

KNOW THYSELF

by *PIERRE DE COUBERTIN*

This precept is so venerable and has been commented upon so often that one scarcely dares to quote it again... The more so since not only its great age is against it but also the fact that it is aimed at the aged. How can we expect young people to relate to it ? A lifetime is not too long for the acquisition of self-knowledge. No one can flatter himself that he will achieve it with only the means available to youth.

The objection is a fair one. And if, out of respect for the elderly bonzes who try to instill into them a wisdom beyond their years, our boys do not express it aloud, you may be sure that they formulate it in their heart of hearts and use it as a barricade behind which they keep intact their disinclination to philosophise.

There is, however, a peristyle through which youth can penetrate directly the illustrious temple, the peristyle which opens on to the athletes' quarters. An athlete, if he is ambitious in pursuit of perfection, must know his own strengths and weaknesses. The laurels to which he aspires will be the reward for his confidence in the former and his mistrust of the latter ; for, to achieve success, it is important to strike the right balance between these two feelings. Here, we are confronted with a paradox which would be amusing if it were not, above all, satisfying : the fact that the fundamental doctrine of human wisdom found its first application in the domain of muscular culture and that gymnastics is a kind of entrance hall leading into philosophy.

The athlete's strength does not reside solely in his muscles, and he can be handicapped not only by an imperfection in his weight, volume or the length of one or another of his limbs. Psychological qualities, the presence or absence of which

have a great influence on his value, occupy a place of great importance in his self-assessment.

A prime example of a self-assessment of this kind is perhaps the letter sent by President Roosevelt¹ to the Sports Psychology Congress held in Lausanne two years ago by the International Olympic Committee. Everyone knows the level of sportmanship maintained by that illustrious American statesman, but hardly anyone is aware that this sportmanship is the result of will-power illuminated by contemplation. Roosevelt, a rather sickly child, grew into a nervous and shy adolescent, indecisive and lacking in audacity. The humiliation of his lack of manliness tor-



mented him and he resolved to overcome it by cultivating his physical strength, since, like our great Montaigne, he well understood that there is nothing like “hardening the muscles” for “toughening up the character”. That is how Theodore Roosevelt came to embark on a sporting career in which he was to achieve no small success — although he takes pleasure in belittling modestly his earlier achievements.

One thing he does not try to belittle, however, but on which he rather places the emphasis in the letter I speak of, is the extraordinary interaction between character and muscle. Self-know-

ledge is a sine qua non condition for the start of such interaction. This, Theodore Roosevelt developed to the acme of perfection. And if the perpetual circumnavigation of his own personality, which enables him to supervise his resources, has become familiar to him, it is because he learned the secret by examination of his physical capacities, those he applied to the practice of sports.

This example is a topical one and it comes from a high place. Follow it, young men and women. Seek in the way you tackle your exercises, in your successes and failures, indications of the capacities which lie within you and those which do not. This will take at first the form of a physical and limited study. Then, almost imperceptibly, psychological elements will become mingled with the others until, little by little, illuminated from within, you stand revealed entirely to yourselves.

You will then be able to appreciate fully the depth of the wisdom of the ancients, which scaled heights man has never since gone beyond. Self-knowledge is not only the prerequisite of all progress and the source of all virtue, but it is also the basis of social equilibrium. The State has no less an interest in its pursuit than the individual, since, if the citizens know themselves and are aware of their irremediable¹ imperfection, they will be more indulgent towards the inevitable imperfections of government. Finally, peoples who are enlightened as regards each other will be less likely to become intoxicated with the fumes of insane pride and to unleash terrible wars as a result.



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¹ Theodore Roosevelt (1838-1919), Statesman and President of the United States from 1901 to 1908.