

The Olympic Games Equality in law and inequality in practice

by Eduardo Guelfand



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Ever since I first took part as a competitor in the Games of the XIXth Olympiad at Mexico in 1968, I have wondered if all competitors really do participate under the same conditions.

As I became more deeply involved in Olympism, it became clear to me that this is not the case, and so I began to investigate whether this was due to inequalities in the rules or whether the latter were being proved wrong in practice. I came to the conclusion that there is equality in law, and inequality in practice, as the title of this article indicates.

The equality in law exists because the rules and bye-laws of the "Charter" of the International Olympic Committee are the same for all athletes. In practice, however, not all athletes take part under the same conditions, as we will see further on.

Rule 3 of the statutes of the International Olympic Committee establishes that the Olympic Games will take place every four years, uniting the athletes of all countries in fair and equal competition.

This is the point in question.

This rule has to do with the Olympic spirit and philosophy, but has it been properly observed ?

The Eligibility Code establishes the necessary conditions for entry as a participant and the bye-law lays down the positive and negative criteria which the competitor must satisfy.

Having said that, it must be admitted that these rules and bye-laws, while well conceived (albeit open to improvement in line with social

and technological development in the world), do not guarantee "fair and equal competition" in practice. This is a pity.

The inequality is not limited to the difficult question, already touched on, of where amateurism ends and professionalism begins. It goes further; the inequality develops alongside technology.

Can an athlete who makes use of a very modern technique truly be said to be competing under the same conditions as an athlete who uses an outmoded method ? Can there be equality if athletes must train in places totally different from those where the events take place ? Is an ordinary fencing foil identical to one which has been manufactured according to the very latest technology ?

In grass hockey, is training on natural turf the same as training on an artificial turf?

is pole vaulting, is the use of poles of differing qualities fair?

In rowing, is an ordinary boat the same as one built to a highly advanced design ?

Of course not, and there are many other examples.

The time has come when we must ask ourselves if something should not be done and whether it is the rules which are at fault, or the competitors, for in their desire to win at Olympic events, men seek to bend the rules.

It is time we looked for realistic solutions. I believe that the rules and bye-laws of the International Olympic Committee are fair and

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that they faithfully reflect the Olympic spirit and philosophy, and furthermore, that this body does ail in its power to ensure that these rules are respected. However, they could be improved further and may still be interpreted as Pierre de Coubertin did when he revived the Olympic Games in 1896 without losing any of their essential meaning.

If we go back in history, we can see that for the Greek Olympiads, one of the conditions of entry was that one month before the Games the athletes had to train together for thirty days at Elis (a town situated 300 stades (57 km) from Olympia), under the direction and supervision of the "Heilenics". In this way, conditions were the same for all athletes, and they all reached the competition site together.

The aim was not only to ensure proper technical and physical preparation by the participants ; it went much further than that. It was intended to put ail athletes on an equal footing. It is this spirit and philosophy which is much sought-after today. It also comes within the context of the "fair and equal competition" mentioned in the rules and bye-laws of the IOC.

I do not mean to imply that, if inequality truly exists, we should return to the Greek model. because that would be impossible. But we



1968 in Mexico

must make sure of the example in order to find a way to ensure equality in practice.

I am aware that the ideas which I put forward here would encounter economic and technological problems, but I feel that ail those of us who adhere to Olympism and are deeply committed to it, must make their contribution, so that the Olympic Games, which despite frequent threats remained unscathed for 3000 years, expressed in Rule 1 of the IOC. contribute to "the construction of a better and more peaceful world". In fact, I feel that the only way to achieve peace in thus troubled universe is through Olympism and the youth of the world.

I wonder if :

- some means may not be found to ensure fair competition wherein ail athletes are equally armed ?
- it would not be better to continue competing on natural surfaces until a certain number of Olympic Committees possess a synthetic turf and/or artificial track ?
- in some sports, it would not be better to limit the age of participants in order to avoid the inequality which exists between amateurs and "hidden" professionals ?

I also consider that it is impossible to generalize about ail sports, because each must be treated in a particular way. The problem of football, for instance, where some participating teams have a markedly professional character, is not the same as that of grass hockey or rowing. An appropriate solution must be found for each sport.

Finally, I would like to add that, given the length of this article, it is not possible to give more than a brief outline of the subject, but I hope that it will prove to be the start of a much deeper study.

But I myself feel morally bound, for life, to fight on the side of ail those who live Olympism as I do, and for the expansion of the Olympic Games and the spread of their spirit and philosophy. This simple contribution is made in the hope that the wish expressed by the motto "Citius, Aitius, Fortius" may be fully realized.



E. G.