

# Sport, a social phenomenon

*As a physical education teacher and former journalist, Mr. Arsène GERONTIKOS suggests to us here his reflections on the subject of sport, drawing a parallel between its practice by former and current sportsmen. Today we are publishing the first part of his study.*

Before turning to the heart of the problem which is and will continue to be of increasing concern so long as intellectual activity dominates productivity and rejects any kind of physical activity, it would be advisable to supply some information which will not only ease our task but also clarify a few very important terms. In this way, we shall have no intellectual differences with our readers, faithful as we are to the principle that good reports make good friends.

When we speak of sport, in this study, we mean any physical exercise which fulfils man's need to prepare himself to expend energy so that his body can meet the dangers and obstacles with which he is constantly faced in life.

This goal can be achieved directly or indirectly.

Let us examine the question from a purely logical point of view. When a person's objective is quite clear and he has only one aim, that is when he is a gymnast, physical exercise is unquestionably much more efficient. However, gymnastics at school or during basic military training is often very boring and tedious. Although it may be very useful, it is not always very enjoyable. This fundamental fact is the basis of sport, which is essentially a pleasant form of gymnastics, fulfilling the physical and mental needs of the person and demanding the initiative of the sportsmen who is not subject to orders. His motivation is made

up of an internal driving force and a personal ambition to prove himself in front of the spectators, not only as an individual but also as a team-member.

Obviously, the spectator, not being an athlete, does not take any exercise. He is merely an amateur of sport. His muscles remain idle and only his voice reacts to moments of enthusiasm. He is carried away by a strange frenzy that expresses his anger, disappointment, satisfaction and desires, and without realising it becomes an active participant in the sport he is watching. Thus in bygone days, this mixed action of half-struggle and half-spectacle was formed: the spectator, although inactive, struggles with the sportsman and at the same time encourages him with his social support just as the athlete is concentrating on winning. What makes sport even more valuable is that this indirectly encourages physical exercise as it creates the desire within the woman to practise the same sport. This is above all true in football and is the reason why squares, streets and alleys become football pitches where youngsters and teenagers imitate last Sunday's match with a badly blown-up football, much to the annoyance of the adults.

This imitation of "westerns," with murder as the main theme and firearms as the principal means of persuasion, incites a love of sport and, at the same time, exercises the body.

Therefore, the antipathy that certain people derive from football, which is sometimes justified, can hardly be defended. Football is the sport of today. It has a mysterious attraction that the most systematic psychological research studies have failed to discover. Although it has no immediate results for the spectator as far as physical exercise is concerned, it gives him the opportunity of appreciating this sporting technique, understanding the real values of the game and of supporting a team, which is after all a social entity (of course, this enthusiasm should not develop into mentally uncontrollable fanaticism). This sport somehow promotes physical exercise which is itself of great benefit to him, even though he does not exercise his body. This combination of sport and spectacle is, however, also helpful to the sportsman as the support he receives at the crucial moment is a wonderful tonic for the nervous system. A team player or athlete exerts himself to the maximum in order to be worthy of the hopes that are placed in him and thus he tries his hardest, something which is of absolute necessity in any struggle.

It would now be advisable to clarify another point. In our essay we refer to track and field of both Greek and Roman origin. However the latter predominates nowadays. Sports grounds are becoming more popular than stadiums. Ever since 776 B.C., when the Olympic Games were created in Greece,

and since they have been held in the month of Hectomb, until the day that a Frenchman, Baron de COUBERTIN, revived the ancient custom, athletics had always had a purely ideological basis. Its goal was and still is a lawrel from a wild olive. Nowadays the sports grounds, that have superceded the arenas, are full of new elements that bear no relation to the pure sporting spirit.

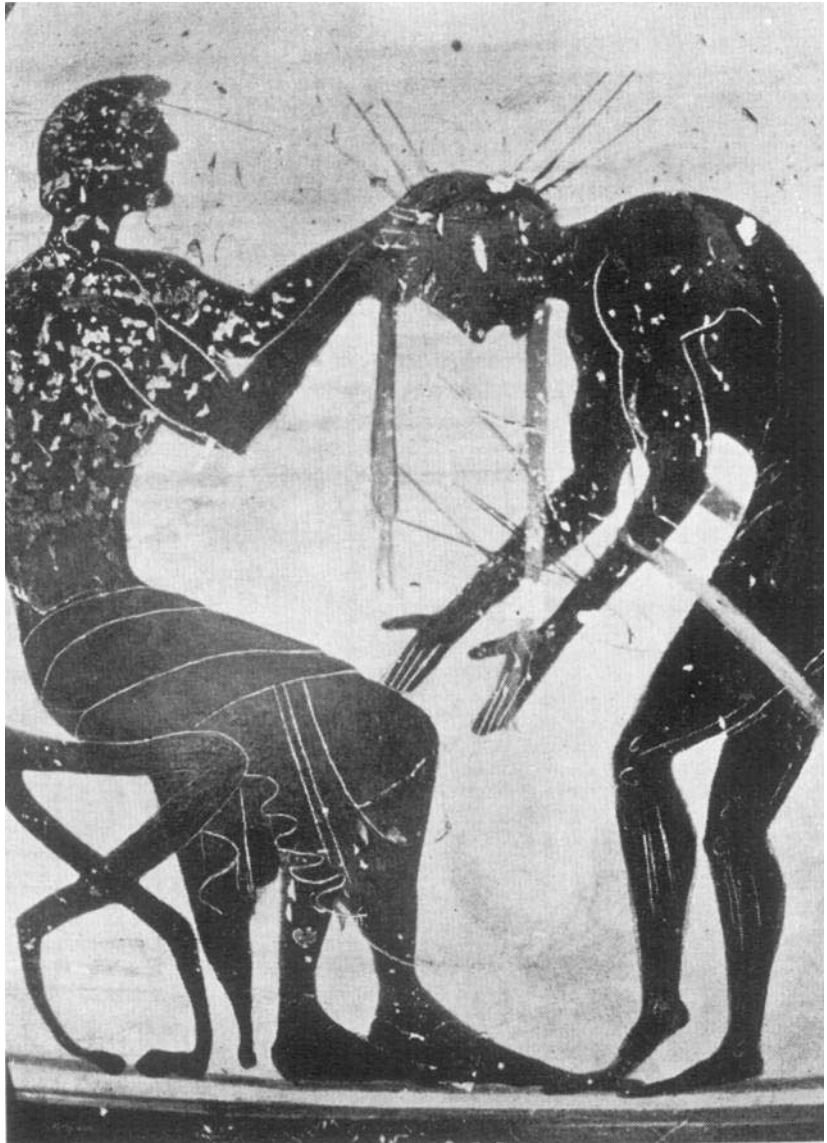
The first of these factors is that it must be a spectacle, an idea inherited from the Roman arena; the second, created in our time, is the economic repercussions which, at first sight, only affect individuals or teams, but which in fact affect the standard of living of a whole nation: financial loans to players or teams, lotteries, bets and above all the creation of a particular sort of internal tourism. All these points contribute to the flow of capital and activates economic life. Everyone is aware of what a first, or even a second, class football match can bring in capital to a local economy. This has been well understood by the owners of hotels, restaurants, recreation centres and car rental firms; and it does not only happen with football and other such sports, it can also occur at pure athletic meetings, whose origins are to be found in Ancient Greece. However these events are based on top quality athletes and, if the aim is to draw a large number of spectators, call for expensive technical preparation. This is the reason why these great meetings are rare. Football grounds and certain other venues provide a spectacle every Sunday, but this is not the case with stadiums. Hence, there can be no real objection to team sports.

It is evident that if this combination had survived

through the ages with all the terrible defects of its ancient ancestry (i.e. games in the Roman arena), there would have been serious reasons for rejecting it from our modern society. Many things have changed in the past two thousand years. The stadiums no longer present, to an audience wild with sanguine delight, the games of yester year: gladiators and retiaries, bulls and cocks, fighting each other to death for the pleasure of cruel and happily settled loafers. "Res" are no longer sacrificed as according to Roman law. Nowadays, they are free men who compete and no one would dare to have the losers slain by the winners by a mere gesture of the thumb.

Although we are derogatory about our civilisation, it has made an effort to give man self-control and a civilised way of living. Of course, human nature still has a trace of cruelty and does not change, except for a few rare cases that prove that civilisation has the power to free man from the obscure realm of his natural instincts. In any case, firstly the fact that the men are no longer victims bought and sacrificed to satisfy animal tendencies, as in the amphitheatres of ancient times, and secondly that the wonderful true sporting spirit, inherited from the Ancient Greek Stadium, give a feeling of joy to today's sports meetings making these events even more indispensable and congenial.

Of course, even today insults, obscenities, crude demon-



strations and xenophobes are apparent in our sports grounds. Fortunately, they are exceptions and disappear as soon as the reason for their existence vanishes. These reasons are effected more easily in those who react to any kind of fanaticism. If the persons responsible are not rationally controlled or when their own rank prejudice goes beyond the natural limits of youth's enthusiasm and helps to create collective psychoses and a feeling of hysteria, it cannot be a question of waiting for the social benefits of the sports event.

All the clubs, sports societies, organisations and their management boards must understand that, if the people provide them with the means of attaining their goals, they sometimes do so without thinking, not only to enjoy it as a pleasant pastime or for a bit of fresh air - a rare commodity in these days - but also because they are expecting a strengthening of humanity through demonstrations of pure emulation. This fanaticism is also incited by the sports newspapers which, instead of striving for the creation of a real sporting public, not only does not fight against the unfounded independence of clubs and sportsmen, but, to the contrary, encourages it for financial reasons. They flatter inexcusable egoism, creating absurd illusions and thus corrupting youth into thinking that eternal glory can be won by moving arms and legs even if the mind is dormant. This sort of paltry literature, a great favourite among sports

writers, creates amazing dreams of giants, heroes and semi-gods, constantly vaunts transient glories in letters a foot high and praises up-and-coming athletes, often forgetting the most important problems of genuine, beneficial sport.

In 1968, the Olympic Games were held in Mexico. Their sporting and economic repercussions attracted exclusive worldwide interest. Despite this, on the eve of these competitions, whose name and idea were born in Greece, nearly all the sports newspapers served up this well-known, puerile literature on the victories taking place on the football grounds, as front-page reading for their drugged public, at a time when the eyes of the entire amateur sports world were anxiously fixed on the stadium in the capital of Mexico. It is true, and no one can deny it, that the General Secretariat for Sport is making a tremendous effort to cleanse our sport. This action has already begun to bear fruit in football and pure track and field.

Whether it be at home or abroad, the behaviour of our teams during matches against foreign teams has begun to improve and their performances no longer provoke our indignation, as was still the case very recently when:

firstly, our football teams, composed, according to the sports papers, of giants, heroes and semi-gods, used to return from abroad almost always after ignominious defeats and then, as did old Aratus for the Peloponnesus, they would fill the world with "*trophies for them*" as Polybius would have said;

and secondly, for us the Olympic Games, a meeting of all the peoples of the world, bestowing honour and glory on the victors

and their homelands, was nearly always a place of martyrdom; even though history gave us the right to parade first in the official inaugural march-passed of the Games, we were usually at the bottom of the general classification. This came as a result of our horror for method and our faith in passing enthusiasm. Our people have a natural feeling for sport, they are captivated by the beautiful spectacles which take place in the sports grounds and stadiums and, without doubt, possess first-class sporting potential, as can be seen in many naturally brilliant athletes. However, neither eloquent speeches false illusions, blinkers and narrow-mindedness, irresponsible leaders nor XIXth Century technique would suffice to emphasise this potential.

A systematic way of working is necessary to prepare our people to meet the challenge of its responsibility in the field of sport. Unfortunately, our country created the very bases, not only of our European civilization but also of the Abdyrites. *"But the Abdyrites"* wrote WIELAND, *"are an immortal people and have invaded the earth. Although their former country has been lost, they increase and multiply, always remaining the same."* They keep their ancient customs. In bygone days they built marble fountains without any water; today, they have water but they forget the fountains.

There are now serious indications that we are beginning

to put aside reminders of the Abdyrites which so dominated us in the field of sport. The people are an excellent resource for almost all sports. Water flows. It is up to the leaders to build the fountains. Thus football and track and field will not remind us of the Eastern improvisations, but will provide us with real not imaginary bread, no longer recalling *"the shadow of a coachman with the shadow of a brush beats the shadow of a car"*, as SCARRON said in the parody of the *Enéide*. Thus, thanks to the intervention of the god, *Sérieux*, we shall refrain from cultivating in the field of sport certain attitudes that are contrary to his desires, like vanity, 'donjuanism' and other evil weeds which have no relationship with true sport and good sporting behaviour.

I shall conclude this introduction with an observation which might shock the reader but which has been taken from the relationship between sport and culture. Unfortunately, many young people have crammed themselves with so much technical sports terminology - names of team players, referees, results of matches, forecasts, etc. - that there is no room for anything else. Although they can be heard speaking with great ease on their favourite subject, they suddenly become completely silent when the subject of conversation changes. Even scholastic education, whether general or not, is also a means of earning a living; this does not constitute a constantly up-to-date knowledge of

sports techniques. Youth must free themselves of this idolatry, this devouring passion for interests that are not particularly concerned with their future career. Freeing themselves of this useless information and returning to more practical interests will prove to be the best way of starting again from scratch for these amateur sports enthusiasts.

It would seem rather strange that a man, who in 1924 was sports editor for the late Pope's newspaper "Athenai", is still interested in sports affairs in 1969, forty-five years later. The reason is that, as time passes, the author of this essay understands better the moral and practical importance of physical exercise in the formation of the new human personality which is created by this modern and heroic day and age. If people of all ages and from all over the world become interested in sport, our country must make it an immediate object of its efforts, of the citizen and of the State; it was here that the idea was first originated of a peaceful battle without loss of blood. It also has the benefit of testing and improving, at the same time, the physical and moral condition of man. Some readers may think that a subject which does not deal with stadiums, swimming-pools, sports grounds, as is customary, is leading us astray from the main theme. However, this will happen with those who are not deeply interested in sport, who have never realised its biological importance and who continue

to regard sport as one did in the XIXth Century, that is as something for children and young people. Fortunately, they are a very small minority. Among them however are those who only see sport as a national affair; disappointed by the poor performances of our teams on an international level, which have recently become a little less humiliating because both in football and athletics we seem to be making slow but sure progress and we no longer justify our defeats (considered sometimes as moral victories) by twisted ankles, colds, chills and other "*Deus ex machina*", which make them seem even more ridiculous, they are not content to turn their backs on sport. They do not recognise either its role in national life nor its importance in the struggle for a new civilisation uniting all men and one that is different from that which cradles us in false dreams, because this minority is incapable of seeing the elevation of man which hides our new era.

Fortunately, the majority have understood it, due if not to logic, at least to intuition which has received the very strong and important messages of collective awareness that has helped our destiny ever since it separated itself from that of the animal.

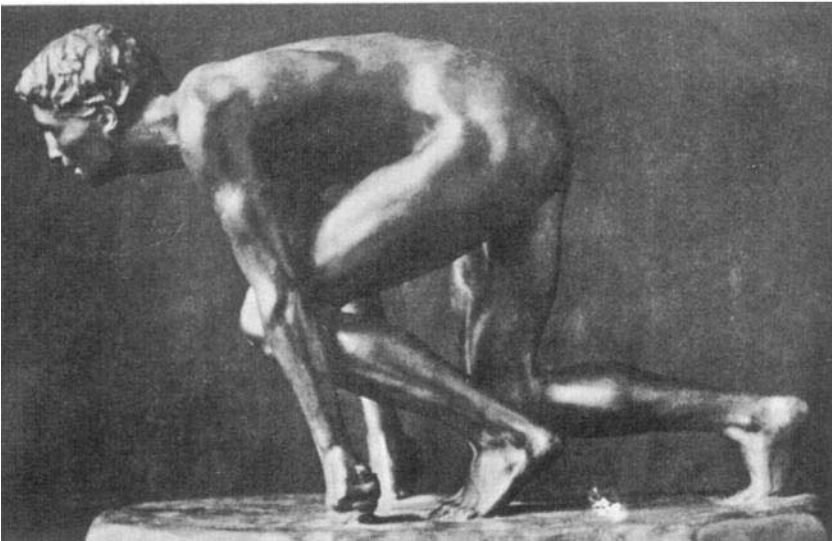
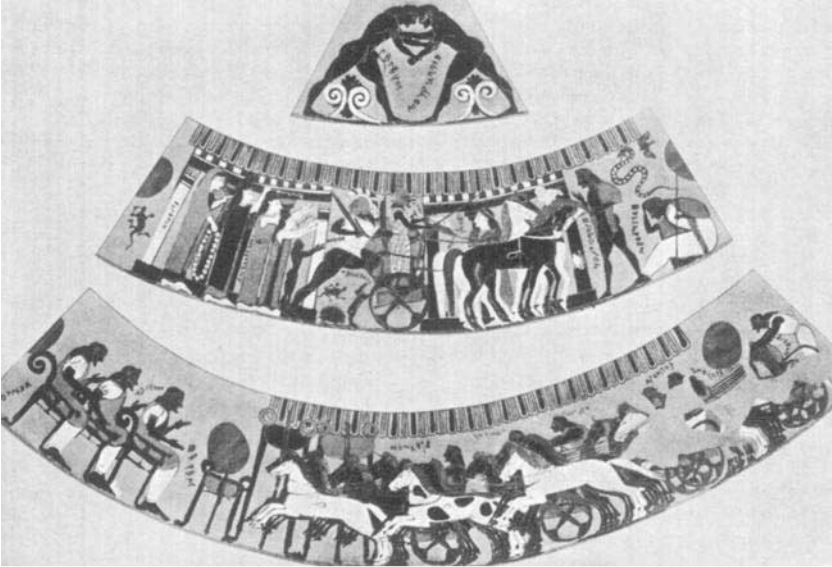
The editor of this essay has spent most of his life as a physical education teacher in secondary schools. He has had the opportunity, in the gymnasiums, to realise the impor-

tance of physical education in education in general, the love the young have for it and their need for physical education, as the basis for a sound mind, because a healthy body is the basic requirement to enable a person to develop his potential. Debility, which was almost the law in our country until recently, not as a blight but as a result of a sick economy, creates neurasthenia and prevents the natural development of mind and body which was of such importance to our forefathers. Luckily things change. Healthier food for the children makes them bigger and stronger, gives them natural vitality, a resistance which stems from better health and which bears no relation to the unhealthy resistance created by tension, anxiety and exaltation. This new strength sometimes inspires children to do things that amaze their elders, who, both in school and in life, had to put up with the overwhelming burden of conventional morals and who would sigh under the weight of the hypocritical acceptance of such things.

Nowadays, in these difficult but hopeful times, exists a new sincerity, which is bearing fruit, between the young and their elders. These results would be much more numerous if the adults would also decide to listen to the message of the times and were willing to make some sacrifices. "*Hooliganism*", which everybody knows is not born directly of the gymnasiums, stadiums and sports grounds and of which cer-

tain adults - Heracles, the virtuous - savour the satanic flavour like a sweet, is not a fruit of our time and youth is not responsible for its increased activity. Youth is the product of a period of transition. And the greater the difference which marks this period of transition between the past and what is come, the more dramatic becomes the struggle for the instigation of a new kind of peace. As THUCYDIDES said, "*as the sudden and the unexpected and that which occurs under the most absurd circumstances appeases the mind.*"

Sport is therefore not responsible for this new "*were-wolf*" which has come and upset our calm and tranquil existence, as the old sellers of gaiters and ideas, yellowed with age, would have us believe. I have learned from a long school experience that sport practised by young people under enlightened supervision does not engender laziness, impertinence and its natural tendency to anarchism. On the contrary, it develops self-control and discipline which are the very foundations of an harmonious social co-existence. Sport does not render obsolete the famous Roman commandment which requires that youth "*Reverentium et obsequium*", respect and obey their elders, but, quite the opposite, it supports and motivates this requirement, making it more clear and bringing it to the great heights of practical moral philosophy, which is the very basis of practical



life. If only the adults would stop looking upon sport as a sacred mule on which to load their own responsibilities when youth goes astray. "*One must first cleanse oneself before cleansing someone else*", said the eminently practical man, Xenophanes. Let them think back to the memories of their youth and see whether they do not prove that these wanderings belong to every generation, and if these failings were less rare in their times, it was because their repression was more arduous and austere than the present day. They were more sullen, bold and brutal in overcoming a greater resistance to see the light of day.

Before dealing with our main theme, which is a brief historical glimpse of sport and its significance today, we should take note of an item of extreme importance. Like Janus, sport has two aspects. One is the physical activity of the sportsmen and the other is the mental participation of the spectators. The former personally take part with their own muscular strength, desires, fears and joys, which drives on their own body. The others look on, enjoy themselves or become impassioned, occasionally carried away by hysteria or folly, with the sound security of a man watching another fighting and being in danger, without he himself running the slightest risk. On the one hand there is the alert, pure and just hope of a personal victory, a desire which was the

fundament of every civilisation; and on the other, the rather hazy, diffuse but cruel wish of a crowd which does not take part and risks nothing, but which becomes enthralled and believes in the supremacy and determination of their idols. This contrast was illustrated brilliantly by Schiller, in his beautiful poem "*Der Handschuh*". The beautiful lady who, in the security of her balcony, throws her glove to the ferocious lion in the arena to try her lover, he who runs to pick it up putting his life in grave danger; the first act represents the psychology of the crowd and the second the struggle of the athlete to gain a personal victory. It is true that, nowadays, this contrast can no longer be expressed in such a repellent fashion . . . However, the embers still glow. In extreme cases, where education and law have failed to brake the natural instinct of the people, we have seen great "Punch and Judy Shows" take place in stadiums where the spectators have crammed in hours before the start, a flower in the lapel and a broad grin over the face to spend the Sunday afternoon.

These are the two aspects of sport which the great Swiss citizen Le CORBUSIER had in mind when, in his book the "*Urbanisme*" (1952), he tried to defend his theory of replacing small buildings with gigantic block projects. Le CORBUSIER, born in the backwoods of the Swiss Jura mountains, where a healthy people of great physical resistance devote them-

selves with enthusiasm to the national sport of mountain-climbing, is a very keen follower of all sport including the latter. He designs very high buildings to be able to plan small gymnasiums, among other things, in the spaces in between the structures, "so that sport in the stadia, the spectacle of moving legs, can be replaced by sport on the doorstep, real sport." These two contradictory views on sport which have followed him in Europe since the very first, the same is probably happening in other countries as well, as all sportsmen want to satisfy a basic fundamental need in man, are therefore essentially characteristic of social life.

It is a great honour for our country to have been the first to serve the most powerful and the most honest form of sport - that of a personal effort answering a fundamental and social need and not the mere consideration of a sports event as a spectacle. It is from this definition that the Greeks of today revere that ancient institution of the Olympic Games.

The Romans developed the spectacular side of sport, for very evident political reasons; that is to say, these spectacles were held for the pleasure of the idle people of Rome, so that they could rid themselves of their aggressiveness in the amphitheatres, which they could no longer do on the distant battlefields and which it was dangerous to liberate at the forum or in the streets of

Rome. Let us think for a moment what was the purpose of the famous gladiator schools, especially Capou, where men were trained to slit each other's throats in front of a blood-thirsty public; let us consider objectively the scene when the defeated "*gladiator*" or "*retiarus*" waited for the people. drunk with blood and death, to give the signal for his execution by a mere gesture of the thumb, "*pollice verso*", according to the terminology, and we could explain the horror of Roman civil wars and the tragic ill-treatment of slaves during the famous revolt of Spartacus.

Thus, under the same sky and in two societies related by blood and civilisation, the two starting-points, which were mentioned above, were formed, both at almost opposite ends of the sports map. The Greeks received their main characteristics of the hard and sober life from the Hellenic people and from the substandard material means of the City. The Roman people stood out for their prosperity resulting from conquests, because these accrued criteria showed up everywhere, whether it was wanted or not. As far as athletics was concerned, their reduced financial means forced the Greeks to regard the sporting spirit as a virtue and victory in Olympia as a high ideal, whilst prosperity allowed the Romans to transform their stadia into massacre arenas and the tiers into schools of inhuman cruelty. Thus, sport began in the Mediterranean and made its way to-

wards the rest of Europe, from country to country, century after century, until it arrived as we know it today still with its two aspects: Greek, as at Olympia, dignified and bright, and Roman, full of ancient failings, but forced by modern realities to modify itself before being presented to today's public, which demands a minimum of good manners and some respect for the ideas of our times and for human values. Later, we shall develop certain aspects of this long, rich progress of sport. But, we must first deal with two basic questions which are closely linked to its essence and which explain its widespread propagation in the world. These questions are:

a/ what are the causes of this collective reality; and

b/ what aims has sport, i.e. its importance in the world and above all in our country and in our era.

First of all, we must recognise that, as throughout history, from Genesis to the development of sport, the Goddess Necessity rules and she determines the reasons for its sudden appearance, which are:

1/ the biological need for exercise to retain a good physical balance.

2/ man's obligation to be able to defend himself from outside dangers, sickness, etc. . . . , and in former ages when the only weapon was the cold steel, to keep his forces intact either for defending his family

or his town or in case of a conquest to be made.

3/ the instinct that the healthy body gives a feeling of security and euphoria, at a time when social conditions are favourable; i.e. when society assumes the power to limit the natural tendency to abuse its superiority, this feeling always produces an undeniable social advantage.

4/ the desire for a beautiful body, which is a basic element in the course of the continuation of mankind, as it causes a mutual attraction between the two sexes which promotes their harmony.

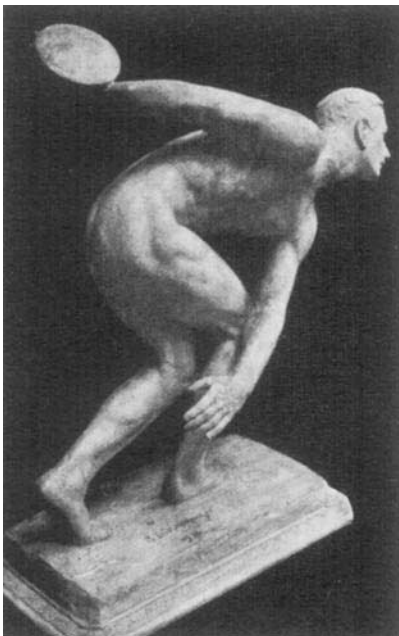
After the causes of the genesis of sport, we mentioned the purposes for which this is required. Nevertheless, corporal exercise is not only a means to attain the aforementioned aims; apart from beauty, health and strength which were the prerequisites *sine qua non* of bravery on the battlefield, there are other aims which directly concern human culture and the future of mankind on earth. One has an educational significance and the other an ethical one.

After natural physical talents, success in the field of sport requires a disciplined education, a training of a specific nature demanding more than just the simple strength to carry fruit; considerable mental effort is also necessary for the sportsman to yield himself to this awareness for discipline which is the attempt to

submit oneself, for his own good and for the good of society, to the determined pattern. This was perhaps what Socrates wanted to point out when he wrote, about the Olympic Games: *"The Greeks made a show of their riches, strength and education there"*. The right education makes the sportsman obtain the best result possible with the least effort; it is therefore found in the form of basic movement of the body of human civilisation, the principle of the least effort, which man carries with him during his struggle for an easier existence.

However, apart from an educational importance, sporting competitions - Greek not Roman - have always had a moral significance which has its roots in our land. It is not a coincidence that the age of the Olympic Games was, for Greece, the time when the wars stopped, a truce between the young people who, some days before, were perhaps face to face not in the stadium but on the battlefield, sent by the City. At Olympia, as at the Amphietyonies, the Greeks gained the feeling of unity much greater than that of any small territory and they lived for a short time as one nation. It will always be an honour for Greece to have sown, in its sanctum, the seed of a our era. After two thousand, five hundred years, the Olympic community of all men, which will one day become a reality, instead of a myth.

Just how fertile this seed has been is illustrated well by



meet of the common people of the Hellenes continues on a world scale every four years; in a perfect world with men of all colours and from all races, who fraternise in the international stadia, united in the desire for the noble reward of the sporting event, inspite of the fact that they are divided for all other kinds of trophies. Thus, people from all over the world, represented by a noble pleiad of young people whose spirit is still open to ideals, can still feel the uniting and brotherly force between them under the same sky. Like art, music and travel, sport has become an international language for a more essential and copious understanding between men, until such time as the abhorrent trees will cease to bear fruit, the Darius will grow pale and the Tamerlane become useless. It is thus that after several millenaries of progress the eminent institution of sporting competition, not in its barbaric form, but more in its Greek form, shows its resistance, despite many other ancient institutions being lost. This is a supplementary proof that sport satisfied man's essential needs.

(to be continued)