

# WHAT COUNTS IS THE ATHLETE

The Olympic Movement is a social force throughout the world, with a decided influence in all the forums in which universal peace and people's well-being are discussed. The IOC is one of history's survivors; along with the Red Cross, it is part of that social phenomenon, the private organization which serves the community and which continues to have an impact on the world because its services are so vitally useful. All this indicates that the system is a good one, that the idea sown by Coubertin fell in fertile ground, because the harvest has improved each year, surpassing even the greatest expectations of its genius founder.

**By Flor Isava Fonseca**

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***The appeal of the stadium must not be to the detriment of the athlete.***

In the ninety-seven years of its recorded history, the International Olympic Committee has had only seven presidents, which gives an indication of the exceptional ability of each of them had to guide with a firm hand the rudder of that vessel, which has rarely navigated calm waters. Since its foundation, 359 prominent figures from all over the world have contributed directly, as IOC members, to the expansion of their organization.

Amateurism or professionalism ? To pronounce lightly on such a complex subject would be irresponsible. Sport as one of man's forms of expression must move with, and within, the times in which he lives. The current debate centres on two points : a) should the concepts enshrined in the present Olympic Charter be retained, by which professional athletes are excluded from the Games or b) should those concepts be dropped and re-directed to making sport open to all competitors? I would favour a third approach, that of expanding



the current concepts without falling into the trap of giving the business world the power of dictating terms, because once that road was taken, it would be impossible to turn back and Olympic sport would inevitably lose the strength and leadership that we have defended so vigorously up to now.

In the first case, various tenets are cited that are attributed to the founder Pierre de Coubertin and which were defended with singular rigour by Avery Brundage. These are brandished fanatically by those who believe that everything should stay as it was in 1894.

Let us take a look at what Pierre de Coubertin said about amateur status in 1919, at the end of the First World War. He said :

“All sports are for everyone. That is a formula that will be deemed utopian, but I do not care, for I have thought much about it and analysed it a great deal. I believe it is correct and feasible. I shall devote my remaining years and strength to making that formula prevail.” And he did devote the last twenty-seven years of his life entirely to that.

## ALWAYS THE SAME SUBJECT

In 1931, answering a question from a journalist on the subject of amateur status, he replied : *“Always the same subject! I must confess I am never very excited by that topic.”*

On another occasion, when he was being pressed on the issue, he replied very sarcastically: *“They have opened the skeleton cupboard and dragged out of it the mummy of amateur status and its trail of implications...”*

On 4th September 1936, towards the end of his life (he was to die in Geneva, Switzerland, on 2nd September 1937), he answered a journalist from ‘L’Auto’ with visible annoyance : “I have been reproached often, and always unjustly, for the supposed hypocrisy of the Olympic Oath. But read for yourself that oath of which I am

the proud and happy creator and tell me where you find in it any requirement that athletes present in the stadium have an absolute amateur status *that I am the first to regard as impossible. In the oath I ask for one thing only : Sporting loyalty.*

These are examples taken at random, since his work is enormous. He left thousands of written pages, educational treatises and the texts of hundreds of lectures. Coubertin always had his doubts about amateur status ; so one cannot attribute timeworn and rigid ideas to someone who was a bold and progressive innovator.

A formula must be found that accommodates both schools of thought. It is not reasonably possible to think that in 1989 the IOC can operate using the same concepts that obtained in its organization in 1894. The Olympic phenomenon, is precisely its constant renewal, consonant with Coubertin’s ideals that a social revolution in university lecture halls and in workshops imposed.

We live dominated by materialism : every day, there are less people prepared to devote their efforts to fostering, organizing and practising sports as a training discipline. The evolution of sport itself, the modern view of the athlete and the increasing number of athletes in the world, the avalanche of national and international competitions, the requirements of the technical staff involved - all this goes against the concept of amateur status, if by this we mean not receiving any remuneration for services provided or time taken from work for sports training. Nor do the standard of records, the demands of competition, anxiety to break world records and the pressures and expectations of the public permit the presence of the enthusiast who only practises sport in his spare time.

All these realities are prompting a change in attitude to what is regarded as professional status in sport. It is impossible to keep pretending that we do not know that today the major figures in sport are subsidized by patrons of all kinds. There-

fore, it is necessary to break with this system of half-truths and doubtful sincerity.

We have to accept that people go to the Olympic Games in pursuit of excellence and that there is no room for improvisation at them. This excellence is achieved solely by total dedication to training for and practising a sport. To be able to do this, an athlete devotes some part of his youth to that end, living a life of discipline and sacrifice unlike that of his peers. So it would be totally unfair to require in addition that he should spurn the opportunities afforded by his dedication that can assure his economic future in some way.

What has to be fought energetically, because of its harmful repercussions in the long run for the aim and purpose of the Olympic Movement, is the cultivation of use of sport by the athlete for basic project motives. This would make him an object of economic barter that went to the highest bidder.

The Olympic Games are for the elite among athletes. People do not go to the Games to learn, but to demonstrate the highest and most refined excellence obtained by total dedication and training, at an event reserved for the best in the world. Although these requirements exclude many from taking part, the IOC ensures that all countries have the right to be present. This is done through the special assistance that they are given by Olympic Solidarity, which pays all the expenses of attendance for six athletes and two trainers.

The term "amateur status" was taken out of the Olympic Charter in 1975. Nowadays, people talk of "eligibility" - a term broader in its social and educational implications. To be eligible is to know and practise a sport in a special way, to have a clear attitude in favour of the "Clean Game" and a noble attitude to life that goes beyond mere financial payment. Losing eligibility is much more serious than losing amateur status.

The present task facing the Olympic Committee is by no means an easy one.

Any decision taken hurriedly or superficially could do irreparable harm to the Olympic Movement and sap the immense moral strength that sustains it. The IOC, together with the 167 National Olympic Committees, the 27 International Federations whose sports are on the Olympic Programme and the 15 recognized International Federations, is currently conducting a global study of the different concepts involved in order to arrive at a formula that accords with the needs of contemporary sport.



***Youngsters who give their all to their sport. One hundred per cent commitment. What about afterwards ?***

To conclude, I will say that the International Olympic Committee is an open forum in which we are working towards a consensus formula whereby we can reconcile the fundamental ideals of the Olympic Movement with the essential requirements of modern sport, bearing in mind that what is important is the physical and moral benefit to the athlete. Coubertin was not just a visionary; he also fought for the aims he had for the future, he was a bold and dynamic director. Let us follow, in his footsteps, slowly and surely, the shining example he set us.

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