

VISIONS OF SPORT



*At Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1936,
the Canadian jumper Norman C. Gagne.*

As we said at the time (OR 265), on the occasion of Olympic Week last November, the Museum of Photography in Lausanne hosted the exhibition "Visions of Sport 1920-1960", which presented the theme of sport from the angle of aesthetic research, seen through the works of the great photographers of the period. The story of these years of tremendous expansion is told for us here by Jean-Claude Gautrand, commissioner of the exhibition, who has also produced a superb work on these forty years of photographs. The text is taken from the catalogue.

Thousands of photographs are taken constantly in the stadiums and on the tracks of the whole world. Millions of pictures accumulate in the specialist agencies, bearing witness to the most varied exploits and events that make up sports news. Visions of Sport has a totally different aim.

The photographs which make up this collection all have a different meaning. Originating from museums, galleries, national or international organizations, or the archives of the photographers themselves, they highlight above all the beauty of the body, the harmonious elegance of a gesture, the rhythm of movement. These pictures celebrate with as much interest the anonymous Sunday crowds and their favourite expression, which is that of physical effort, as the sports event in itself. And if a few "gods of the stadium" or some individual exploits appear here and there, they owe this more to the aesthetic qualities of the works which depict them than to the importance of the event reported.

From the stadium to the beach, from the high dive to the Sunday swim, from athletic fulguration to a simple walk in the mountains, from the actor to the spectator, these pictures celebrate above all communication between beings in the same and double passion inherited from Antiquity : that of the body and physical exercise. A passion which in the past many artists and writers have shared.

There is no need to go back to Pindar or Greek and Roman statuary to become aware of the the harmony found among the cinder tracks, stadiums and swimming pools. Delaunay, Villon, de Staël and Hockney have discovered it; Giraudoux, Montherlant, Morand and Camus have extolled the athlete and the sporting mind. It is therefore natural that the greatest photographers should have explored the world of sport to find that each athlete is the sculptor of his own body, that all movement is rhythm, and that a stadium may be the most beautiful setting for ballet that exists.

With different motivations, sometimes opposite objectives, they have thus discovered a world of sufficiently inexhaustible diversity for the creativity of each to find excitement and inspiration.

The result is a great variety of pictures : direct snapshots, scientific and highly technical experiments, futuristic visions, grandiose landscapes, unusual moments, sociological and political testimonies, moments of humour and pure emotion, pictures of dreams or exhilarating joys. Priority here is given to the eye of the photographer, to his sense of plastic art, to his analysis of the moment, to his appropriation of space.

Moreover, this veritable anthology presents, by the choice of the period considered (1920-1960), an obvious historic interest. Each of these four decades brings together some particularly strong and significant moments from the history of photography. Through a theme that is both as open and as precisely targeted as *Visions of Sport*, the great movements, the great trends which marked photography during these turbulent years emerge clearly.

After the necessarily static pictures from the initial days or the sophisticated ones from the turn of the century, photography in the twenties rediscovers the pleasure of the direct picture capable of capturing life and movement and henceforward gives the leading role to outdoor photography; everything which a young boy called Jacques-Henri Lartigue had already, naively and intuitively, half-comprehended at the beginning of the century. Whether in the USA, under the impetus of Stieglitz, in Europe with the proponents of New Objectivity, or through the action of individuals with an alert sensitivity and curiosity like Kertész, open-air photography was to become for many an instrument of privileged testimony. In the field which interests us here, the beauty and intensity of the sporting action was not slow to arouse interest. In Vienna, Lothar Rübelt, himself a confirmed sportsman who took part in the 1920 Olympic Games, immediately specialized in sports photography as did Lothar Jeck in Basle and Munkacsi in Hungary.

Specialist and non-specialist magazines became the first users of these new pictures.

But this same decade still remained the golden age of avant-garde photography, taking an active part in the cultural advance whose culmination was unquestionably the famous Weimar Bauhaus. A school deliberately in search of a modern photographic language, a new aesthetic quality and the integration of photography into the language of plastic art in general. The most varied techniques, the most original photographic angles were used systematically. Moholy Nagy was the figurehead of this phalanx of creators for whom photo-montage was a privileged means of offering different visual relationships from which a new subjective reality would emerge. An artist like Baumeister, particularly inspired by sport, produced a whole series of "constructivist-cubist" pictures, an idea imitated by some of the Italian futurists like Paladini or Munari.

In the 1930s, sport became a truly social phenomenon; the cult of physical effort took off in all levels of society,

A race in the twenties in Vienna (AUT).



encouraging the media then enjoying rapid expansion to give it an ever greater place. Parallel to this, technological advances such as the advent of the small-format Leica, the invention of roll film, the new contribution of the flash bulb, liberated the photographer's eye, opening up new possibilities and influencing photography in the most varied of fields.

On a scientific level, in 1930 Harold Edgerton, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology invented an electric light with a short and intense flash which could be repeated at will. Thanks to the succession of flashes thus produced (down to 1/100 000th of a second), Edgerton was

Photographers were to emphasize the dynamic side to sport.



able to record on film the various phases of a movement, and particularly those of sportsmen like golfers or tennis players. His pupil, Gjon Mili, worked in the same field and put his flash light science to work in producing quasi-theatrical photographs of the great moments of games. From then on, photography was able to render visible the invisible and discover in movement hitherto unimagined forms.

NEW INTEREST IN THE BODY

The imagery of sport spread everywhere, including to new unexpected areas like, for example, fashion. Hoyningen-Huene, taking advantage of this new interest in the body, produced pictures of athletes or men's torsos as well as fashion pictures for sport. At first an exclusively sports reporter in Budapest, Munkacsy also produced some photographs of an exceptional dynamism in this field. After 1934, working for "Harper's Bazaar", he drew inspiration from his initial pictures to introduce sport, outdoor life and vitality into the rather rigid world of fashion. It was of course in the field of reporting that the rise of photography was most spectacular. As we have seen, technology offered the photographer total freedom of movement. Many photographers turned to the world of sport to magnify the dynamic, passionate, unusual, aesthetic, even dramatic side of it. All the more so since the number of press publications was increasing and the demand for illustrative material was growing continuously. In Switzerland, Lothar Jeck regularly produced reports for "Schweizer Illustrierte" and "L'Illustré"; in Austria Lothar Rübelt worked for the left-wing newspaper "Kuckuck" and then for the "Berliner Illustrierte" for which he covered the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. Gotthard Schuh also worked for the same magazine, as well as providing reports for "Vu", "Life" and the "Zürcher Illustrierte", as did the other Swiss photographers Paul Senn and Hans Staub. In France, a number of photographers were occasionally producing pictures on sport : Pierre Ichac, a great ethnological reporter; Jean Roubier, a well-known illustrator; François Kollar, creator of the famous portrait "La France travaille"; etc. "Vu", "La

Revue du Médecin”, “Arts et Metiers Graphiques” were the main vehicles for the distribution of this new photography in direct contact with life, photography capable of capturing time so as to provide a better view of the moment caught, suspended.

A reality which some contested by seeking new means of restoring movement. The freshly-learned lessons of Bauhaus were not forgotten. With the help of curiosity and imagination, experiments to achieve this were conducted using the most varied techniques. Gjon Mili continued his research into the electronic sphere in order to mix hyper-instantaneousness with superimposition. Maurice Tabard, Andre Steiner and Pierre Boucher worked as much on capturing the moment as expressing the action through the graphic mobility of that which had moved, the long exposure, superimpositions and extended blurring. A different conception which Michel Frizot defines as “a conquering rivalry between the uncontrolled temporaneousness of the instantaneous and the contemplation of the vital instant”.

In the 1930s, other active forces were added to these aesthetic-philosophical considerations. The sporting phenomenon attained such dimensions and such a social importance that it was bound to be taken over politically. The reports by Leni Riefenstahl or Lothar Jeck show how far the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin were deflected from their true finality to serve the regime in power.

A NEW AESTHETIC

Elsewhere, the pictures by Rodtchenko turn out to be an important sociological testimony to the use of photographic language in the service of revolutionary dialectic. The aim, wrote Rodtchenko in 1929, was to find “a new aesthetic quality which can express with photographs the bewitchment and pathos of our new socialist reality”, and to apply these principles by photographing people and mass movements in accordance with the creeds of a new

vision : shock angles, close ups, high-angle shots, low-angle shots. A festival of original viewpoints intended to “revolutionize visual thought” and laud the existence of a socialist realism.

The 1930s? An exalting and turbulent decade which was to end alas in the chaos of the second world war. Photographers split up, exiled, some were pursued... - a full stop for history.

After the conflict, everything slowly started to move again. Mentalities had changed, technology had made new spec-



Women's foil at the Games in Berlin, images which tell the story of the Games and the history of photography.

tacular advances. Around the 1950s, in grand classical style, René Jacques produced a project to illustrate “Les Olympiques” by Montherlant; Brassai, an unrepentant traveller and mountain-dweller, produced strong dynamic pictures of mass sports; Doisneau in his humanist tradition cast a questioning eye over the sports world and captured to perfection certain moods like that of the defunct “Central” or that of a football pitch in a desolate sub-

urb. But the 1950s were above all years of the explosion in photo-journalism : Henri Cartier-Bresson produced pictures of large Soviet sports parades, and in particular a little known report on one of the last six-day races held in the Vel'd'Hiv in Paris, demolished a few years later, a closed world, strange, with surrealist touches. In addition, Robert Capa produced with humour a life-like and surprising report on the 1939 Tour de France, or rather the side-aspects of it; and George Rodger from the Magnum agency brought back from Africa some extraordinary pictures, whose inspiration is drawn from Antiquity, of traditional Nouba fights.

But it is perhaps the prestigious team assembled by the magazine "Life" which shows best the quality, strength and high technology possessed by photographers such as Ernst Haas, the master of colour, Gjonn Mili, electronic wizard, Eisenstaedt,

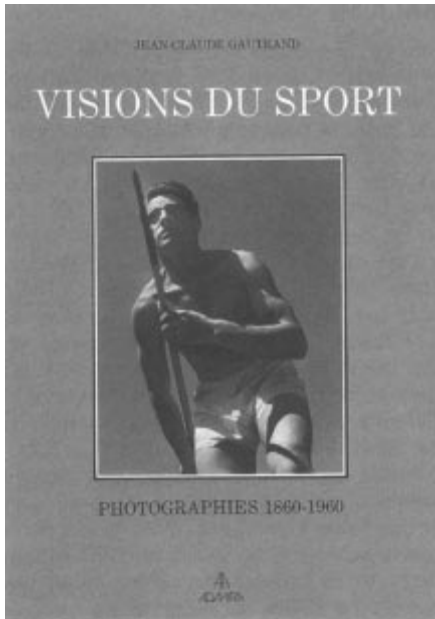
Dominis, Ralph Morse, Charles Stenheimer and Georg Silk, who created powerful and meaningful pictures whose perfection only the hyper-technology employed in the following decade could equal - at least on a technical level.

Visions du sport is thus an exhibition-history created with two different objectives in mind. The first, historical, derives from the constant efforts of the National Photography Foundation to contribute to increasing knowledge of the photographs from a period which is still little-known. The other, sociological, is to show the public that with a theme as precise as that of the world of sport, the diversity of photographic expression is still total, and that the greatest photographers have found in it plenty of material for reflection or aesthetic delectation.

Jean-Claude Gautrand

A race which has gone down in Games' history : in Helsinki Lothar Rübelt caught Emil Zatopek "The Czech Locomotive", taking the lead in the 5,000 metres from Alain Mimoun (FRG) and Herbert Schade (FRG).





VISIONS OF SPORT, A BOOK

In order to prolong the pleasure of the exhibition and give an idea of it to those who were unable to see it, Jean-Claude Gautrand has, with science and passion, brought together in a book a selection of the works on show. **Visions du sport, photographies 1860-1960** (Visions of sport, photographs from 1860-1960) is a remarkable compilation of more than 200 photographs showing the different approaches to sport by over sixty photographers during a century of sports photography. These photographs highlight the beauty and elegance of the action, deliberately leaving aside the factual and documentary aspect of the sports event covered, yet bear witness, as Pierre Borhan says in his preface, to "the modifications made to materials and types of equipment. They provide an account of the modernization of sports grounds, from the tiny stadium with wooden stands to the giant arena designed for the spectacle as much as for the

crowd." And again : "In great sports photography, the champion is not the athlete, but the photographer". A beautiful book indeed.

Visions du Sport, photographies 1860-1960, by Jean-Claude Gautrand, preface by Pierre Borha, published by Admira, la Fermette, résidence de la Tour d'Aygosi, 13010 Aix-en-Provence, France, 1989, ISBN 2-907658-02-6, 253 pages, price FF 540.—.

Brief biography of Lothar Rübelt, taken from "Visions du sport"

Lothar Rübelt, born in Vienna (Austria) in 1901; higher technical studies to obtain an engineering diploma.

In 1918 he joined the Vienna Sports Club. In 1919 he started photographing sport and in 1920 took part in the 400, 800 and 1000 metres in the Olympic Games. In 1924 he and his brother created the Phot-Rübelt press agency in Vienna and joined the Organisation der Wiener Presse. A keen motorcyclist, in 1926 he made a film called: 'Above the clouds on a motorcycle'. In 1927 he reported on the fire at the Palace of Justice in Vienna, and in 1928 took part in a major exhibition on movement in Moscow. In 1929 he became one of the first to use a Leica, and in 1930 worked for the left-wing newspaper Kuckuck. In 1935 he became a photo-reporter for the Berliner Illustrierte, a post he held until 1945. 1936 saw him covering the Olympic Games in Berlin and the Winter Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. After the war he recommenced his activities as a sports photographer, working for the Munich newspaper Heute and the Wiener Illustrierte. He covered all the Olympic Games from London in 1948 to Rome and Squaw Valley in 1960.

The exhibition and the catalogue have been produced by the Fondation française de la photographie.

