a thorough examination of each nominee.

I see the IOC assisted in its task by the National Olympic Committees grouped in a permanent organisation, in which

everyone would have the same rights, an organisation of a consultative character, which would in addition take part alongside the International Federations, under the authority of the IOC, in the action of sporting solidarity, the urgent need for which has been amply shown, and which should strengthen everywhere the beneficial reality of Olympic brotherhood.

I see the IOC advised permanently on the technical level by International Federations responsible for the application of the Olympic rules in their respective sports, all the major problems moreover being debated in mixed or tripartite committees on which the IOC, the NOCs and the IFs would be represented.

Finally, I see these various institutions meeting periodically at an Olympic Congress with government sports organisations, the physical training committees of the international organisations and the representatives of the athletes, modelled for example on the Order of Belgian Sportsmen. Such a Congress, conceived and run in keeping with its great significance and its ultimate success, would give Olympism not so much a new structure, but a new face, that of hope.

V

No one can say whether the Olympic Games will survive. They may be swept away by a cataclysm originating in the world outside: acts of war, social revolutions, economic or political upheavels. They may collapse under the weight of their inner contradictions. They may be supplanted by another institution, more down to earth and harshly realistic in its aims and ambitions.

But one thing certainly remains: their disappearance would create a tremendous vacuum, would signify the end of a great hope, would be a step back on the difficult path that man is treading in pursuit of his true destiny.

It is vital therefore for the Olympic Games to survive. And they will survive provided the Olympic movement remains true to its mission, whose constant topicality I have stressed, and provided it shows suppleness and realism in adapting its action, of which the Olympic Games is undoubtedly the most important but which, outside the actual period of the Games, must impose itself by its universal and permanent character.

I have intentionally refrained from dwelling on particular incidents momentarily occupying the public's attention and

assuming a sensational character as the floodlights of the mass media are trained on them for a moment.

The obstacles scattered along the Olympic path will be overcome, both for the Winter and the Summer Games, provided those responsible for Olympism seek their inspiration, for each of their particular decisions, in the overall policy to the search for which this article is devoted.

But, once clearly defined, a policy only has value in so much as it is applied firmly and resolutely.

For those who constitute the Olympic world, this will be the joint task for tomorrow.

R. G.