

What are the Olympic Games for ? * (I)

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We didn't want to fully believe it.

Despite the shooting in Three Cultures Square and the demonstrations made on the podium, fists raised, by black American athletes in Mexico in 1968.

Then the massacre of Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972.

Then the departure of some of the African delegations, in protest against New Zealand being guilty of sports contacts with racist South Africa, in Montreal in 1976.

Despite past and present examples of totalitarian countries in Europe : the German Third Reich, then the USSR and the democratic peoples' countries, constantly reminding us that sport can be something other than a pleasant leisure activity, becoming rather and above all the expression and logistical support of the political and imperialist strength of states.

Despite the fact that in the past three decades the relationship between sport and politics has been more closely analysed by historians, sociologists and even psychologists. And that the hypocrisy of a ruling class anxious since 1936 and 1968 (in France) to have control over the sporting leisure activities of young people has been increasingly severely judged and denounced.

Despite the assault on the Olympic myth, under attack from young French and West German historiographers. And everyone congratulates himself on this questioning, which is salutary for science and for the Olympic movement.

Despite our awareness that politics is not absent from discussions within the International Olympic Committee. We were aware of the past and present problems raised for the Committee by the existence of two Germanies, two Chinas, and two Koreas. We were aware of the battles being fought behind the

scenes by the major powers of the world using their delegates within the Olympic commissions and within the international sports federations.

So we were informed and forewarned. But even forewarned and lucid, we did not want to fully believe that, in such crudely expressed terms of war strategy, the Olympic Games were to be weighed on the same scales as interplanetary politics and peace in such a brutal manner.

No, despite our awareness, we did not believe-we did not want to believe-in this traumatic and vulgar intrusion of politics into the Olympic movement.

Now, it must be recognised that that is how it is today, and that politics-not minor political politics, but the megaton sort of politics-has invaded the only social area which we thought, no doubt over-optimistically, was still protected against political intrigue and blackmail.

Today, the very existence of the Olympic Games is in serious danger, and there is total confusion regarding values and categories.

On one hand we have the United States of America, and in particular their President, which used the Games as a means of applying political pressure

On the other hand we have the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics which, at the same time as intervening with its military forces in Afghanistan, organised the - essentially peaceful - Olympic Games in Moscow, thereby intending to demonstrate that there is no contradiction between the two acts and that in doing so it was conforming to the Olympic regulations and permanent principles of peaceful coexistence between all nations.

On one side, politics is thrown brutally into the Olympic movement.

On the other, politics is deliberately excluded from the Games.

When political positions vary so greatly, and when it is moreover a question of the positions assumed by the two greatest world powers, on whom we depend daily for our

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Lausanne. January 1963: H.E. Mohammed Taher, IOC member, chairs a meeting between the two Korean NOCs.

right to survival, when men of goodwill, helpless, find themselves confronted with a lack of precise information or when they are, which amounts to the same thing, submerged by a flood of vague information full of truisms emanating from mass media in the hands of state or private pressure groups, when fallacies and tautologies develop, even within universities and governments, it is high time for us to be asking ourselves what is the validity of an institution capable of catalysing so many contrary forces and mobilising so many passionate adversaries and devotees.

Yes, the question must be asked :
What are the Olympic Games for ?

With regret, we have to say that there is almost total ignorance on the subject.

Even today, in the flood of articles and writing, it is as if the philosophy of Olympism were something spontaneous, and not open to question. What is more, there is scarcely any mention of the renovator of the Games, Pierre de Coubertin, and his life and educational work.

All the more reason for us to go back to first principles, in order to try to clarify the present debate.

What is Coubertin's modern Olympism, thus named by its creator to distinguish it from ancient Olympism ?

It is firstly a heritage-from Pierre de Coubertin. Woven about with Hellenism and mythology-apart from the era of Carl Diem and the Nazis, when the surrounding trappings were those of racialist Aryanism—it is a confused legacy, at one time held to be inalienable by certain cliques in western Europe and America, as it is today by East Germany and the USSR, and as it always has been by the archons of the International Olympic Committee.

Thus, during almost fifty years-and we are not out of the wood yet-all that has filtered through from Coubertin's work is quotations taken out of context, and maxims doctored to fit the requirements of hasty journalism or dubious causes.

It is true that there are reasons for this.

Coubertin's work, a weighty sixty thousand pages of print, does not exist anywhere-not even at the IOC's headquarters-in its entirety. And only a few rare academics-including John Apostol Lucas (of Pennsylvania State University) and the author-have as far as we know attempted a critical investigation of

such a quantity. Another reason is that Olympism and sport remain vague and undifferentiated in a field of research where universities are still only making timid advances.

As a consequence it is understandable that we are still at the stage of credos and black masses. The present situation is a perfect illustration of this : for some, Pierre de Coubertin is an omniscient demiurge, for others he is merely the high priest of an established order, whether it be capitalist or communist.

What happens is that each individual, according to his point of view and interests, finds in Coubertin's concept of sport and his work whatever he is looking for.

Nothing could be less scientific than this mechanistic practise of casting a sounding-lead, this serialisation, whether it is deliberate or not, of a person's life and work. At best the result is anecdotal or factual. But that is not even the case.

With regard to Coubertin and Olympism it is essential, if we are to avoid mistakes in the inventory, that we resituate the work and the man in the dynamic context of European and French history and economy at the end of the 19th century, after the defeat of the French Imperial armies against Prussia, and the workers' uprising of the Paris Commune, which Coubertin feared so much.

If we are to understand the serious crisis in which the Olympic movement finds itself today, we need to know the family determinisms, the education, the class restrictions, and also the exceptional, often tragic, personal destiny which were to influence Pierre Frey, Baron de Coubertin from his birth (on 1st January 1863 at 20, Rue Oudinot in Paris) to his death (on 2nd September 1937 at Parc La Grange in Geneva), and which were reflected in his conduct and work, the political positions he adopted, his ideological hesitations, his educational orientations, but above all in his certitude that only a preliminary and profound reform in the education of the adolescent—a reform of which Olympism was to be the driving force—could resolve the basic problem of man's adequacy in facing up to the challenges of the second industrial revolution which was under way and hence to that of the thorny social question raised by the advent of the proletariat.

To resume, let us say that a dialectic view of history, which nevertheless is not exclusive of the personal contribution of great men, enables us to discern just how evolutive and progressivist Coubertinian thinking was, and how, viewed in this way, the present crisis seems to be no more than the normal histori-

cal transformation of a living institution taken in its context.

For we think that the present confrontations within the Olympic movement and the passionate attacks aimed at the movement, far from being a sign of degeneracy, are positive manifestations of life.

They raise essential questions, touching on the very essence of Olympism and civilisation. Seriously and earnestly.

We must be equally serious and earnest in finding answers to them.

What are these questions ?

It would seem that they could be formulated as follows :

- why was it possible for the Olympic Games, dead for fifteen centuries, to come back to life in Europe at the end of the 19th century ?
- why was it Pierre de Coubertin who renovated them, and consequently who was this man whose real face continues to be masked so consistently ?
- and finally—mutatis mutandis—are the modern Olympic Games (at only eighty four years of age) already suffering from senility ? Are they not already merely a worn-out, maladjusted relic ?

Or, an enigma and a challenge, are they one of the tonic solutions which humanity invents for itself in reply to the threats which weigh it down ?

In short, finally, are the Olympic Games still justified today ? And if so, what use can and should they have ?

It seemed to us at first that a quick reminder of the history of the ancient Greek games and the modern Games could help us to give a better reply to these questions.

Throughout the long history of ancient, classical, Hellenic and Roman Greece, Olympia was not the only place where games were held. There were also games at Delphi, Delos, in the Nemean valley, on the isthmus of Corinth, and perhaps even at Byblos, in Asia Minor. All were sacred ; however, none of them surpassed the glory and renown of the games at Olympia.

The origin of the Olympic Games is mythical. They are sometimes attributed to *Pelops*, sometimes to *Heracles the Edean*, and no doubt were originally both a form of ordeal and-funeral games. It is fairly certain that in 884 A.D., when they had been abandoned for a long period, *Iphitos*, king of *Elide*, consulted the Delphic Oracle in order to stop an epidemic of the plague and fratricidal wars, and

the Oracle ordered the re-establishment of the Games and a sacred truce between Iphitos and his rival Lycurgus, king of Sparta.

What we know with precision is that in 776 B.C., someone called *Koroebos*, whose name is engraved on a dated stele at Olympia, at the entrance to the underground passage which led into the stadium, was in fact the winner of the stadium race that year.

History also teaches us that in 394 A.D. the Emperor Theodosius, who had just embraced the Christian faith, decreed by edict the end of the Olympic Games, which as a new convert he found too pagan.

Between these two dates there are many examples of Greek authors having witnessed the games, even if some of them, such as Pausanias, are somewhat dubious. During this long period the programme of the games may well have changed, but their ritual and sacred nature never did.

For the major characteristic of the ancient games is that they were basically of a religious nature.

Competitors at Olympia had to be Greek, to have been in regular training for ten months, and to have spent the previous month in retreat at the temple of *Elis*. With a purified body and soul, the competitor arrived at Olympia thirty days before the opening of the games.

Olympia was one huge area of temples, dedicated to the cult of Zeus and the goddess Hera, his sister. To the east of the sacred grove there was a stadium, a long sandy track measuring 183 m by 30 m. A gymnasium, a palaestra and baths enabled the athletes to train. There were two "reception centres" for the winners and important guests. The prytaneum and the *Leonidaion* were open, the latter being outside the *Altis*. An office for referees and judges, the *Be-leutherion*, housed the statue of Zeus *Horkios*, the protector of oaths, in front of which, before the competitions, each athlete swore to the purity of his body and his intentions.

An exedra, a pool fed by the waters of the *Kladeos*, offered refreshment.

From all points of the known world, from the Mediterranean alma mater and from beyond the Pillars of Hercules, came an enormous crowd who camped in tents or in the open air outside the temples. Jugglers and poets, thieves and senators-all rubbed shoulders in an atmosphere of popular festivity: a splash of colours, loud music and the smell of humanity. Herodotus was reading his latest book, Pindar was declaiming his odes, Phi-

dias was putting the finishing touches to his giant ivory and gold statue of Zeus in triumph.

The competitors entered the stadium through a long tunnel - 32.45 m long, 3.45 m wide and 4.45 m high. Beyond the stadium was the hippodrome.

In the Hellenist period, the programme was as follows :

The first day was almost entirely devoted to religious rites: sacrifices before the high altar in the temple of Zeus, procession of women to *Elis*, and funeral ceremonies around the cenotaph of Achilles. The competitors swore their oath. The judges, or hellanodics, explained to them the principles they were to respect in competing. They were then divided into categories.

The second day saw the beginning of the games proper. They included races in the stadium, the double course or dialulos, and the sextuple course.

Four stone markers marked out the track.

The men competed naked.

Women were excluded from the area-young girls, at least at this period, were tolerated.

On the third day the pentathlon events took place :

- stadium race,
- long jump,
- discus-throwing,
- javelin-throwing,
- wrestling.

On the fourth day, it was the turn of wrestling and fighting.

On the fifth day, the running and children's competitions took place.

On the sixth day, horse and quadrigae races were organised in the hippodrome (1538 x 320 m).

On the seventh day, the winners were crowned with oak leaves. All the people gave thanks to Zeus, Hera and the gods.

Content, honoured and idolised, the Olympioniks—the winners—then returned home in triumph. The surrounding wall was breached for them, and the Academy—the hotel where important guests were lodged—reserved them a free place for life.

However, let us be careful not to give an idyllic view of the games in antiquity. They were not purely itself—far from it. Being reserved for Greeks alone, they excluded Barbarians, slaves and metics. Commercialism, chauvinism and betting often gave rise to shabby scheming and cheating. The starting judges,

armed with rods, physically punished those who cheated. Heavy fines payable in gold drachmas were inflicted on offenders: they served to build the expiatory statues, the zanyes, dedicated to Zeus, the god of thunder. In the period of decadent Rome it was not unknown for citizens to have slaves compete in their place. This was the case of Nero, winner of a quadrigae race at the hippodrome thanks to a slave... and to the sabotage of the wheels of his adversary's chariot.

The first century writers John Chrysostom and Epictetus from Gallia are severe in their criticisms of this "race of athletes", who according to Euripedes, were worse 'than the race of layabouts'. These harsh comments nevertheless agree with the wise counsels given to athletes at that time by Plato in his dialogue with Gaucon, in the fourth century before Christ :

"I therefore said that a god has, it seems, given these two arts, music and gymnastics, to men for the education of their energy and their wisdom, and not for the specific good of either their soul or their body, but rather for both, to achieve their conjugated harmony, their proper tension and relaxation".

Thus the eurhythmy which was so sought after, the offering to the gods and the divine grace of a body and soul in harmonious union, was hard to achieve and was rarely attained, even in the sumptuous period of 5th century Hellenism.

Victims of abuse which was denounced on an sides, but above all victims of the decadence of Hellas, the games, when Theodosius decided to abolished them, were already dying, poisoned by the social evils which we have just briefly pointed out.

No voice was raised in mourning among the sages, the poets and the fathers of the new Church.

The ancient Olympic Games died amid indifference.

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(to be continued)

