



# Professionalism and its implications for the Olympic Movement



*The Olympic Charter* is a document that sums up the philosophy, aims, traditions and realities of the Olympic

Movement. In the charter, it is clearly specified that sport serves the harmonious development of man by creating a philosophy of life.

Given that the Olympic Movement is a constellation of organizations which are permanent in nature, it generates traditions which, like boundary posts, link the past to the present and provide identity and continuity. Traditions are like roots that provide stability and nourishment: they allow you to grow without abandoning your place or ideals.

At the same time, the *Olympic Charter* also reflects reality. The rules are adapted to the society in which the charter's stated aims are to be pursued. Laws and rules are instruments created by society to help it achieve its objectives. The same objectives, when pursued at different moments in history, may require different mechanisms in order to be achieved. By the same token, laws and rules must be in keeping with the degree of development? both qualitative and quantitative, of the activity which they regulate.

The Olympic Movement uses the activity of sport as the means to achieve its supreme objective, which is no other than to improve the human condition of whoever practises it.

This concept has made sport a part of daily life for almost all the inhabitants of this planet. We find it everywhere, in

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every school and in every family. An important concept that we must emphasize at this point is that only the rule on participation of athletes in the Olympic Games has changed; there has been no change whatsoever in the philosophy of Olympism.

We could even embrace the view that the current rules are much more consistent with the Olympic principles of non-discrimination in that they do not allow any distinction based on political, racial or, in the case that concerns us, economic grounds.

At the present time, we have moved away from the "amateur" concept of the beginning of the century, according to which: "The gentleman amateur is someone who has received no financial remuneration for his sports participation and is not a manual worker". In this scheme of things, the amateur was first and foremost a "gentleman", which undoubtedly constituted a social rank. Let us not forget that, at that time, sport was considered to be a pastime of the nobility. In addition to the condition concerning absence of payment to participate, there was a further condition, namely that of not being a manual worker. These aspects concerned social class and were



*A course in field hockey (Olympic Solidarity).*

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linked with sports activity: manual labourers were marginalized owing to the belief that, because they required physical effort to earn their living, they were athletically more powerful. It was obvious that, in the Sunday regattas, the Thames boatmen who earned their living transporting goods from one bank of the river to the other would have beaten the young gentlemen students who rowed for amusement.

Today, it is also obvious that when Jim Thorpe was stripped of the gold medal earned with his performance as the world's best all-round athlete at the Games of the V Olympiad in Stockholm in 1912, there was a large measure of racism and prejudice involved, given that the athlete from the United States was an American Indian and that the US \$60 he had received was not for playing baseball but to cover his travel expenses to the place where the match was taking place. It is also worth pointing out that, contrary to what many believe, Pierre de Coubertin, who was President of the International Olympic Committee at the time, opposed the decision against Jim Thorpe, but was overruled by the opinion of the majority of his fellow members. The truth is that the founder of the modern Olympic Movement was a visionary, greatly in advance of the ideas of his time. He propounded the principle of "all sports for all", making it clear that there was no room for discrimination in Olympism.

The world has changed and so have the rules. We can be sure that, today, we are closer to the ideals that make the Olympic Movement strong, whenever and wherever we defend them with intelligence and balance. As in every human activity, success is rewarded to the best; and to be the best takes great dedication and hard work. Human development requires motivation and compensation for body and mind. Good work and the greatest feats are generally performed by the best., that is, by the "professionals". Being "professional" in a field can be synonymous with "work well done"; and

anything that is well done can be rewarded with compensation, both material and psychological.

If a "professional" musician who is capable of drawing beauty from an instrument but who must fully devote himself to his music whilst also earning a living, receives money for his concerts, the doors of the musical world will still remain open to him and he will not forfeit his reputation. If a highly skilled doctor saves lives and cures illnesses, acting ethically and in accordance with the Hippocratic oath, he too will be classified as an excellent "professional".

The engineer who builds, the school-teacher who teaches or the lawyer who pleads a case will also be considered as good professionals. Likewise, the athlete who is self-educated, who acts as a model, who fully devotes himself, who is an artist in his sport, the healer of his



*Jim Thorpe.*

own wounds, the engineer of his own life, and a teacher for society... is also a professional... and has the right to earn his living. In the final analysis, reality is not always as fair as is suggested here, but that is no reason to abandon our ideals. On the contrary, it is all the more reason to fight for them.

For all those reasons, one might consider that the key lies in the Olympic philosophy itself. The potential dangers that sometimes threaten sport, be they foul play, violence, drugs, money: etc., become all the more tangible the moment we depart from our philosophy.

Olympism is to sport what the soul is to the body, and the combination of the two is called life.

There are very fine examples of "amateurism" and "professionalism" in our sport; let us live with them. We have to understand that professionalism can affect the Olympic Movement only if we lack assiduity, as we sometimes do, in supporting the dissemination of the Olympic principles.

We must recognize that sport has developed tremendously over the past hundred years, in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Nevertheless, its essence, the real *raison d'être* and potential benefit of sports activity, namely its educational factor, which is spoken of often but not used often enough, has not developed at the same pace.

Professionalism in sport is the logical outcome of the pursuit of excellence, as in any other type of activity. As in any other type of activity, the danger arises when someone practising sport is a "poor professional".

Hence, we must recognize that the implications of professionalism in the Olympic Movement will depend in large measure on what we as leaders do or fail to do. Whether professionalism in sport is for the better or for the worse will therefore depend on us.

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