

30 000 SPECTATORS FOR AN INTER-COLLEGE COMPETITION



A national gathering and a fine tradition.

By Noël Tamini

Athletics without stars and without world records for good measure is not a recipe for success. Or so it is generally thought. One of the most striking examples which disproves this comes from Belgium, where 200 paying spectators attended the national athletics championships only a few weeks before 45,000 people turned out at Heysel for the famous meeting in Brussels ! And on the island of Mauritius, a minute dot in the Indian Ocean, schoolchildren make it happen, to the point that, once a year, their track and field supplants even football, the so-called king of sports.

REGIONAL GAMES

It is a known fact that Mauritius was a British possession before its accession to independence in 1968. It has retained the good taste of a certain tradition, a kind of athletics that is old-fashioned perhaps but so very attractive. This is borne out by the Inter-Schools Games, held at the Rose Hill stadium one weekend last year.

More precisely, 650 athletes from 24 first division junior secondary schools had qualified for these finals, which were hotly contested even before the national anthem sounded. Some even spoke of athletes being bought, and there were even appeals to the Supreme instance (!), the MUSSA, that is the Mauritius University and School Sport Association. All that to defend as hard as possible, teeth bared and flags flying, the colours of one's school.

DOING ONE'S BEST FOR ONE'S COLLEGE

"The Inter-Schools Games are here", declared Mr. Heerasing in the inaugural speech "and the MUSSA was determined to meet the challenge despite last-minute difficulties and heavy criticism". He added: "This inter-schools track and field championship has become a national event which polarizes attention for over a week, and at the same time it is a celebration for the young people of Mauritius".

From the youngest to the oldest age group eligible, everyone was there to participate in this unique festival, close in its spirit to the finest days of track and field as Coubertin knew them. All of them, boys and girls, were there to give the best of themselves to exact the least little point for the benefit of their schools.

But which school would be the winner? That is what this unusual weekend, which drew - scarcely believable! - 30,000 spectators, was all about. For a country with scarcely more than one million inhabitants... All that without any prizes, any expectation of glamour and - of course - without the slightest suspicion of doping. Which only goes to prove that the healthiest form of athletics, athletics as a game -

is still a recipe for success, at least among the student population.

Among the girls, there could be no surprise in store, so obvious was the superiority of the Convent Lorette de Quatre-Bornes (375.5 points as against 220 for the nearest rival).

Among the boys, however, two long-standing rivals were to vie with one another yet again. The Saint-Esprit Junior High had been declared the winner 28 years in succession. And yet this year more than any other, Saint-Joseph's seemed close to its first victory. For three afternoons of highly colourful performances, with their supporters cheering them on and brandishing their colours and their streamers, encouraging their heroes boldly but sportingly, they seemed to be doing so well that...

How wild was the joy of one side, after the ups and downs of these stimulating iousts, how bitter and sad was the other! For ages, victory had seemed to hang in the balance. Finally, by 372 points to 329.5, it was the Saint-Esprit Junior High that won yet again.

VICTORY BEFORE RECORDS

"There are no more areas of common understanding", as Robert d'Argent, a local journalist, wrote afterwards. "There are only battle grounds. Because victory has become synonymous with admiration, defeat gives rise to shame and a feeling of mediocrity. But mediocrity in relation to whom? In relation to what? Everything is relative. The winner here would be the loser somewhere else. Inferior or superior, one is primarily face to face with oneself. Victory passes away, but man remains".

In June in Mauritius, hundreds of young men and women will celebrate once again, in their spontaneous way, the virtues of athletics at its finest. A contest in which victory counts for more than records.

N. T.

Festival for the youth of Mauritius.

