

Olympic standard

by Mr. Javier Ostos,

*President of the Fédération Internationale de Natation Amateur (swimming)
and of the Panathlon Club of Mexico*



The purpose of this article is to carry out the agreement made by the Assembly of the Panathlon Club of Mexico, following the debate concerning the criticism of the integration and performance of the Mexican Olympic team at the Games of the XXIst Olympiad. The most important point at this meeting was to reach a completely clear definition of the aim or objective sought by the National Olympic Committees of each country, in conjunction with their own national sports federations, in respect of the result of their athletes' participation in the Olympic Games. Indeed, the International Olympic Committee and the National Olympic Committees themselves often repeat that the teams should be of Olympic quality or standard, but they make the serious mistake of not defining this concept.

After each Olympiad celebration, a wave of comments breaks for or against the performance of teams, particularly by drawing up balance sheets that are not only technical, but also have socio-political and economic implications. It has even happened that a National Olympic Committee member has been summoned to give an account to his country's parliament, accused of betraying its ideals by allowing a participation of its Olympic representatives in a manner that did not correspond with the Olympic quality or standard.

It has been possible to play with this phrase for or against the teams taking part in the Olympic Games, for which reason the Panathlon Club of Mexico instructed me to study and analyse it in order to state quite clearly the criteria of the International Olympic Committee, National Olympic Committees, International Federations and national federations, which would enable the definition of Olympic quality or standard.

Let us therefore examine, through the rules of the game, whether or not this can be defined. Firstly, let us talk of the foundation, that is the charter of the IOC and its bye-laws, in

order to find the solution to our problem, or at least the spirit which should prevail, not only in the Olympic movement, but also in the actual participation in the Olympic Games.

Towards a definition of "Olympic standard"

The first rule in the said charter shows that "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 and to bring together the athletes of the world in a great quadrennial festival of sports thereby creating international respect and goodwill and thus helping to construct a better and more peaceful world."

The third rule explains that this great festival called Olympic Games aims at uniting "Olympic competitors of all nations in fair and equal competition" whilst securing "the widest possible audience for these Games."

Not content with this, article 11 B) states that one of the IOC's aims is "to make the Games ever more worthy of their glorious history and of the high ideals which inspired their revival by Baron Pierre de Coubertin and his associates."

Everyone is well aware of these ideals. However, we should remember one, which is that the most important thing in life is self-improvement and struggle through participation and communal life.

On the other hand, article 24 of the IOC's charter mentioned above specifies that "only National Olympic Committees recognised and approved by the International Olympic Committee can enter competitors in the Olympic Games and the qualifying

rounds." The National Olympic Committees must safeguard "the development and protection of the Olympic movement and of amateur sport" since these organisations are bound to promote and encourage the physical, cultural and moral education of their nation's youth, as well as character development, health and good citizenship, *without getting involved in political or commercial affairs.*

Article 35 of the said charter mentions that the NOCs *receive* entries from the national federations and forward them, *after giving their approval*, to the Organising Committee for the Games. The national federations can appeal to the IOC, through their International Federation, against any decisions the NOCs may take concerning their entries.

Up to this point, it seems really that the IOC is informing the NOCs that they must give *priority* to the Olympic aims and ideals which were at the origin of the sports revival of this modern Olympic era. But this same article 35, in a completely contradictory manner and perhaps from fear of an excessive entry of competitors, draws the NOCs' attention to a policy declaring that, while the Olympic Games welcome the youth of the whole world, it is a physical impossibility to accommodate *everyone* and for this reason they are asked to use their discretion in sending to the Games *only those competitors of Olympic standard.*

The fact that the meaning of the *Olympic standard* concept appears neither in the charter nor in the bye-laws would explain why the NOCs use the phrase or concept incorrectly.

Why Olympic competitors?

I feel it is essential for *the IOC to define very clearly what it means by competitors of Olympic standard*, but I also think that the NOCs themselves, in conjunction with and not in constant contention with their own affiliated national federations, must look at and determine, in each case, the Olympic standard that is expected of participants in the Olympic Games, and this as long as the IOC has not clearly established the meaning of this concept.

There are a great many NOCs which, lacking economic independence, are liable to interference from the governments subsidising them, public opinion, the mass media, etc., since in their eyes and considering the money donated the only justification for participation in the Olympic Games is winning medals to satisfy national pride.

The history of the Olympic Games and the Olympic movement has experienced changes over the ages with regard to their objectives and aims, which has consequently led to a distortion and misunderstanding of the real intentions to be pursued when taking part in the Olympic Games.

If the most important thing was to participate by making the greatest and best possible effort, it should therefore be considered that even the least technically developed competitor could participate in the Games. Indeed, it is certain that working on this basis, the national federation would fight for at least one sportsman from each federation to take part in any of his sport's events.

But the reality is otherwise. Neither the IOC, nor the national federations, nor the National Olympic Committees aspire to fulfilling the standard or motto of Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Their objective is now different, since economic, and particularly nationalistic, problems have become involved. It is felt that only the sportsmen who make up the elite in each sport should participate in the Olympic Games.

Everyone asks and requires that those who participate succeed in winning prizes that will justify the economic effort and time spent in preparing and sending competitors.

The distortion of the reality that one seeks to achieve by participating in the Olympic Games has reached such a point that public opinion, confused by its own leaders and the mass media responsible for creating it, demands that countries without sports power be obliged to win medals, the only interest which would justify their participation.

We have fallen into the serious mistake of scorning those who succeed in finishing among the world's best eight.

The error we have made when looking at the yield of the Olympic Games is precisely not



Youngster accompanying the future Olympic marathon champion, Valdemar Cierpinski (GDR)

to consider the participation a success unless the teams return loaded with medals.

No one is concerned whether an athlete has sacrificed time, physical effort, spare time, etc. in order to better himself and struggle to join the best in his speciality.

If he wins medals, he will be made an idol. But if he does not, even if he is classed among the world's best eight or 16, his quality will never be recognised as that of a winner. On the contrary, he will be spoken of as a loser.

As a result, I feel it is the authorities that owe it to themselves to make a deep analysis of their ideals and aims in relation to the Olympic Games, that is the IOC itself, which is responsible for establishing the basis and

rules for participation, and the National Olympic Committees, which are bound to supervise the encouragement and promotion of the Olympic ideals.

Appeal to the IOC and NOCs

Current affairs, with their economic, ecological, social and political problems, require that we linger over the Olympic ideas so that sports delegations taking part in the Olympic Games may find a justification before their governments and people (situation which at the moment is causing concern). It is vital that they sit down to discuss and define reasonably what each understands by *Olym-*

pic standard or class, since it is not defined in either the IOC Rules or those of the National Olympic Committees.

If necessary, the IOC must forget the pretext of gigantism and clearly define in its Rules whom it wishes to accommodate, or who, in its opinion, deserves to succeed in competing at the Olympic Games.

The International Federations are harshly criticised because they fight for the greatest number of their sportsmen to take part in the Olympic Games, forgetting that the main object of these sportsmen is the promotion, development, growth, etc. of their sport. Besides, they are criticised when, in conformity with the IOC's petition, they draw attention to the limitations on participation on the basis of the number of competitors per event and minimum or average times, according to the required levels combined with their objectives.

The International Federations have no other function than to establish the technical standards for the development and control of the Games, thus when they indicate records or limits they wish to reconcile a large participation, based on the Olympic ideal, with the necessity of avoiding a massive entry.

A National Olympic Committee which follows literally the motto of Baron de Coubertin, as well as the idea so often repeated by Brundage that the Olympic Games are not and must not be a display of the socio-political power of peoples or nations, but the personal demonstration of the athletes' improvement, will understand by *Olympic standard* the fact of entering at least one athlete in the competition, in spite of his technical incapacity.

If, on the other hand, the aim of the Olympic Committee is to present medal winners, then its whole programme for making up the team will have to be revised.

The countries which cannot consider themselves as world sports powers cannot afford the luxury of thinking that their aim or Olympic quality is to win medals.

The National Olympic Committees should be aware of their capabilities, and if the socio-

political and economic obligations they have towards their people force them to forget the motto of Baron de Coubertin, then they must define honestly and sincerely their aspirations.

Whereas the International Federations, in agreement with the IOC, have indicated for team sports a large number of prior events which must be completed in order to arrive at a very limited number in the Olympic competition, whether 12, eight or 16 teams, there is no doubt that the *Olympic quality* is perfectly defined. As a result, it is ridiculous to think that the team participating in this restricted number is a failure because it has not won a medal.

The competitors in team sports gain their places in pre-Olympic qualifying rounds. Those who succeed in them will automatically have played an important role, as well as shown, just by participating, their *Olympic quality*, even if they appear in last position on the list of Olympic Games' participants.

375 possible competitors per event, but...

With regard to individual sports, and although the IOC opens the competition gates to many sports with three participants per event, the National Olympic Committees themselves are responsible for limiting the participation. The fact is that there are more than 125 National Olympic Committees recognised by the IOC, which gives the possibility of 375 competitors taking part in an event.

Looking through the respective reports, we find that in 80% of the events celebrated during the last few years, there were less than 50 competitors per event, and very often the number of participants did not exceed 35 or 40.

This means that the National Olympic Committees send fewer and fewer competitors to the Games, because they are only thinking of the socio-political repercussions and, in most cases, they act in fear of criticism from the mass media and public opinion.

However, the International Federations set the minimum or average times and performances to be achieved as a prior condition for participation in the individual events. This could be considered as a recognition of *Olympic standard or quality*. On innumerable occasions, the NOCs refuse to accept as Olympic standard the simple fact that the competitor has achieved the mentioned performances or average times, thus provoking a constant fight between the NOCs' Executive Committees and their national federations, which support their competitors' participation on the basis of the performances and times laid down by the International Federations.

I believe that the countries which are not world sports powers and which have to limit and make the most of their participation are those which have a more urgent need to determine what, in their opinion, should be considered as *Olympic standard or quality*. It is absolutely essential that they establish, as an indispensable element of their programme for choosing their Olympic team, the aspiration or objective that this team is expected to achieve at the Olympic Games. On this basis, and in complete co-ordination with their affiliated national federations, they must determine the standards and bases granting the right to become a member of the said team.

For a continuous dialogue between all

As long as the National Olympic Committees do not express their position clearly and openly, and as long as the leaders do not explain the intended objectives to the mass media, confusion will continue to reign and as a result public opinion will carry on demanding that a cargo of medals be returned.

The dialogue between the International Olympic Committee, National Olympic Committees and International Federations must be permanent. In addition, the dialogue between the leaders of the National Olympic Committees, national federations and mass media must be close, open and continuous.

If everyone knows that he must be ambitious and to what he aspires, and if, working from a serious and analytical basis, a delegation is made up which will try to reach the fixed objective, no one will have to be disappointed when the team accomplishes what was expected of it.

I believe what I have just expressed is nothing new. It is only a little reminder of what should be the duties of those to whom belong the responsibility of being leaders.

I hope that these comments will be received in the same light as directed their expression, that of constructive criticism in favour of the objectives to be reached in the Olympic representation of each country.

In conclusion, allow me to recommend both to the NOCs and to the IFs to encourage the IOC, as does the Fédération Internationale de Natation Amateur I have the honour of presiding, to determine clearly what it means by Olympic standard.

J.O.

Mexico, 30th September 1976

