

The memories, stories and lives of athletes

by Mrs. Wally Cattarini



Associated with the Italian National Olympic Committee since 1951 as librarian at the Institute of Sports Medicine, Mrs. Wally Cattarini has written the following article for Olympic Review readers.

She draws attention to the ideals and beauty of amateur sport by honouring the memory of the professional boxer, Primo Carnero.

Someone, wishing to be rid of the two plants, had taken them to the common, which served as a sort of rubbish dump for the neighbouring houses. It was a bright autumn day when the gentle heat of the sun warmed up men and objects. The plants, classed as evergreen and used for decoration, were not entirely dead; they were withered, slowly decomposing, but the hazy sun postponed the natural process—rather it stirred in them some sparks of the remaining vital sap.

The plants began to talk, to whisper through the softly caressing breeze, and each in turn told his story.

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“I just don’t know how I come to be here; I suppose it was a mistake”, one plant began. “It happened after the people in the building where I was living moved away.

“I was living in a lovely village house; there was a meadow in the front, a wood at the rear. The air was fresh, beautifully scented with resin and wild flowers. I lived there for quite some time. Then one day, there was a great commotion—a peculiar fellow had arrived and a huge crowd formed around him. He was very tall, almost a giant, no longer young but not old either. He looked tired, extremely tired, and could hardly hold up his large body which was nearly wasted to the bone. “Who is he?” I wondered. His hands were enormous, gnarly, and had surely been powerful once.

“Slowly, lost in contemplation, he gazed at the countryside around him and I understood his story.

“He had been born there of poor folk. Despite his poverty, he grew tall and strong, but he never used his extraordinary strength to harm anyone.

“When he became a young lad, he packed his possessions in a bundle and departed to try his fortune. For a while no one heard from him, but then suddenly word of his fame reached his village. This good-hearted man had become “the strongest man” in the world, the boxer whom few dared to challenge.

“He returned to his native village covered with glory, but he remained the same simple, warm person. It gave him great pleasure to see everybody again, though some might have reminded him of the gloomy old days. He did not harbour any thought of revenge, nor did he bear any grudge. Due to his warm-heartedness and generosity, he deserved to be called “the good giant”.

“As the years went by, his fame waned slightly, but he still remained “the strongest man” for those who remembered him. It was this strength which enabled him to ensure a very comfortable position for his family and himself in a far-off land.

“More years passed and one day Death knocked at his door. “No”, he said “I don’t want to die here, far from my country. I want to go back home, to see it again just once more.” Everyone tried to dissuade him, but he was immovable in his purpose.

“He returned home for his last match with Death, and he knew he would be defeated. But this defeat was only on points as he had wished to see his homeland, his village, again before dying and he succeeded. He

was like a plant, for a time uprooted and taken elsewhere, but eventually restored to its native soil.

“Little by little, I saw his strength oozing out of him. Within sight was his countryside, the green grass in the meadow waving gently in the wind which his dying eyes transformed into a huge number of heads, a large cheering crowd as in his successful days.

“A great champion was slowly passing away, the good athlete whom destiny had introduced to a tough, sometimes cruel, sport. This man whose heart could not be corrupted by the sport’s crudity was consciously going to face death with the same courage as when fighting in the ring.”

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“Now I shall tell my story”, said the other plant. “I was in a sports ground, a stadium, and there I was tended lovingly. From the high balcony where I had been planted, I could see groups of boys and girls running, jumping and playing. One day I was stunned to see thousands of young people gathered together from all parts of the world. I saw the athletes parading, marching impeccably in their sportive uniforms and grouped according to their country with the flag carried in front. The stands were crowded with cheering people and throughout the following days I could see the athletes competing in their respective fields.

“The Olympic Games, as the games were called and whose origins were hidden in the distant past, had begun in the most peaceful and pure atmosphere.

“At the close of the Games, a ceremony took place when the standard-bearer from each competing nation came back on to the track, their rhythmic pace emphasized by the band. A most wonderful harmony was in the air, a harmony which during the few days the Games lasted had succeeded in unifying young people from totally different countries. One could hear greetings and good-byes exchanged in all kinds of languages:

“See you in four years’ time at the next Olympics, perhaps... perhaps never again!”

“The day was drawing to a close and the last rays of the sun set alight the happy faces of both winners and defeated alike.

“They were good-byes not only to the athletes, but also to something else which deeply moved everybody. Perhaps it was a farewell to the prime of life, to a magic moment in one’s life, with no past nor future, a sudden burst of joy at living pervading the whole of Nature around us. It’s like what happens to us in spring when we cover ourselves with flowers and tender leaves. I realised that it wasn’t just a matter of pure muscular strength: it was the moment of elation in life which expressed itself in movement, thus attaining human perfection combined with the qualities of generosity, gallantry and determination. In their achievements, the athletes felt a unique and irreplaceable happiness.

“However, not everyone feels the same as we, poor plants, know only too well. Sometimes we are loved and cared for; sometimes we are ignored and destroyed. As a matter of fact, some time later at the end of a football match, I became the victim of hooligans’ wild fury who, screaming and shouting, rushed down from the balcony like a stream in flood to invade the pitch.”

The second plant was silent for a moment, but then went on: “Each of us has his destiny and here we are at the end of our days on earth: we proceed from the Infinite and to the Infinite we must return. But life does not end; it passes from one being to another, for everything transforms itself and moves on in an everlasting circle.

“In such a way, other plants will follow us, we don’t know if they will be more beautiful or not; similarly, other athletes whose ideals will perhaps be different will come after these.

“What will be left of this life of ours—the most beautiful things we have done and seen? All that is at one with Nature remains; thus, sport remains as an expression of life, and the Olympic Games recall youth which is beauty in life.”

W. C.



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