

“WE WANT TO GO EVER FORWARD”

THE “TRUSTEES” OF THE OLYMPIC IDEA

by *PIERRE DE COUBERTIN*



We are continuing our series of writings by Pierre de Coubertin with one of the most famous speeches of the restorer of the Olympic Games. In this address, delivered at a reception given by the British Government in honour of the guests at the Games in London in 1908, Pierre de Coubertin recalled the difficulties encountered by the International Olympic Committee since its creation. We see that from the outset, the system of cooption aroused particular jealousy. It is in this text, too, that we find the now famous phrase : “The important thing in these Olympiads is not so much to win as to take part”. To this maxim, which we owe to the Anglican Bishop of Pennsylvania, Pierre de Coubertin added the following words which sum up his sports philosophy : “The important thing in life is not the triumph but the combat ; the essential thing is not to have won but to have put up a good fight”. Like the other nine texts published in the Olympic Review this past year, this speech is included in the collection of Pierre de Coubertin’s writings on sport and Olympism, compiled under the supervision of Professor Norbert Müller and published by Weidmann.

Your Excellencies, Mylords, Gentlemen, On behalf of the International Olympic Committee, I would like to express to you my deep gratitude for the tribute which has just been paid to us. We shall remember it with emotion, as we shall remember the Games of this Olympiad, for which, thanks to the hard work of our English colleagues, a colossal effort was made in the direction of technical perfection. And, however satisfying the result may have been, I hope I am not being too ambitious when I say that in future we hope that it will be done even better, if that is possible. For we want to go ever forward. He who does not go forward goes backwards.

Sirs, the progress of the Committee on behalf of which I have the honour of speaking has been considerable. And when I think of the unspeakable attacks of which it has been the object, of the ambushes and obstacles with which improbable conspiracies and frenzied jealousies have strewn its path over the past fourteen years, I can not help but think that wrestling is a fine sport — even when your opponents abandon classical techniques and employ against you the surprise tactics of “*catch as catch can*”. Such is the treatment to which the International Olympic Committee has been subjected since its birth, and it seems to have gained a solid and robust constitution as a result.

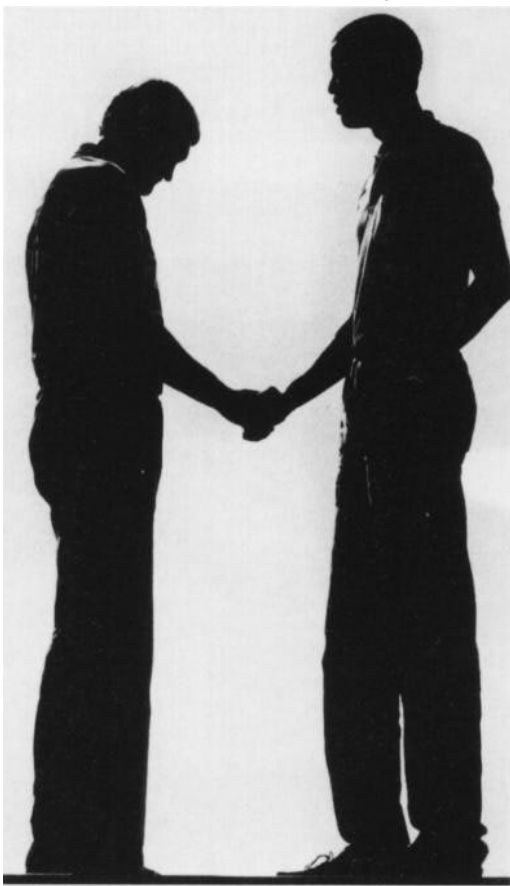
The reason for these struggles? Oh ! My Goodness ! I can tell you in two words. We were not elected ; we are self-recruiting and our terms of office are not limited. Is there need of anything else to irritate an opinion which is increasingly accustomed to seeing the election principle extend its power and gradually bring all institutions under its yoke? There is, in our case, — is there not ? — a distortion of the common law which is difficult to tolerate. Well ! We are not afraid to take the responsibility for this anomaly.

For my part, I learned many things in former days in this country, among them that the best way of safeguarding liberty and serving democracy is not always to abandon everything to election, but, on the contrary, to leave in the great electoral ocean small islands where, in certain special areas, it is possible to ensure the continuity of an independent and stable effort.

Independence and stability. That, Gentlemen, is what has enabled us to achieve great things; that is what, all too often, it must be admitted, is lacking in organisations today, and in

sports organisations in particular. No doubt this independence would cause problems as far as we are concerned if it were a question of creating strict rules to be enforced in a compulsory manner. But such is not our role. We do not encroach on the privileges of associations, we are not a technical police board. We are simply the “trustees” of the Olympic idea.

The Olympic idea is, in our view, the concept of a strong muscular culture based, on the one hand, on the chivalrous spirit, what you so nicely call “fair play”, and on the other hand, on the aesthetic idea, the cult of beauty and grace.



“The long goodbye”, James Ruebsamen (USA), taken from “Best, The Best of the World’s Sports Photography, 1986”; published by Studio 6 and the AIPS. We shall be presenting the work in our next issue.

At the Sources of Olympism

I do not say that the ancients never failed to live up to this ideal. I was reading in one of your major newspapers this morning, in connection with an incident which took place yesterday and caused something of a stir, an expression of despair at the thought that certain characteristics of our sports ethos today prevent us from reaching the classical level. Do you believe, then, Gentlemen, that such incidents never blotted the chronicles of the Olympic Pythian of Nemean Games, in short, all the great sports events of antiquity? It would be very naive to assert such a thing. Man has always been passionate and heaven preserve us from a society in which there are no excesses and in which the expression of ardent feelings is forever trapped within the too narrow confines of propriety.

It is true to say that in our time, when the progress of material civilisation — I would even go so far as to say mechanical civilisation — has magnified everything, certain shortcomings which threaten the Olympic idea give rise to anxiety.



Yes, I would not disguise the fact, “fair play” is in jeopardy; and the main reason for this is the blight which we imprudently allowed to develop: the love of betting, of gambling. If a crusade against gambling is needed, we are prepared to undertake it, and I am sure that public opinion in this country will support us — the opinion of those who love sport for its own sake, for its high educative value, for the sake of human improvement, of which it can be a most powerful factor. Last Sunday, at the ceremony held in St. Paul’s in the honour of the athletes, the Bishop of Pennsylvania recalled in felicitous terms that the important thing in these Olympics is not so much to win as to take part.

Gentlemen, let us remember these great words. They extend through all domains and form the basis of a calm and healthy philosophy. The important thing in life is not the triumph but the combat; the essential thing is not to have won but to have put up a good fight. To spread these precepts is to prepare a more valiant, stronger — and thus more scrupulous and more generous — humanity.

Such are the ideas that prevail within our government. We shall continue to draw our inspiration from them. We shall be seeing you again in four years’ time to celebrate the Vth Olympiad, not forgetting the Games in Athens to be held in the interval, when, once again, the world will turn towards immortal Hellas, the worship of which is indissolubly linked any ennobling aspiration.

Allow me, on behalf of all my colleagues, to greet here your respective countries and, in particular, old England, mother of so many virtues and inspirer of so many efforts. Internationalism as we understand it is made up of respect for all fatherlands and the noble emulation with which the heart of the athlete trembles when he sees hoisted on the pole of victory, as a result of his labour, his country’s colours.

To your countries, Gentlemen, to the glory of your sovereigns, to the greatness of their reigns and to the prosperity of your governments and your fellow-citizens!

Olympic Review, July 1908, pp. 108-110.

Non-official poster of the 1908 Games