

To the athletes

According to the press, athletes' eligibility to enter the Olympic Games rests solely on a list of figures: performances achieved, amounts of money allotted, proposed or refused, the height and weight of the competitors, distances to be run or already run in training, number of participants, etc....

But becoming an Olympic athlete is not just a question of muscles or one's purse.

Let us take a look at the famous rule 26: *"To be eligible for participation in the Olympic Games, a competitor must observe the traditional Olympic spirit and ethic and have always participated in sport as an avocation without having received any remuneration for his participation."* Of course, this involves the question of money, but also the Olympic spirit and ethic. What does rule 3 say: *"The aims of the Olympic Movement are to promote the development of those fine physical and moral qualities which are the basis of amateur sport."* Ethic, physical and moral qualities, these are terms which cannot be translated into figures and which are too often forgotten.

We know the physical talents: a healthy body well developed, able to provide the effort demanded within the limits of human capability. To achieve this, definite moral qualities are necessary; complete self-awareness, that is, the knowledge that man is not made up of a brain alone but also of a body, that they are inseparable and interdependent for each to work well. Who is not aware of the truths of La Palice?

Even so, we must put theory into practice and not let our physical and intellectual faculties slumber through idleness, slackness or habit. Of course, is there much point in being able to run 100 yards in 10 seconds when a car is waiting outside the door, or to visit a museum when you can read a magazine in your armchair? The prime quality of the athlete is his desire to avoid ease, to surpass himself by going beyond his impetus and reaching through physical activity, spiritual fulfillment. But the satisfaction of this desire, at the same time a choice and a spiritual need, requires a great amount of will and self-discipline, since the intention alone is not enough.

Added to this are enthusiasm, the desire to participate, the feeling of solidarity; the athlete trains by himself, runs round the track by himself, but is a member of a team and has to bend to its rules. He must be aware that he is part of a whole and that he is fighting for, and with, his friends. We can then wonder to what extent these moral dispositions, this enthusiasm this self-neglect are not more precious and should not, when selecting athletes, weigh more heavily than sports results. In fact, once he has assimilated the feeling that he is entering a community, the athlete is better able to curb an excess of individualism, to submit to rulings, and thus show loyalty and dignity towards not only his own team, but also his opponents. This is, in fact, what athletes undertake when represented by one of their number, they take the Olympic oath at the opening of the Games: *"In the name of all competitors, I promise that we will take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honour of our teams."*

But let us reverse the order of these factors. Based on what has just been said, one would be tempted to compare the athlete to a saint or a superman whose perfect spirit and body would assure him a place in the Olympic paradise.

To devote oneself faithfully to a sport, to resist fatigue and all kinds of temptations, to want to reach the limits of the body, to open one's spirit to the world, these are the demands every man must face, these are the demands of Olympism. The union of these qualities and these goals make up the Olympic ethic; the Olympic athlete thus distinguishes himself and accedes to the supreme honour of participating in the Olympic Games.

This is not the case; Olympic athletes are normal men, in the full meaning of the term, formed by Olympism. Anybody can adopt the ideas of this school without necessarily possessing exceptional physical qualities or a faultless morality. In the first place, it depends on rediscovering one's body, one's capabilities and one's limits. The idea of *"know yourself"* begins with the envelope of flesh and ends with the spirit, since the intellectual faculties work more profitably in a healthy *"milieu"* which helps them blossom out.

How many athletes have sport revealed to themselves by making them appreciate the joys of effort and discover friendship, by giving them the taste of emulation, by introducing them to other values than those on which they had based their existence? There are many who consider their body a useless mass, a burden which shackles their liberty and lucidity of mind. J.J. Rousseau wrote *"The weaker the body, the more it commands; the stronger it is the more it obeys."* Let them improve their body, develop it, discover it through sport, and they will achieve the fulfillment to which they aspire.

Olympism also has a rehabilitating force, for when one is in complete possession of oneself, it is easier to understand *"the man opposite"*, to analyse his reactions, to act according to his feelings and have greater respect for him. There is another kind of rehabilitation: that of oneself vis-à-vis those who surround us and judge us. Blameworthy, reprehensible acts that anybody can commit are due precisely to this fundamental ignorance of oneself and of other people. For example, the act of murder is provoked by the absence of two virtues which sport helps to reveal; self-discipline and respect for human life.

Coubertin once said *"Olympism can constitute a school of moral nobility and purity as much as of physical endurance and energy."* Those who participate in the Olympic Games are those who are members, in fact the best members, of this school, both from the moral and physical aspect. Each Olympic athlete is an example in the eyes of the public since he combines strength with purity, speed with loyalty, the desire to win with intelligence; each of them incarnates Hermathena, that figure who for the Greeks, united Hermes, god of the gymnasium, and Athena, goddess of intelligence.

On 26th August, there will be 10,000 athletes resolved to take part with the best Olympic spirit, to engage in a friendly struggle for the triumphs of the Olympic ideals. May they fight well to be more victorious, to learn more, and thrill the world of the faithful with their prowess.

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