

## What are the Olympic Games for? \* (II)

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The long night then spread over the Olympic Idea. In various places down the centuries there were flashes of light. In the writings of a French monk, Dom Bernard de Montfaucon, in Montaigne's Essays :

*"Our life, Pythagoras said, resembles the great and populous assembly of the Olympic Games. Some exercise their bodies in order to achieve glory at the games, others bring goods to sell for profit. There are also those, and they are not the worst, who aspire to no more than watching why and how each thing is done, and to being a spectator of the lives of men in order to judge and regulate their own..."*

At one stage under the Directory, there was thought of reviving the games on the Champ de Mars in Paris, where the Eiffel Tower now stands. It was a stillborn initiative. Rousseau and particularly Gutsmuth, his German disciple, were to speak about it in their writing.

It was not really until the first quarter of the 19th century in Europe, and to a lesser extent in America, that the idea raised its head again with any force and insistence.

The romantics and the philhellenic partisans-faced with the Ottoman occupation-were to restore the passion for old stones and the passion for Hellas to respectability. In 1826, the French expedition to Morea rushed to the aid of a Greece in revolt. Abel Blouet, a scientist who accompanied the expedition, visited the site of Olympia and brought back with him as irrefutable proof a metope from the temple of Zeus. Influenced by Goethe's work, the German school of archaeology, which was particularly active, then went to carry out a systematic dig of the site at Olympia. Until 1939 and then after 1945, Curtius, Winckelmann and Dorpfeld, with praiseworthy patience and faith, gradually brought to light most of the temples-sadly almost all destroyed-which were the most beautiful and most glorious monuments to set the scene for the extravagances of ancient Olympia.

Concurrently, spurred on by these archaeological discoveries, there was a revival of the

idea of Organising the Olympic Games once again, and it made its way into university thinking. There were scattered attempts, but almost all were soon abandoned.

In 1934 in Ramlösa (Scania, Sweden), where there was a curious mixture of jumping over live animals, climbing up ropes and gymnastic and athletic exercises. In Greece in 1859-according to the gazettes of the day, it was an example of what should not be done. In Wenlock (Great Britain) in the 1880s, prompted by Dr Brookes, a friend of Couber-tin's, who was the first to combine athletics, knights jousting, hymns, the reading of poetry dedicated to ladies, and the planting of a symbolic oak to sanctify the event (this is the country of the Druids). In the USA, at Harvard University, Professor Sloane, the first IOC member of American nationality, tried in vain to revive a certain form of Olympic Games in about 1890. But Buffalo Bill and the circus took hold of the idea: the Far West was not that far away.

In France the idea was curiously upheld, at this period, by sporting priests at the important seminary in Grenoble, where Olympic competitions were organised over a period of about twenty years.

In reality these were merely picturesque events with no future. And it was in France again, around the years 1880 to 1890, at a time when modern French sport was particularly active, that three men, the first organisers of competition sport, were to play an essential role in arousing public opinion in favour of a revival of the Olympic Games. These pioneers were Pascal Grousset-alias Philippe Daryl, a journalist for "Le Temps", Ferdinand de Lesseps-the engineer who built the Suez Canal, as well as being president of the highly aristocratic Jockey Club of Paris, and Georges de St-Clair-secretary of the Racing Club de France. They were the fore-runners.

But the man whose name has gone down in history is Pierre de Coubertin.

It is to this name that the glory of bringing life back to the Olympic Games will eternally be associated.

\* See "Olympic Review" No. 159.

Who was Pierre de Coubertin, in reality Pierre Frédy, Baron de Coubertin ? He was born into a family of minor landed gentry ; his father painted religious pictures of rather academic talent, and his mother was an extremely pious woman, who intended him for the priesthood.

He spent his childhood in Paris, in the well-to-do areas. He attended—noblesse oblige—the Jesuit college in the Rue de Madrid. He was extremely bored there and rebelled, very early on, against its high-handed discipline. His holidays were spent in Normandy, near Le Havre, on a very modest estate belonging to his mother's family, which is said to be directly descended from one of the companions of William the Conqueror.

It was a traditional childhood for a young French aristocrat of a landed family in the last quarter of the 19th century.

So the social path seemed to be marked out in advance for the young Pierre. He was to be either a priest, a cavalry officer or an ambassador.

Despite holding qualifications in letters and law, the young Pierre de Coubertin turned his back on the usual careers of young men of his class and social standing.

It was a time of concern and hope. Concern : the defeat by Prussia and the deeply-felt tremor of the Paris Commune had shaken the foundations of political power. The French bourgeoisie was afraid.

But hope, for the second industrial revolution was opening up unsuspected perspectives to anyone of good birth who wanted to set off to conquer new markets, or even the universe.

Coubertin identified with the rising generation which supported this movement—as history was to bear out—and was in favour of change.

That is why, rejecting the easy way out—as indeed the family fortune enabled him to do—he enrolled after his baccalauréat at the School of Political Science in Paris.

It was a significant choice, and a determining one. Significant, because at that time the school was a melting pot from which emerged the cream of managers of French industry, trade and the civil service. The philosophy professed there was a positivist one. Taine was a particularly revered figure. This was the man behind “Notes on Public Schools in Great Britain”, which advocated a form of education which put more emphasis on the body than the mind, on physical strength more than instruction, on strength of character more than physical resistance. In short, Taine proposed a type of education

which made power available to an elite which was industrial and commercial, active, imaginative and efficient.

In a country which had remained agricultural, where the universities were still restrained by their Napoleonic corsets, this was a radical concept breaking with prevalent tradition which—despite the theoretical support of classical educational theory and the flashes of genius of the precursors of the modern school—was not only sacrificed to dualism but, even worse, almost completely ignored the body, the receptacle of potential physiological perils, such as consumption, and of, above all, the unspeakable sins of the flesh: The specialist literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries is full of such confirmations, encountered in the works of Monsignor Dupanloup as well as in the works of Guizot, Jules Simon and Jules Ferry. Coubertin followed suit.

Tempted by what he had glimpsed of British education, Pierre de Coubertin (let us not forget that he was only twenty) decided to go to its place of origin. Thus for more than ten years he regularly went to Great Britain, to Rugby School, and to North America, to the universities of Toronto, Montreal and New York.

At Rugby, Coubertin discovered the work of a brilliant clergyman, Thomas Arnold (who had died in 1842) who, in modifying the daily life of his pupils, revolutionised the philosophy of British education and gave Victorian Britain the best leaders of industry and the most efficient of colonial armies.

At Rugby, Coubertin saw at first hand the life of an educational community where the young adolescent makes the discovery, by himself, of his own truth, and constructs his own manliness for himself, by himself.

In itself, the life of a boy at Rugby School is an initiation into the social life which exists outside its walls by the constant exercise of minor social responsibilities within them. Thus the boys acquire a sense of freedom and exercise their determination to act and construct. As a counterbalance to this thirst for fighting, self control provides the guarantee and safe conduct for their moral education.

Now, for this social practise to be a genuine one, the adolescent must be free to try, to dare, to construct, which enables him to compare, to weigh up, to imagine. These were novel educational concepts, and the complete opposite of those practised in the French lycée or the Prussian Gymnasium of the period. The British adolescent, in fact,

was free to discuss (in debating societies), to write (in a school newspaper where any subject, even politics, could be dealt with), in charitable societies organised by him, in the school sports association of which he is the initiator, the actor, and the trainer.

And it was here that Coubertin was to find the most valuable of his reflections. Thanks to the activities of Thomas Arnold and his successors, assembled in a movement called "muscular Christianity", sport, and football in particular, made a resounding entry into the British school of the 1830s and 40s.

Arnold's genius had been to sense-he was not a sportsman himself-how much sport could be an element of human promotion by the bodily discipline and moral ascesis which he infused. It 'was on the playing-fields of Rugby, Oxford and Cambridge that the world power of Victorian Great Britain was forged.

Coubertin noted the fact, and was won over ; any reform in education passes via the recognition and elevation of sport to the level of moral value and privileged means of education.

Firstly in France. before 1914, and then throughout the whole world after the First World War, he was tireless, in fighting for a reform in education, which he felt was the only means of achieving the eurhythmia of the Ancients, which made the glory of Hellas in an age gone by and that of Great Britain today.

Coubertin was therefore firstly, and wanted to be so all his life, a reformer of education. Evidence of this are his many essays devoted to the problem, in particular: "Utilitarian gymnastics" (1905), "Universal analysis" (1907) on intellectual education, and "Mutual respect" (1916) on moral education.

It is from this view point, and almost uniquely from this view point (let us leave it to the psychoanalysts to put forward another one if it would be valid) that Coubertin's Olympic work should be read.

For Pierre de Coubertin, of landed stock, and a Norman into the bargain, was a pragmatic soul. He knew the weight of things, and the heaviness of institutions, habits and customs. And prepared for the fight, he knew what fortresses he would have to besiege: the Faculty of Medicine ruled by Swedish gymnast-doctors, partisans of the edifying age "mens sana in corpore sano", and fierce enemies of sport which they felt was responsible for too much excess; the University, stiffly formal in its out-of-date frock coat ; the army-which is only an apparant paradox for

is it possible that troop discipline could benefit from the free practice of sport? Parents, ever ready to fear heat and cold, and vice ; and the Church, of which some venerable fathers complained of depravation, but happily the Jesuits were to rally to the flag, and in 1912 Pius IX invited gymnasts from throughout the world to the Vatican, where he received them in the St Damasus courtyard.

But, borne along by the generous ideas of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and the American Bill of Rights, both of them philosophical foundations of the Olympic Charter, Pierre de Coubertin, a liberal bourgeois-which at that time meant a man of progress-counted on the liberating power of the democratic ideal.

Thus he was always to appeal to the good sense of the people, and to public opinion, which was informed better and faster than previously thanks to the new techniques which Coubertin took to with enthusiasm-the telephone, photography, the phototelegram, the telegraph, the cinema.

Moreover he knew that these new means of communication and information, and the new rapid means of locomotion-steamers, airships and aeroplanes-were bringing the nations closer together and making them more and more interdependent. (In 1905, he proposed that French schoolchildren should learn the names of the towns along the Trans-Siberian Railway in Russia).

In short, he was the first in the infant sports movement to reap the benefit of the new technical discoveries, and felt that in order for educational sport to gain ground, international public opinion would have to be inflamed with the spark of an international sporting event which would appeal to the popular masses and the political and academic elites to communicate in the cult of the Beautiful in the service of the Good. Thus every humble village or town square would know the educational virtues of sport, as discovered by Coubertin at Rugby and in the universities across the Atlantic.

Hence on 23rd November 1892, in the great amphitheatre of the Sorbonne, under the gilded canopy and the gentle diaphanous Muses painted on frescoes by Puvis de Chavannes, came the announcement of the revival of the modern Olympic Games, the necessary basis for the reform in education to which Coubertin, had devoted, was devoting, and was to continue to devote until his death in 1937 almost all his energies and the exclusive passion of his life.



*Moscow 1980: From Olympia to the Lenin Stadium... (photograph taken by our friend Mario Pescante, Secretary General of the CONI).*

An audacious move, a poker move. But which succeeded to the point, today, of hiding the profound meaning of Coubertin's work.

The major characteristic of the modern Olympic Games is marked by this first determination. The Games are above all an appeal to the exaltation of the soul, a mass, a communion in sport.

And let us make no mistake about it, it was from the first reflection on the metaphysics of ancient Greek religion that the philosophy of the new Olympism was to be born and progress, in the work of Coubertin.

The thread runs through all the texts of the Olympic Review of before 1914, in "Que Olimpismo" published in 1917, in the text of a lecture given in Paris on 4th March 1929, in the message to the youth of the world broadcast from Berlin on 6th August 1935.

What do these documents tell us ?

Firstly that Coubertin noted that Olympia had been not only a place of athletic exploits, but above all "a religious focal point and a cultural centre". And, he added, if the ancient Games lasted so long, it was because they were a special meeting of religious thinking, and that their philosophy rested on the concepts of purification and asceticism.

This cult of the human being, of the body and the soul, of sensitivity and determination, instinct and conscience, was what he defined by the sacred athlete.

He thought that this religion had survived in the practices and spirit of medieval knight-hood, which was inseparable from a certain Christian mystique. He thought he had rediscovered it in the teaching at the contemporary British school, and in the educational reform devised and carried out by the Anglican Church.

He wrote :

*'Modern Olympism is a passionate religion and upsurge likely to lead from games to heroism'*—and we can already translate this to mean from leisure sport to high-level competition sport.

And to add :

*"But this religious sentiment, this cult, this passion, should be transformed and enlarged by the internationalism and democracy which are the characteristics of the times in which we live."*

Thus Coubertin proposed a somewhat secularised religious 'basis for the new Olympism, so that all the inhabitants of the Earth, whatever their background or race, could accede to a sporting practice which was to make, as he was to write so often, "muscle surrender its arms to the spirit" in every way, in every age.

We therefore think we are able to advance the idea, as we have written elsewhere, that the new Olympism was a synthesis of ancient Greek philosophy (or rather the ancient Greek religion of finitude), western Christianity, and contemporary democratic internationalism. It is, as Jacques Ulmann was to say later, the modern transformation of the old Platonic concept of man at play emulating the Gods.

We see it well, the fatal mistake, the gross error carried along so consistently by the mass media that there must be considerable commercial interest behind it ; the Olympic Games cannot be confused with mere (we were going to say vulgar) world championships. They occupy a higher level of human and divine ambition, far beyond technical success and the sporting exploit; they rise above this technique, this exploit, and this virtuosity, and make of the body exalted by effort and asceticism the offering yesterday to the Gods, today to humanity.

We are far from the mediocre accounting of a sports merchant, which consists of adding up the number of medals won at the Games. We know how often, by a fatal amalgamation, the economic, political and military successes of nations are compared in countries whose offspring have been victorious at these very Games.

For it is a Promethean vision of man which the philosophy of Olympism sets before us. The athlete fighting until he conquers the useless is like Sisyphus rolling his rock; in the end, it is the vision of the best delegates of the human species fighting, on the long

exhausting path of history and humanity, for a little more love and light.

Coubertin wanted the Games to be that exaltation, that four-yearly festival of the human springtime. That is why he insisted so much that the decorum and the ritual of the Games be fixed, and that such a festival should be the occasion, as in days gone by, at Olympia, for high-quality artistic, scientific and intellectual events.

It is often forgotten that the Games are also an opportunity for the friendly confrontation of many cultures which honours human creation, in the concept, recognised today, of the complementary nature of cultures.

It is to serve the cause of international understanding that Coubertin also invented the Olympic Village, where the athletes who have come together can get to know each other better and fraternise. It is well-known that at the height of the Cold War the athletes whose nations were violently attacking each other on the airwaves, and sometimes in actual fighting, never failed to take part in this fraternisation. Today, the creation of an international youth camp outside the stadium is the sign that the lesson is still being understood.

Does this mean that Coubertin lost contact with reality? No, for he was always lucid in the face of the multiple evils which he sensed. But he remained confident, throughout his life, of the virtues of free information and reformed education, the creators of calm and reflection, a counterbalance to mercenary and commercial enterprise.

That is the philosophy of the new Olympism.

What then of the Olympic Games today, you will ask.

We think that they are not ailing or decrepit, but merely passing through a crisis, as is the world on which they depend. And we think that that is a sign of health.

What we should ask of Coubertin's work is—in what way was it progressive, i.e. capable of adaptation and evolution ?

Born in the dynamic context of liberal democracy, against which we are better armed today to know its limits and mistakes, it is important for us to place the games as quickly as possible in the context of universal civilisation.

Reforms are necessary. For it is in fact to the hidden part of Olympism, the part which is not quantifiable for the greater public, that we must from now on devote all our efforts as educators.



*Montreal 1976 : Press facilities.*

What must be done, right away, in Senegal and in Africa ?

May we be forgiven if we are making a mistake. Fairly long experience of the Third World would not enable us to teach other people lessons. We are therefore only putting forward proposals.

First of all it seems to us, if we want the Games to regain a human face, that there must very rapidly be a vigorous campaign for the exposure of the new Olympic philosophy, explaining it, commenting on it, making it authentic, so that the sporting spirit, a "delicate plant" if ever there was one, composed of nobility, grandeur, tolerance and unselfishness, penetrates and protects the sports movement as a whole, both nationally and internationally.

It is in this way, we feel, that public academic and political opinion, which is often versatile

and still sometimes distrustful, will be affected by the real problems and not by the anecdotic report which lacks interest, by the future of the nation in some championship match. This is pure fiction of a basic, mediocre and alienating kind, which we must re-

The role of the sports journalist is therefore a considerable one. The sporting press-written, spoken and televised-can be the opium of the masses. It can also be an important factor in popular education. For it affects all sectors of societies and acts as a vehicle for images and ideas which stir the collective subconscious of the masses. And sport, as we know, is fuel in the fires of the fantasies of men and societies.

The role of the heads of the various types of educational establishments, from the humble country school to the faculties and rectorate

of the universities, is no less important, and equally important is the role of social agents : directors of sports institutions, heads of family homes, sports assistants, doctors, educationalists in supervised education, organisers of popular education, administrators of the main state bodies, judges and court presidents.

In this strategy, it seems evident that particular attention ought to be paid to the training of junior and secondary school teachers and teachers of physical education and sport. And that, parallel to this, the mission of training establishments should be the promotion of an increased civic conscience in future teachers so that, by their worthiness, hard work and responsibility, they will make their profession respected for the quality of their knowledge and demonstrate by their ability the scope and value of the discipline they teach.

We also think that greater attention ought to be paid to the quality of sports managers and trainers. The sports association, which is at the heart of the sports pyramid, should be taught about Olympism. Let us remember that in most of the developed countries of the world today, trainers start off as teachers of physical education and sport (four years of higher education) who then receive two years of further specialised training.

Let it be well understood that we are not moralising, but encouraging action, encouraging living, encouraging the coming together of sportsmen in the spirit of the Olympic standards of respect of the opponent, the judge, and oneself. For us, at this level, practice is more important than theory.

We then move on to consider the immense role played already by the National Olympic Committees in Africa, but which should be even greater.

Our Olympic Committees are the privileged carriers of the Olympic idea, and by diffusing sporting fair play, they should provoke a reflection on the contribution and enrichment that the traditional virtues of the African civilisations could provide to the Olympic philosophy-born, let us recall, in the context of Graeco-Latin civilisation and of the industrialisation of white Europe.

The Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, in conjunction with UNESCO and UNICEF, should also make its voice heard better and more clearly.

For we must help the International Olympic Committee to make its appeal heard, and to make its fight known.

The IOC was the first international organisation to be set up, well before the League of Nations and the UN, and whatever its detractors may say about it, it is an assembly of wise and responsible men. It is the privileged repository of the Olympic idea.

What the IOC maintains—with insufficient means—is that sport is an irreplaceable means of education in that the sportsman remains a moral man, that on a planet torn apart by ideological conflicts, occupations and wars, the great assembly of the Olympic Games is one of the rare concrete and spectacular manifestations of the determination to achieve peaceful coexistence between nations and men.

The IOC now is calling to us to undertake an act of courage and intellectual lucidity. An act which consists, while keeping our eyes wide open and protesting in a different way against attacks on the dignity of man and deportations because of the exercise of liberty of mind and conscience, of wanting to guard jealously a haven of encounter, contact and information between men of different races, cultures, religions and political systems, so that the sense of human brotherhood, love of one's fellow-man and peace, can take the upper hand over the determination of hegemony and hate.

That is why we must support the IOC in this noble and necessary task of lucidity and courage. As the European National Olympic Committees have just 'done, on the appeal of Claude Collard, President of the CNOSF. We are making ours, personally, the proposals put forward by these committees, which aim at removing the ceremonial from the pernicious manifestations of chauvinism and nationalism, as well as fixing definitively the Games in Greece, at Olympia. It would not only be a return to origins, it would be no more than justice. And how symbolic !

Why then the Olympic Games nowadays ?

Perhaps for the reasons we have just put forward.

But perhaps, and above all, for the honour, for the joy, and for the happiness of mankind.

Y. P. B.

