

Gymnastics

Right of reply*

We read Paolo David's article "Young athletes and competitive sport" in the December 1998/January 1999 issue of the Olympic Review with great interest and have a great deal of respect for the institution he represents.

Much of what he writes, be it in the form of observations, remarks or criticism coincides with the fundamental concerns of the FIG with regard to education and the physical and moral protection of children and adolescents who practise sport at any level.

However, although we entirely agree with the author when he describes certain facts, we feel obliged to make some comments based on some general rules derived from our principles. We must avoid making general statements

on the basis of a few exceptions and setting too much store by second-hand information obtained from controversial articles in the press, which is not too concerned with the scientific truth, or with the truth in general. Moreover, there is nothing to gain from an approach that extrapolates everything which is good, or everything which is bad, from insignificant or poorly focused investigations. On the contrary, we must shun dialectics that can lead to misinterpretations of the relationship between cause and effect. Take, for instance, the thousands of young girls throughout the world who suffer from anorexia. If one of them is a gymnast, the cause of her illness suddenly becomes the fact that she practises gymnastics, and if she is

famous, gymnastics is soon seen as a factor which causes anorexia. This type of reasoning is far too simplistic. Indeed we know - and therein lies the paradox - that sports, including gymnastics, are also an excellent form of prevention or treatment for this particular illness.

This is a fact which applies to all sports and to society in general: Mr David is right to say that there are cases of deviant practices in gymnastics, but we would remind him that they are exceptions and not the rule. The FIG condemns and fights against any such practices in sport including over-training, excessively result-oriented training, and non-respect of the athlete as a human being both from a physiological and psychological point of view and with regard to doping, etc.

The FIG has made a point of promoting a policy of moral and physical health that benefits its 125 affiliated countries and some 35 million active gymnasts. Coordinating such a vast operation on a world level is no mean feat. The FIG is pursuing a high-level scientific and medical research programme in close coordination with some internationally renowned universities, including a nutrition programme, a growth programme, a programme for developing educational material and protective material for apparatus, a technical training programme adapted to all levels of practice and respecting all criteria linked to age

(the Age group programme); the FIG delegates its leading experts throughout the world to provide training for coaches not only at a technical level but also to ensure that biological and humanistic principles are respected (FIG and Olympic Solidarity development fund).

Given that the key figure is the coach, the FIG has set up an Academy for training coaches which operates on all five continents. The FIG's 1999 world medical and technical congress will focus on protecting health by improving the quality of equipment; its last congress was on the issue of "growth and gymnastics".

The FIG has made it its duty and principle, not only in its statute, but in all its actions too, to ensure that the practice of gymnastics at all levels respects the participant, especially the child, as a human being.

Education is its basic argument but any dangerous or unhealthy devious practice is already punished with exemplary sanctions.

While denouncing such practices, we should not forget that the vast majority of people who do gymnastics find in it the physical and psychological enjoyment which they seek.

Suggested reading: Doctor Michel Léglise - Member of the FIG's Executive Board. *Olympic Review* XXV-7 February/March 1996 "Young athletes and competitive sports".

*By the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG).

