

Olympia

by D José Maria Cagigal



Mr José Maria Cagigal is world-renowned for his rigorous research into and his considerable reflections on the human sport phenomenon.

He has published many articles in specialist reviews and has spoken at conferences throughout the world. Since its creation, he has been head of the National Institute of Physical Education and Sport in Madrid, where he also teaches psychopedagogy.

In Warsaw in 1970, he was elected President of the International Association of Physical Education Schools. He is also Vice-President of the Research Committees of CIEP, UNESCO and Vice-President of the FIEP.

His first book Men and Sport was published in 1957. Sport, Pedagogy and Humanism, his second work, of which the following is an extract was edited in 1966 by the Spanish Olympic Committee.

Mr Cagigal was, moreover, awarded the Philippe Noël Baker Research Prize in 1971 for his work for sports.

At Olympia the perfumes rise up, carried by the opposing winds.

Let us again penetrate the valley of Alpheus and Cladeos and scale the first foothills of Mount Cronos. Here is the Altis, the sacred part of Olympia 2,300 years ago, stretching over roughly 40,000 square metres. The marble, the columns and statues shine under the rays of the mediterranean sun. There are clumps of trees here and there, and the courtyards are surrounded by pines and cypresses. When the Hellenes caught sight of the pediments of the temple of Zeus in the distance they probably had the same feeling as Moslems approaching the Kaaba, or Hindus facing a temple on the banks of the Ganges. Flanked by numerous other constructions, it rose up in the centre like another powerful Acropolis.

The day before the Games the Olympic cortège assembles, followed by thousands of people whose only endorsement is being men of Greek tongue. The protagonists enter into the enclosure. Voices, choirs can be heard above the aromatic puffs of air. The Olympic oath is taken. Majestic Zeus—a seated Phidias 13 metres high—will protect the Games of Olympia. The Eleans, owners of the region; the men of Crotona, of whom the traditional victories are feared; the Agrigenti, stronger every time; the Spartans, asleep on their old laurels; the Athenians, lordly and confident; the men of Salamis, whose bellicose exploits are in every memory; the men of Rhodes, Smyrna, etc., split up into groups. Anticipation is marked with emotion, desires are passionate, and confidence in the propitious gods

is great. A thick crowd hurries along the road leading past the house of Oenomaos and Pelops to the Avenue of Treasures. Everybody crowds round the Treasures, praising their own and recognising the statues raised to their heroic compatriots.

Already the athletes have assembled in the vast Gymnasium lodgings, the Palaestra and the Pritanea, and stroll up and down away from the noise and agitation, under the interior porches supported by slender columns. The evening twilight is impregnated with essences burnt in private temples. Monochord chants rise up from the olive groves on Mount Cronos. Tomorrow the physical exercise Games begin, and the day after, the riding events and the pentathlon. Everybody is making comparisons, and they lose themselves in conjecture.

With night comes retirement. But the conchylaceous stones of the Altis deny themselves sleep. The muscles sculpted in the metopes of the temple appear to develop in the darkness. The limestone Dorics of the buildings today seem to be about to burst. While the men below are trying to sleep, Hercules and Atlas, bare steel nailed on to the metope, start up a conversation; Apollo and Jupiter stand majestically in front of the two pediments. Further away, Niké, goddess of victory, stylised, tears the blue of the sky. Alcamenes, Phidias, the two Paionios and other great artists talk about immortality which is reflected in their testaments of imperishable plastic. The movements are, brusque, the impetus full of hope. It is the high classical period, 470 to 455 B.C., a period looking towards heaven, a creative and productive period, a period of faith and realities. The constructions of the Altis are mostly Doric, and almost all are temples.

Such is the cultural heritage representative of Greek sport.

To the north-east of the Altis on the slopes of the Cronos lies the stadium. Just under 200 metres long, its tiers cling to the ground which rises in a gentle slope¹.

Unfortunately the last vestiges have been destroyed by floods. The Delphi stadium, relatively well preserved, has enabled the architecture of the Olympia stadium to be reconstituted. Simple horizontal earthenware tiles, spread out and resting on shorter ones serving as an upright support, gradually climb along the slope of the ground. The surface area is not very large, perhaps about fifty metres, extended by the tiers. According to several specialists, the stadium at Olympia could hold between forty-five and sixty thousand people. However the number of spectators could probably be considerably increased owing to the Cronion foothills. The stadium was in fact renovated several times²; Popplow discerns five phases in its development. The embankments became steeper each time, and the race track, 192 metres long, became deeper. As far as the competitions are concerned, this is the picture which Greek sport bequeathed to us.

There was no need for the Hellenes to construct new enclosures every four years. They met at the same place Olympiad after Olympiad. They measured their strength in the stadium, facing the Cronos. The Altis was reserved for their personal expression; there they devoted themselves to art, intoned songs and offered sacrifices. As the latter aspect was the deepest and most important, they first built temples and altars, decorating them

artistically, and only then did they go down into the stadium. But all of this constituted a whole: the Games. This summarised every aspect of Greek life, and accounts for the fact that the Greek expressed himself through sport. And, as an artist, the Hellene created art through sport.

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¹ According to Conrado Durández, the stadium at Olympia never had tiers. (*The Olympic Games Ancient Times*, Madrid 1964, p. 26). Controversy among the experts is still going on.

² Conrado Durández, who notes the latest archaeological discoveries exhibited at the International Olympic Academy in the abovementioned work, maintains that a new stadium was built on a different site in the fourth century B.C., and that the old stadium was replaced by the « Echo Porticos » in the reign of Philip (350 B.C.) (*Op. cit.*, p. 25 note 8).