



# Coubertin and Sport in France

(continuation - see Nos. 34/35, 36)

by Eugen WEBER

/E/ Pierre de COUBERTIN wanted to form (or to re-form) a moral being, inner-directed, autonomous within an ever-more-encroaching world. Something closer to an ideal prototype than to an actual person operating in a recognisable social context. Reading COUBERTIN, his ideal sporting type appears as real (or as related to reality) as Huymans' "*Des Esseintes*". And, while the two types seem very distant from each other, one cannot help remarking that "*A Rebours*" appeared in 1884 and that the rise of organised sport in France was contemporary not only with the development of aestheticism and art for art's sake, but with Nietzsche's formulation of the aspiration to go beyond laws and standards, to enlist effort and will to create superior humans, to become supremely human, a kind of language that COUBERTIN could well accept. (16)

A kind of language, too, that we recognise in the writings of Maurice BARRES, breviaries in which young dilettantes learned to admire that "*passionate task for human energy*" which feeds *the constant effort to create oneself, to the point of substituting one's own conception of the world for conventional reality, in brief of recreating the universe*". (17).

BARRES was no admirer of sport, but the quotation, representative of views he often repeated, is also a good description of one aspect of organised games - refuge from, re-shaping of, an unsatisfactory world.

Pascal GROUSSET had known or sensed what he was up against. COUBERTIN was a reactionary figure, albeit an enlightened one. He stood with Gladstone, whom he admired and whose approval he sought; with the Mill of the essay "*On Liberty*", insistently and persistently treating human beings as ends rather than means. But he also stood with LE PLAY, in whose name he declared: "*Inequality is more than a law, it*

*is a fact; and patronage is more than a virtue, it is a duty".* (18) He suspected what he regarded as the dehumanising forces of State, and Science, and Press. He recruited his committees by co-optation, and ran them at his own expense with an iron will and a velvet voice.

Sport played an important part in what COUBERTIN described in a fencing term as possible parades against the industrial civilisation that he disliked and feared. Industrial civilisation stood for the four Sancho PANZAS of the Apocalypse: greater comfort, specialisation, exaggerated nationalism, and the triumph of democracy. Sport and education could provide remedies to all these evils and counter them to foster a human progress which COUBERTIN conceived as the unlimited development of individual capacities. Such development could come only after the young had been converted: to sport, to games, to exercise, and to the self-discipline which could alone forge sound characters in healthy bodies. The young must be lured on to the playing fields; and this, reasoned COUBERTIN, could be done only by the example of champions, by the glamour of achievements that many would wish to emulate. Only great exploits would fire the imagination of the young, attract them to the stadium, the track, the court, the swimming pool. It was not that COUBERTIN wanted to recruit players in great numbers in order to seed out champions, but that he sought champions whose influence would inspire the young to play. The individual exploit was a recruiting agent. What better stage for such exploits than competitions carried to an international level, surrounded by all the excitement and publicity of great official functions? GROUSSET's lendits could reappear, reshaped, in the pageantry of the revived Olympics. Re-reading his *"Souvenirs d'Amérique et de Grèce"*, published in 1897, in the wake of the first Olympic Games of 1896, one is tempted to see in this recreation the greatest of COUBERTIN's parades, the most astute publicity more for the expansion and popularisation of sports.

These sporting activities, however, affected only few. The capacities they developed were those of members of a restricted group: restricted by birth, by education, by wealth, by the opportunities all these afforded. A publication of the early 1890s, referring to the delight with which the press greeted the physical regeneration of the *"Jeunesse Universitaire - flower of French youth"*, regrets that this covered only a tiny minority. Physical exercise was a good thing, but those who needed it most never got it. If athletics and ball games *"brillent dans l'ombre des manèges des riches écoles . . . le peuple les ignore!"* (19).

One of COUBERTIN's circulars of 1894 insists on the supreme importance of preserving *"the noble and chivalrous character of athletics"*, of defending them against professionalism and the spirit of lucre. But his stubborn insistence on amateurism, perfectly appropriate to the purpose he had in

mind, raised yet another barrier between "true" sportsmen and the mass of ordinary men. In the end, as L'Equipe once explained (12 January 1955), "only schoolboys are true amateurs because they play for fun!"

Games, in this perspective, are anti-utilitarian *par excellence*: quite useless in the material sense, unproductive and gratuitous. Free, separate, uncertain, regulated, fictitious, games are ends in themselves. They leave behind no harvest, no gain, no work of art, not even any ruins. And none could be more gratuitous or non-utilitarian than the sport of fencing on horseback that COUBERTIN spent his life trying to get accepted by the Olympic Committees that he headed. If one considers that games are excellently suited to the consumer society that people talk about today, being simply the accumulation and expenditure of disposable effort, then one may say that sports were a commodity suitable for the consumption of the rentier class that flourished in late nineteenth century France and apt to be particularly attractive to their young who had time and energy to spare.

The economic situation permitted the "fils de famille" to satisfy his whims at a low price, whether indulging in a 'soubrette' or a 'plaquette'. The general atmosphere hardly encouraged the young and the potentially active to turn towards economic activities as such. The most dynamic discovered that advancement lay in non-economic enterprises: writing, politics, speculation, entertainment, the university. And the situation that suggested this also made it possible, by creating the lower prices and providing the higher revenues that sustained large sections of the middle classes. It is in these broad but numerically limited circles that one finds the young men of independent means who staff most of the intellectual activities of the time, like BARRES, DAUDET, and MAURRAS, or like Jean BAROIS and the circle of friends who joined him in founding "Le Semeur". And lesser lights confirm the pattern.

Maurice LEBLANC (b. 1864), son of a wealthy Norman textile manufacturer, spent some reluctant years pretending to manage one of his father's factories while trying to break through to literary fame. Before achieving success in 1907 with the fictional figure of Arsène LUPIN, LEBLANC published one of France's first sporting novels. "Voici des Ailes" (Paris 1898) glorified not the aeroplane but 'the new friend that destiny has granted man' - the bicycle that gives us wings to rise above the vileness of the world. Tristan BERNARD (b. 1866), another provincial in easy circumstances, started off in the "Revue Blanche", founded a shortlived publication of his own, then moved to the editorship of a cycling review. Before achieving success with "Les Pieds Nickelés" in 1894 and becoming a well known author and playwright, he had launched the first great indoor bicycle stadium in France:

the Vélodrome de Buffalo, built on the site once occupied by Buffalo BILL's circus. More revealing still is the career of Charles-Louis BAUDRY de SAUNIER. Born in 1865, he broke off his law studies to found a literary review, "*Le Roquet*", for which Willy and Jules RENARD occasionally wrote. Towards 1890, BAUDRY took up cycling and published four books about it, culminating in "*L'Art de bien monter la bicyclette*" (Paris 1894). Then, around 1897, following the trend of fashionable taste, he abandoned the bicycle for the automobile, producing a number of guides on driving before he became editor of the "*Revue du Touring Club de France*".

Devoid of these modish and opportunist aspects, closer to the idealism of Jean BAROIS, were men like COUBERTIN, or another disciple of LE PLAY, Albert de MUN, whose major endeavour was moral and political. It is not irrelevant that COUBERTIN's activities were made possible only by a private fortune that it took a war and forty years of spending to exhaust, and by social relations that facilitated initiatives impossible to less well connected zealots. But such explanations do not go far enough. These circumstances made his undertakings possible; they did not preside over their conception, which stemmed from the reactions that more generalised conditions roused in his particular temperament.

Looked at in the perspective of the *fin de siècle*, COUBERTIN's dream reflects the romantic elitism of a nineteenth century aristocrat fascinated by DARWIN, by TAINÉ, above all by Dr. ARNOLD; the ARNOLD beside whose tomb he sought inspiration on several occasions, the ARNOLD who wanted to instil in his Rugby charges religious and moral principles; the behaviour of a gentleman; intellectual aptitudes. In that order.

The good thing about such traditionalism was that it enabled COUBERTIN to claim that he was a non-conformist - and to do it with absolute sincerity. There is a familiar sound about his closing words to the international congress which he persuaded to endorse the principle of reviving the Olympic Games. The Congress had been called in 1894 by the USFSA (General Secretary - Pierre de COUBERTIN) '*to study and propagate the principles of amateurism*'. A vast and elegant public, seventy-nine delegates from thirteen countries including the United States, ministers, Academicians, luminaries of the university, the Church, and the *gratin*, presided over by Baron Chodron de COURCEL, sometime French ambassador in Berlin and now in London. It had been held - as many functions COUBERTIN sponsored were to be held - in the great aula of the Sorbonne, among the potted palms, the recitals of music and poetry, and the frescoes of Puvic de CHAVANNES, that

guaranteed the respectability of athletics. *'Those of the old school'*, COUBERTIN told his audience who came from nowhere else, *'have lamented our holding our assizes right here in the Sorbonne. They have realised that we are rebels, and that we shall end by overthrowing the worm-eaten structure of their philosophy. And this is true, gentlemen, we are rebels.'*

There is no evidence of opposition to the Congress or of criticism of its doings. The President of the Republic smiled upon it, the Academy of Paris welcomed it. Its sessions did not threaten the established order, did not quarrel with the Republic, did not criticise the rising democracy. But the feeling of non-conformity lent it a special sense of virtue and the vigour that rebels enjoy even when they are rebellious in name only. COUBERTIN's nearest approach to non-conformity at this time was his emphasis on the pacific and internationalist character of his enterprises, as when he advocated the reestablishment of the Olympic Games as *'the best of internationalism'*, and argued that the best battleground for universal youth was the playground. (20) But such views themselves were the views of his peers and odd only in the respect that COUBERTIN had jettisoned the legitimism and clericalism of the conservative tradition in which he had been born, retaining only the internationalist and pacifist aspects along with the code of honour.

Yet convention deprived of some of its familiar aspects can look unconventional. Tadpoles without tails look very different. COUBERTIN meant what he said, and that mattered.

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(16) *In actual practice, COUBERTIN, who had recourse to DARWIN and SPENCER, did not refer to NIETZSCHE. Allies like Paul ADAM, a more demagogic publicist, did so. ADAM's "Morale des Sports" (1907), 12-13, 17, quotes NIETZSCHE as to man being meant to surpass himself, argues that sport stimulates the "will to power" and invigorates national energy. ADAM's (mis)understanding of NIETZSCHE was characteristic of the way in which the German philosopher was read and used. "When Americanism and Nietzscheism dominate the next era, there will no longer be ideas strong enough to withstand these social phenomenon. Let us ask sport to arm our characters so that we can take a place in the first ranks of those who show their will for power with glory". No wonder COUBERTIN kept off NIETZSCHE!*

(17) BARRES, *"Du Sang, de la Volupté, de la Mort"* (1894), page 268. Thus, the football-playing hero of an autobiographical novel written in the 1920s above school life in pre-war days, associated "NIETZSCHE's conception of . . . the superman with BARRES' culte du moi". Jules JOLINON *"Le Joueur de Balle"* (1929), page 75: "To realise first of all our athletic selves".

(18) *"Un Programme"* (1887), page 29.

(19) Louis BARRON, *"Les Jeux"* (n.d., 1891?), pages 217-19.

(20) *"Revue de Paris"*, 15 June, 1894.