



“Olympism is not a system, it is a state of mind”



The Olympic Games existed in ancient Greece for over a thousand years. This year, the Olympic Games of the modern era can look back

over a hundred years of history since their first edition, held in Athens in 1896. During the celebrations in Atlanta, the individual who was behind modern Olympism and the Olympic Games of the modern era was also called to mind: Pierre de Coubertin was fêted there, and with him the idea whose name he had borrowed from ancient Olympia; an idea he wished to bring back to life but to which he wished to give a different meaning.

For Coubertin, this new Olympic idea was first and foremost a pedagogical one. The most important aspect of Olympism as he saw it was not setting sports records but rather its educational aims and ideals. Coubertin's concept of Olympism was that it must be pedagogical to exist, as Eilert Herms, a theologian from Tübingen, points out. Without an educational basis, the Olympic Games would deteriorate to the same level as the gladiators in the arenas of Rome. This concept, therefore, requires some explanation.

Originally, Olympism was meant to be something exceptional. Employing a new interpretation of the meaning of sport, Coubertin wished not only to reform Olympism but also to use it as an instrument

by **Ommo Grupe**

for the ethical reform of politics and the economy, since he did not believe they could undergo changes from within. This could be achieved by means of reforms in teaching and instruction methods, of which he considered Olympic education

Coubertin in the 1890s.



to be an important part. This education was based on five basic points.

The first point was the principle of the unity of mind and body and the harmonious development of man. The practice of sport should follow the idea of a global form of education. Olympism is based on a spirit of “harmony” in humankind. Physical training is not sufficient for education, and should be integrated within all-embracing type of instruction.

Second comes the aim of self-perfection, which today would probably be called “self-improvement”: sports activities should include a “striving for human perfection”, and the effort to gain skill in sport should therefore be seen as a means of developing one's abilities.

Third is the ideal of amateurism: this should give sport its “noble and chivalrous character”. A kind of “purification process” is required in order to pursue the ascetic ideals found in sport. This implies, first of all, protecting sport as a whole from the spirit of the “lust to win”, and secondly “preventing Olympic athletes from turning into circus gladiators”, as Coubertin explained it.

Fourth comes the link with sporting principles: the law of fairness, of compliance with written and unwritten sports rules and the refusal to make use of unfair advantages. These make it possible on the one

hand to practise sport according to the rules and to the principles of justice, and on the other to control impetuosity in terms of strength and emotion so that sporting contests do not end in barbarianism. "Olympic pedagogy" is a "school" for practical "chivalry". Only a fair attitude renders Olympic sport noble.

Fifth comes the ideal of peace through sport: one of Coubertin's central and constant philosophies was that of the need for peace among men and peoples. This ideal of peace does not contradict the principle of sports performance and competition; it is much more a case of performance and competition serving sport. Sport, international sports competitions, and the Olympic Games in particular, must be clearly presented as one form of effort made toward achieving peace and toward bringing peoples of different races and political or religious beliefs together in a spirit of mutual respect. Coubertin was not naive in this respect: in order for people to respect each other, it is first necessary for them to come together, he wrote.

The reality of sport today only corresponds to these Olympic principles to a certain extent. The fact that controversy exists is nothing new. Coubertin was already aware of it in his time. Stating lofty values has in the past often served as a means of covering up misguided efforts or imposing overriding economic interests, and this is still true today. Some of the ethical values attributed to sport appear, in reality, to be an expression of hypocrisy and two-faced morality. Because this was (and still is) the case, critics have pointed out the errors, political entanglements and economic interests involved in sport. Some predicted its downfall, and demanded that an end be put to the Games.

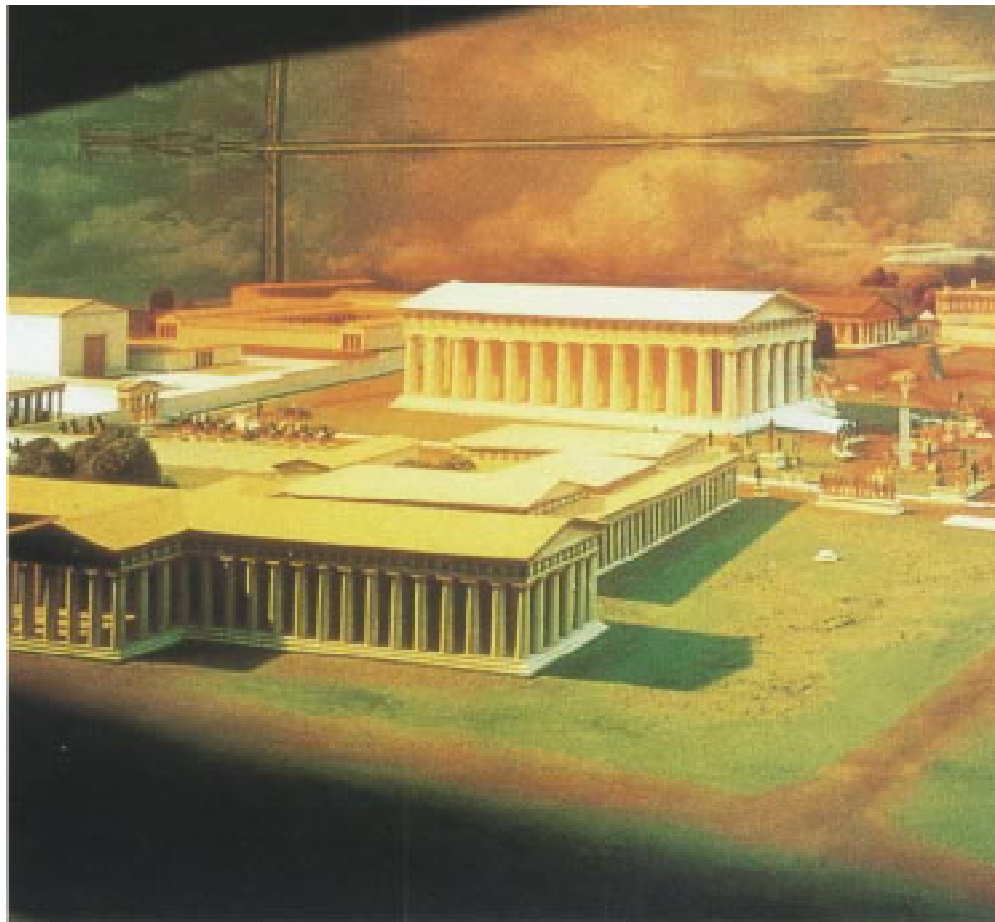
To others, Olympic sport seemed - and still seems to be - an area of special pedagogical opportunities. They see it as being linked to hope. Anyone who takes the aims of Olympic sport seriously is fully convinced that it can offer

a chance for personal development and evolution in addition to achievements in sport.

Such opportunities are still part of Olympic sport today, although it has become more difficult to draw benefit from them. The conditions under which Olympic principles should be followed in our time have become harsher. Top-level sport has not only grown in terms of quantity, but it has become, to a far greater extent than ever before, a political, economic, media and social event which not only arouses considerable public interest but is also tied up with various personal interests. Many would like to profit from the glitter of Olympic success - including those with no interest in sport but with a definite interest in the business it represents. In our media- and

business-oriented society, there is a public demand for sports performances and above all successes, and this is expressed as an expectation for ever-better results, ever-more-exciting competitions and ever-more-expensive sports events. The more forcefully the often misunderstood Olympic motto *cilium - altius - fortius* is stressed and linked to the principle of success, the greater the need (for those who have the means) to turn it into reality, and the greater the pressure brought to bear on the athletes. This brings with it the danger that the Olympic ideal will be used for non-Olympic purposes. Hans Lenk, a philosopher and Olympic champion, has therefore strongly recommended that *cilium - altius - fortius* should be followed by "*humanus*".

Scale model of the city of Olympia.



It is time to provide Olympic sport with a new definition and new legitimacy. We must find answers to questions regarding 'what the future will bring for Olympic sport and whether everything that is physically feasible is actually desirable, despite the risks of damage to the body, performance manipulation, business taking precedence over moral values and success over fairness, children being trained from early childhood, and so on. Sport today is no longer as it was when Coubertin developed his ideas. It has undergone a metamorphosis and become a "universal" phenomenon. For this reason, it is quite comprehensible that the same can be said of the traditional values and principles of Olympic sport, which cannot be fully adopted in our time without some modification. Some of them, however, need not be changed, since they are not specific to



sports but are general human principles. This applies particularly to the need to respect human dignity and to the recognition of personal integrity.

So what, in fact, does "Olympic" mean today?

Olympism is still an educational concept. It is aimed at sport and prowess as they are linked to clarity of thought and fairness of action and reaction. The Olympic Games and their sport performances are its finest form of expression. However, the same principle applies to all degrees of skill, in all age groups. This is the definition Coubertin endorsed. For him, top athletes were the ambassador-s of the principle, and the Olympic Games its embodiment on a world-wide level. But the principle was developed with the aim of providing Olympic and sports education for all. Olympism is a concept of performance and skill, but it stands for more than just those aspects which can be measured and evaluated. It stands for the new humanistic idea of self-fulfilment. Sport is a means of proving oneself. It is not the results that count, but the efforts made to achieve them, as Willi Daume once said in a speech before the Bad Boll Evangelical Academy.

Olympism is a concept of fairness. The concept of fairness raises sport above mere physical training, an aimless pastime or an undemanding pleasure. Obeying written and unwritten sports rules means placing sport on a higher level and the future of sport depends on whether it is led by this concept of fairness.

Olympism this is a concept of peace. It does not resolve conflicts, but is a model for handling conflicts. It favours the acceptance of different types of cultures and tolerance for ideological or religious differences, and condemns all forms of racial, sexual or ideological discrimination.

These ideas use "Olympic" concepts to define and outline a profile of sport as something which is both demanding and pedagogically significant. Without a

statement of values, this will not work. Values are equally essential both in giving sport a direction and in evaluating it. They are the basis, perhaps even the condition, for an Olympic sports culture. The fact that values are constantly criticized or used as a label means neither that they are wrong nor that they are unnecessary. The clearer and more unequivocal they are, the better their chances of being followed.

Looking back, Coubertin's Olympic project emerges as part of the global process of modernization. Coubertin used sport in England as an example, particularly for its pedagogical spirit. But British sport alone was not enough, and so he turned back towards Olympia, incorporating sport within a suitable and morally valuable philosophical concept and using this to achieve his main goal: that of crafting a pedagogical method or approach; an example for behaviour in other areas of life, and a motivation for all people to practise sport. Even efforts to achieve modest skills can attain the Olympic ideal, although they may not be called Olympic. By the same token, many things bearing the name "Olympic" do not deserve the title.

Many years ahead of his time, Coubertin addressed a problem that has become central in today's world: that of overcoming the ever-increasing gulf between the development of technical, scientific, intellectual and physical strength on the one hand and moral strength on the other and directing and controlling the one by the other; of anchoring virtues and values important in individual life and social cohabitation within daily life, experience and actions and providing a public and if possible world-wide model for this. For Coubertin, the model was the practice of sport based on Olympism. Was this Coubertin's vision? Yes, but his vision, to which no alternative has been found, has clearly taken on a greater urgency in today's world than it had in the past. For historical, political and pedagogical reasons, it is therefore still too early to bid Olympism farewell.