



ARE SPORTS UNIVERSAL?

by *ROGER CLÉMENT*

Sport is universal. Competition makes the world go round. It is undoubtedly an instinct. But does that which applies to mass practice also hold true for the elite level? Do not the achievements of the best in fact constitute a threat to the general development? This is the question we shall be examining here.

It is the second week in October 1984. The European Weightlifting League is holding an important meeting at Landersheim in Alsace. On the agenda is a question which has perhaps never been asked in sport until this moment: is not the monopoly of certain Eastern European countries over weightlifting titles, medals and records harmful to the development of sports of strength?

The question is a topical one; two months earlier at Varna in the course of the Friendship Games, twenty seven world weightlifting records were broken. This was a landslide which made it possible to rewrite contemporary sporting history. This surge forward, this tremendous thrust, is a common phenomenon in lifting sports. The previous year, twenty three world records were beaten in the same way in a single competition!

However, the most striking fact is that these records were set up by representatives of two

countries: the Soviet Union and Bulgaria. It is also a fact that of the thirty records recognised by the International Federation (snatch, clean and jerk and the combination of the two movements in the ten weight categories) there is just one that belongs to neither the Bulgarians nor the Russians: the clean and jerk in the lightweight class, set up by the German Behm (GDR).

The Russians have always had strong men. Even in the time of the Czars, it was in Russia, at Saint Petersburg, that the sport took off, so it is believed. At the 1960 Olympic Games, they replaced the Americans as leaders in the medal stakes. The 1972 Games produced a surprise: the Bulgarians outdid them. Since then, European and World Championships and Olympic Games (with the exception of Los Angeles due to the boycott), could be described as Soviet-Bulgarian duels.

Paradoxically, during this time, under the Presidency of Mr. Gustav Schodl, an Austrian business man, and gentleman of benevolent and placid disposition, weightlifting could boast a constantly growing audience. Some ten years ago, the number of affiliated nations passed the hundred mark. It is still among the leading group of International Federations.

Nevertheless, the increase in the number of member countries is not matched by a wider spread in the elite practice of the sport. The rate of progress stamped on the records by the leading nations, all of them in Eastern Europe (USSR, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, the GDR, Czechoslovakia) literally leaves the competition standing (if it is possible to speak of competition for the others).

We find ourselves in a situation where, if all the national Federations with the exception of seven or eight (those listed above plus Korea and Cuba) were to leave the IWF, it would not make the least difference to the rostrums of the world championships.

It is a fact; the highest aspirations of all other teams are never greater than fifth or sixth place.

TWO THIRDS OF THE MEDALS

Is this a new phenomenon? In order to find out, let us look into the record sheets of the past and attempt a few comparisons. Between 1896 and 1980, 102 Olympic titles were awarded in weightlifting. 33 went to Soviets, 15 to Americans, 9 to Frenchmen, 7 to Bulgarians. In other words, almost two thirds of the gold medals were distributed amongst the representatives of four nations.

If you count not only the titles but all the medals, out of a total of 302, 54 are to be credited to the account of the Soviet Union, 39 are American, 21 Polish, 20 Bulgarian, 15 French and the same number Hungarian : that means that seven countries walked off with the whole lot. That is a lot, especially in view of the fact that the rules of weightlifting restrict the entry of each country to one athlete per category. If a country "doubles up" in one category, it can only do this at the expense of participation in another category.

Since the second world war, weightlifting has doubled the number of weight categories. At the World Championships of 1946 there were only five: 60 kg, 67,5 kg, 75 kg, 82,5 kg). The International Federation had put forward as an argument to

justify the addition of new weight categories the need to enable new countries to enter the medal tables, for instance the Asians, who can only compete in the lightweight classes. Thus, over the years, the following categories have been grafted on to the original ones: 52 kg, 56 kg, 90 kg, 100 kg and 110 kg.

Today, we are in a position to look back and measure the real effect of the doubling of the number of categories over slightly less than forty years.

The last Olympic Games where weightlifters competed in only five weight categories were in 1936. Fifteen medals were awarded: four to Egypt, four to Germany, two to Austria, one to Estonia, one to France, one to Iran and the last to Czechoslovakia. Thus, eight nations gained medals, and Egypt and Germany achieved supremacy.

Forty years later, at the Moscow Games, the programme had doubled: thirty medals, ten of them gold. The distribution was as follows: eight to the USSR, eight to Bulgaria, three to Poland, three to the German Democratic Republic, two to the DPR of Korea, two to Cuba, two to Hungary and two to Czechoslovakia.

It thus transpires that the doubling of the number of medals has not produced, as it was hoped, a wider distribution. There were still eight nations at the Winners' banquet. And the difference? The dominating countries take precisely twice as many medals: eight to the Soviet Union and eight to Bulgaria, as opposed to four to Germany and four to Egypt 44 years earlier!

SHOULD WE DIVERSIFY THE EVENTS?

Should we then oppose the increase in the number of categories, saying that it has done no good? To see better, let us count the only medals which would have been awarded in 1980 under the rules of 1936. In these five categories, Bulgaria would have come out on top in Moscow with 6 medals ahead of the Soviet Union with five, the GDR with 2, and Poland and Czechoslovakia with one each. Cuba, Korea and Hungary would disappear from the picture of the Moscow Games.

It is evident that if the increase in the programme has not opened the way to the rostrum to new teams, it is because, in the meantime, a new phenomenon has arisen, namely the *growing monopolisation* of this sport by a handful of nations who have made a sort of technical breakthrough.

WRESTLING, SWIMMING: THE SMALL ELITE

Let us look at another sport, cousin of weightlifting: wrestling. In 1948, the free-style wrestling programme took place in eight categories. In 1980, there were ten. At the same time, the number of nations participating in the medal ceremonies has increased from eight to eleven. Here, then, there is no phenomenon equivalent to that in weightlifting. Let us say rather that a sort of status quo is being established.

In swimming, the men's Olympic programme grew from eight to thirteen races between 1960 and 1976. At the Rome Games, out of a total of 24 medals, Australia and the United States carried off 18, nine each. Japan won four. The remaining two medals went to a Brazilian and a Dutchman.

At the Montreal Games in 1976, out of 39 medals, the United States, who hold an implacable monopoly, took 27. The rest of the world had 12 between them: the USSR 4, Great Britain 3, the Federal Republic of Germany 2, the German Democratic Republic, Australia and Canada one each.

As these examples demonstrate, the medal distribution did not widen significantly. The International Weightlifting, Wrestling and Swimming Federations have meanwhile been constantly increasing the numbers of participating countries, but this does not lead to increased chances of success outside the leading few.

Does what applies to each sport apply also to sports as a whole? A convenient framework for examining the development of sport is provided by the largest general sports meeting of all: the Olympic Games.

MORE COUNTRIES LESS VICTORS?

According to the remarkable "Guinness Book of Olympic Records", published by Stan Greenberg, seventy eight nations have seen their representatives win at least one medal at the winter or summer Games.

To guide us in our enquiry, some detail is necessary. Let us therefore look more closely. Let us compare from Olympiad to Olympiad, the number of medal-winning countries with the overall number of participants.

The table (figure 1) shows three columns of figures for each Olympic Games. The first column shows the number of countries represented; the

		<i>Participating countries</i>	<i>Countries having one or more medals</i>	<i>%</i>
Athens	1896	13	10	17
Paris	1900	22	18	82
St. Louis	1904	13	10	11
Athens	1906	20	19	95
London	1908	22	20	90
Stockholm	1912	28	20	11
Antwerp	1920	29	22	15
Pans	1924	44	30	61
Amsterdam	1928	46	33	73
Los Angeles	1932	37	27	13
Berlin	1936	49	32	65
London	1948	59	31	63
Helsinki	1952	69	43	62
Melbourne	1956	61	38	56
Rome	1960	83	44	52
Tokyo	1964	93	41	44
Mexico	1968	112	44	40
Munich	1972	122	48	39
Montreal	1976	92	41	44
Moscow	1980	81	36	39
Los Angeles	1984	140	45	32

second shows the number of countries winning at least one medal. The third column shows the percentage of medal-winning countries in relation to the number of countries who took part. You will see that the largest percentage was reached in Athens in 1906: 95 per cent of countries gained medals. The table also shows that the ten lowest percentages correspond to the ten most recent Olympic Games, which are also those with the highest number of participating countries. The worst percentages are those for the Munich Games in 1972 and the Moscow Games in 1980.

Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that the Olympic phenomenon, by virtue of its diversity, is greatly mitigating and even managing to combat quite effectively the perceptible tendency towards monopolisation, sport by sport. Fortunately, it is a fact that in spite of the efficiency of certain large-scale sports policies such as that of the GDR, countries come across pockets of traditional resistance in certain disciplines, even if these are sometimes demolished.

Let us take as examples the excellence of the fencing of those latin sisters, France and Italy, which



has more than once come to the "rescue" of their Olympic performances, the British tradition of middle-distance running and the Hungarian tradition of water-polo. We know what satisfaction the Africans often get from racing, the Finns from the javelin. Certainly, these positions are sometimes lost, for instance that of the Turks in wrestling and the French in alpine skiing. On the whole, however, that does not alter the fact that Olympic universality remains, thanks to the multiplicity and richness of the programme.

TRACK AND FIELD AND BOXING

It is the very richness of its own programme within the Games that makes athletics into the most universal of Olympic sports. Since 1896 and up to 1980, 55 nations found their way into the list of winners of the six hundred and two gold, silver and bronze medals awarded in track and field.

The universality of track and field events alone has become such an indisputable fact among observers, that many of them regard a medal won on the track or in the field as more significant than one won in any other sport... in the name of this very universality. It is not in individual track and field events that this universality lies, but in the discipline of athletics as a whole.

Let us take the 100 m to prove our point. The hundred meters is the queen of sprints. Between 1896 and 1980, 60 medals were awarded for this event. One short of half (29 medals) were won by the United States. Only fifteen other countries won one or more medals.

After track and field, boxing is the sport with the widest range of winners: 49 medal winning countries out of 144 medals awarded. Next comes shooting with 37 medal-winning countries, followed by two sports of strength in equal fourth with 35 countries; next on the list are yachting (28), rowing and swimming (27), and equestrian sports (26). Football is the foremost sport from this point of view with 25 different medal winning teams. That is an excellent result for a team sport which only offers one title every four years, and it is no surprise in view of the fact that it is the most popular sport. The sports which follow are: judo (24); gymnastics (23); cycling (22); canoeing and fencing (21); hockey and diving (15). Bottom of the list are archery, basketball, the modern pentathlon, water-polo (11), handball and volleyball (10).

THE COUNTERWEIGHTS OF SOLIDARITY

We have seen that the weightlifting authorities are concerned about the worrying image of their sport: two countries locked in combat while every one else looks on. To counteract this tendency, they propose to increase the number of training opportunities in the less developed countries, but they are very short of resources. Track and field athletics, a much richer sport, now pays for all the athletes to compete in world championships, which is a tremendous effort. Athletics also takes part in actions started by the most impecunious associations and tries to organise systematically a redistribution of resources in favour of those most in need.

The United States, in the numerous sports in which they are on top, enable foreign athletes to gain considerable benefit from the system to which they owe their supremacy, by opening their borders to scholarship students from other countries. Thus, large numbers of African Olympic running medalists come from American universities.

European fencers, meanwhile, welcome Chinese and Koreans on to their training courses, or send their trainers to teach the use of sabre, foil and épée to their best pupils' future adversaries in Peking or Seoul. In 1985, it is believed that the head trainer of the Soviet weightlifting team, Mr. Prilepine, will visit France, just as in the course of a few years, the best Polish technician in that sport enabled the strong men of Greece to make very great progress. The best track and field trainers dedicate several weeks a year to information trips, making contacts which are enriching to all parties involved.

Last but not least, Olympic Solidarity is having ever greater resources placed at its disposal and should soon be playing a fundamental, driving rôle in the growing move towards equal opportunity.

Sports are not universal, and universality is an ideal which will never be achieved. Still, they should strive towards this ideal. But the most interesting thing of all is the fact that there is a growing awareness of this aim. Progress should not be far behind!

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