

AFTER THE APPLAUSE, BACK TO THE GAME OF LIFE



RETURN OF THE ATHLETE TO SOCIETY

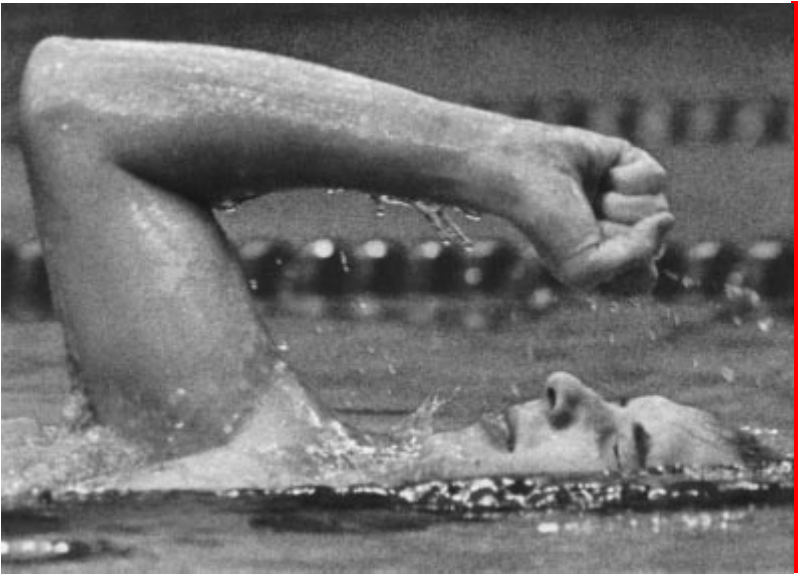
An interesting initiative has been launched in Italy in order to help former athletes find employment once they have finally given up their career in competitions. The body which will be responsible for this important work is known as the COPA, an abbreviation of the Italian «Centre for Vocational Training of Athletes».

The COPA is a service organization, set up by the firm Consultsport, a member of the Confederation for Commerce. It was soon joined by ERG, a large oil company, and by ISDA, a firm specializing in management consultancy. Full backing was also given by Mr Arrigo Gattai, the President of CONI, as well as by Mr Antonio Matarrese, President of the Italian Football Federation. Among the main supporters of this project are a number of leading champions in the world of sport, for example Klaus de Biasi, Olympic winner in the 1968, 1972 and 1976 Games, swimmer Marcello Guar-

ducci, and footballer Sandro Mazzola. At the opening ceremony of the COPA Mr de Biasi said : "Once the competitions are over, a feeling of lack of confidence and uncertainty sets in. I have personally seen how traumatizing it can be, even to famous champions, to try to find the right employment. Certainly, it is increasingly clear that those who have studies to their credit can aspire to a better existence. Children should organize themselves properly and realize that study is a vital aid in getting a job when one is no longer young enough to compete". A few words were added by

By Donato Martucci

swimmer Marcello Guarducci who was also a European champion : "When a swimmer is engrossed in his competitions he is scarcely able to cast a glance outside his pool. And many athletes on coming to the end of their competitive career are forced to accept humiliating jobs, which do not do justice to their experience and talents. Once the applause has died away,



When a swimmer is involved in competing, it is difficult for him to see beyond the pool.

the sportsman is faced with finding an activity to support him".

In brief, a group of people composed of managers from industry, university lecturers and businessmen are intending to make their services available to athletes who have come to the end of the strictly competitive part of their sporting careers, offering them guidance and vocational prospects in the field of employment. Their services are offered free of any charge and are available at either of the first two branches to be opened, in Rome and Milan. "We are not an employment agency, and even less an assistance centre", point out the managers of the COPA, "we want to be a permanent place on the map

where we can give constructive help free of charge to sportsmen who are about to take up vocational activity".

To do this, the COPA has to take into account the background of the persons concerned, their status and professional competence. To this end, 500 athletes in the various disciplines have received basic questionnaires. The COPA examines the cases of athletes who are currently fully engaged in competitions, rather than those who have left the matter too late and call for help now. As soon as the questionnaires have been collected, the COPA will be able to map out in detail the types and form of aid that can be given to sportsmen who are planning to embark on a new job.

The Italian Union of Footballers has also enthusiastically accepted COPA's programmes. In fact the football sector, which has been considered by many to be the richest discipline, has its own problems with unemployment. Sandro Mazzola, who was one of the most famous champions of Italian football, raised a cry of alarm on behalf of the footballers who, after having fought in the A, B and C Series of the Championship, suddenly find themselves without a contract just because they have reached a certain age. "Once they have failed in an attempt to get into the three main categories of the Championship, says Mazzola, these footballers often accept offers to play in amateur championships".

Recently, the CONI had to help in providing a pension to the renowned skier Zeno Colo, winner of the downhill ski competitions at the 1952 Winter Games in Oslo, who was experiencing hard times. However, these exceptions do not justify the proliferation of similar cases. In certain disciplines there is now a false professionalism which deceives the young generation and accustoms them to a medium/high life-style that can suddenly collapse through an accident or for some other reason. Then if the athlete concerned has been unwise enough to abandon his studies or the learning of a trade the situation may well prove tragic. The IOC has always

been concerned with the future activities of the athlete. But in each individual country the Olympic Committee should be the body which handles such a serious problem. It would not be bad, for example, if the Sports Federations which are the most closely involved with the problem could include in their own management staff Welfare Counsellors with the task of keeping track of the top athletes, and encouraging them to provide the wherewithal for a decent return to society after a distinguished period of their lives spent in competitions. The task could also be extended to the clubs to which, in particular, the athletes belong. Giorgio Sarosi, a

famous Hungarian footballer who later became a coach, said that in each association there should be a chaplain for religious matters. Without going as far as that, it could at least be hoped that there is a "welfare counsellor", someone who would quickly become popular among the athletes because of the important tasks he has to fulfil.

The initiative taken by the Italian COPA is in any case a major step forward, and it is possible that it will be followed also by other countries which encounter similar problems.

D. M.



Athletes like Zeno Colo need to be able to face the future.