



# Verses like lanes



In athletics, it is the lanes, numbered from one to eight, that guide the feet of well-trained runners to their goal. In the same way, imagination and beauty are led and carried by the verses of poetry. These two movements share a common element: they both strive to be effective and successful. It is essential to achieve the best possible result. To be sure, in sport, the measure of success is the result, the record or victory, while in poetry, it is above all beauty.

But in sport, too, beauty has a part to play, which derives from art. In ancient times, the Olympic Games were the expression of a oneness, an altogether creative unity of spirit and body. In reviving these Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin drew on the ideals of the past; but at the same time he created more: he established a vision of the Games for the whole twentieth century, the century of rhythm and image.

At first, this newness was but a small speck; like the symbolic flag of the Games which the Baron himself designed; like the opening and the closing ceremonies. From this small seed, mighty trees have grown over the years. The Games today are a huge stadium event. They engender and bring forth works of art, and inspire emotions of the greatest intensity, albeit somewhat ephemeral, as inconstant as the experience of art, but repeatable. Thus, our games are a kind of *chronicle* in which humanity records - for eternity? - the spiritual, intellectual, philosophical and social experiences of its time.

How differently literature treated sport one hundred years ago... Then there was no penetration into the depths of the psyche, no expounding of moral imperatives. The notions used were as dif-

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ferent as the stadiums of Athens, Helsinki, Los Angeles, Rome and Munich. But how the Olympic ceremonies have developed and grown richer! How the beauty and rhythms of the presentation in the stadium have evolved, and how the pictorial quality of the sporting action has unfolded. Even the apparatus itself is often a work of art of our material culture. All the elements which enhance the aesthetic quality of the sporting occasion, and heighten the experience of participants and spectators alike, have come to the stadium from the almost boundless regions of art. Here, in the Olympic oval, hands stretch out to offer support and comradeship.

For great sport needs - it is in fact a prerequisite - a sphere of organized beauty which corresponds to it. By this I do not mean only architecture; the written word also plays a great role, the art of the well-turned phrase, hence literature. Poetry and prose alike.

At this point, I should like to recount something from my own experience: for a few years, I was in charge of the feature section of two Polish sports publications, *Olympic Discus* and *The Athlete*. I saw it as my job to find texts from Polish literature which were connected with sport, its content and images. Here, I mean sport in its widest sense, including everything connected with competition. This even allowed me to include jousting.

Parallel to this work, I compiled an anthology which I titled *Stadium of Words*. The collection contains almost everything that Polish poetry has produced about sport from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. More than 70 authors feature, from long-forgotten names to

some who are still writing today. There are famous names with a secure place in *les belles lettres*, literary prize-winners, many who write about sport only occasionally, and others who are enthralled by sport and who have never written about anything else.

You name them, they are in there! From the Renaissance, there is Jan Kochanowski, regarded as the father of Polish lyric poetry. Then come two great Romantics. Adam Mickiewicz and Cyprian Kamil Norwid. There are major poets from the twentieth century, the winner of the gold medal for literature at the Games of the IX Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928, Kazimierz Wierzyński; Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz; and the important Polish writer Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz.

How is it that so many artists of the word, whether romantically or analytically inclined, so often concern themselves with experiences that should really be reserved for athletes, the artists of strength, speed and the fighting spirit? Of the possible answers, two attempt to exhaust the subject. First, both art and sport have their origins in talent, and this in turn is sustained by the power of the imagination. Without imagination, there is neither art nor sport. Second, only those who possess character, determination and steadfastness - and who are driven by uncertainty, perhaps even fear - can pursue art and sport. As a poet, I am always concerned that the poem and its verses, into which I put my entire soul, thoughts and abilities, should succeed in expressing my deepest self; that it should express the truth and not deceive both me and my reader. As a young triple jumper, I was always terribly afraid, not of being beaten, but that I might not succeed in showing at

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that precise moment all that I was capable of.

I have never met a writer who, before composing the first few lines, dared to dream of what would happen to him after he had finished; nor any athlete who, before the competition, dared to think of how he would celebrate victory at the end, after crossing the finish line.

In this sense, verses composed of words are truly the running lanes of the poet. At the same time, sport imposes its own rules on the verses. A ballad can hardly recount a 100-metre race, as its elegiac flow is incompatible with the drumming staccato of the sprint. Likewise, the epic of a marathon cannot be crammed into a sonnet: the effect would be merely comical.

But the new forms of poetry, which are open to freely-structured language, free rhythms, any sequence of words and melody, lend themselves especially well to the modes of expression of contemporary sport. For this reason, I would timidly dare to hope that perhaps, after years of stagnation, the Olympic idea might once again devote itself to Beauty and record in the pages of the *chronicle* two experiences which for me are inseparable, those of sport and art.

The Stadium of Words is always open - as open as the one in Athens where, more than 100 years ago, the Olympic flame was kindled anew and in such a special way.

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