

## ***AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC ACADEMY***

*by Phillip Barker*

To take part in the Olympic Games is a rare privilege, the accolade of Olympian still one of the most worthwhile in the modern world. It is however an achievement which calls for sporting excellence and good fortune in equal measure. Olympism like sport itself is intended to embrace everybody. How then to achieve that aim?

For the last 35 years the Olympic movement has had a wonderful institution designed to spread the ideals of Olympism to all - the International Olympic Academy (IOA). The Youth of the World have made their way to Ancient Olympia in Greece, to take part in the annual sessions of the Academy. Over the years it has become an Olympic studies center - a magnificent complex set amongst the sacred olive groves and open to all with an interest in the Olympic ideal. Coubertin himself had long wished that there should be an Olympic institution at which questions relating to Olympic matters could be addressed. Back in 1927 while in Greece he discussed the idea with a friend at the University of Athens, "I believe a center of Olympic studies would aid the preservation and progress of my work more than anything else, and would keep it from the false paths which I fear."

Coubertin died in 1937 but the idea was kept alive by Ioannis Ketseas (GRE) and Carl Diem (GER) when they suggested the formal establishment of an Olympic Academy. The seeds were sewn in 1936 when Diem organized a study program at the Berlin Olympics which drew an international attendance of over 1,000. Two years later, they took their idea to the Hellenic Committee who backed the idea enthusiastically. There was an equally warm response from the IOC but then came war. In 1947 as the world slowly returned to normality, Ketseas and the Hellenic Olympic Committee took the idea to the IOC where it was encouragingly received. Two years later at the IOC session in Rome, Diem and Ketseas presented a paper they had worked on and the IOC entrusted the establishment and organization of the IOA to the Hellenic Olympic Committee.

It took another twelve years for the idea to become reality but in 1961 the first session of the IOA took place. The sessions were led by Dr. Kleanthis Palaeologos (GRE) and Professor Franz Lodz (GER). They took as their subject Olympism and track and field coaching. Lectures were conducted "*al fresco*" and the participants slept in tents.

There was little money available to make concrete this new institute but helped by funds from the Greek benefactors of the IOA and later by Olympic solidarity the center gradually developed. In 1962 Dr. Otto Szymiczek (GRE) became Dean of the Academy. He and Palaeologos had been friends since the 1920's and both men were to serve the Academy over three decades. A seven-man council (Ephoria) was entrusted with the planning and organization of the sessions and the first president was appropriately Ioannis Ketseas. When Ketseas and Diem passed away, a monument was erected to recall their great contribution to the Olympic Movement. In 1967 the first buildings went up at Olympia and over the next few years lectures halls, a dining area and accommodation for students and lecturers appeared as the IOA became a significant landmark beneath Mount Kronos.

Each year the number of participants increased and so too did the diversity of subjects addressed by the Academy. In 1981 the IOC recognized 20 years of the IOA by awarding it the Olympic Cup at their congress in Baden Baden. This was duly presented the following year. By 1986, the IOA had celebrated the first quarter century of its existence, and there were awards of the Olympic Order for two loyal servants, the long serving Dean Otto Szymiczek and the first vice president of the Ephoria, Dr. Palaeologos.

The IOA President at this time was the distinguished Greek Academic Professor Nikos Nissiotis. An IOC member in Greece until his tragic death in a road crash in 1986, he was the longest serving president of the Academy and was accorded the rare honor of the Olympic Order awarded posthumously. He wrote of the Olympic Academy that "You will become a miniature replica of the Universal family . . . (without) any religious political or racial discrimination. Thus you will be called to be taught and to teach the Olympic ideals in an abstract manner but also to implement them directly." Over the fortnight at the session the bonds of friendship do indeed develop tangibly.

Outwardly, the site has changed little over the last thirty years, although sadly a security fence now surrounds the stele which serves as a memorial to Baron Pierre de Coubertin. There are more positive differences, for example the IOA has its youngest ever Dean, Kostas Georgiadis.

In 1994 the new Congress hall was declared open by Mr. Nikos Filaretos, IOC member in Greece and Chairman of the IOC Commission on Olympic Education and the International Olympic Academy. Throughout the summer the center at Olympia plays host to a myriad of sessions. Since 1970 the center has staged programs for journalists, educationalists, coaches, sportsmedical officers and NOC officials - a wide range of Olympic related study. The centerpiece remains the annual session of the International Olympic Academy. This typically happens in July every year. In 1996 the theme will be Olympism 1896-1996. Delegates gather in Athens and are taken to see the national treasures of the Acropolis before the opening ceremony which takes place on the hill of Pnyx above Athens at dusk. Pnyx was one of the great meeting places above the city and it is appropriate that it is the setting for the first formal gathering of participants. Atop the adjoining hill is the Acropolis, nestling in the valley below is the Panathenaic Stadium used for the Olympics in 1896. The Olympic Hymn of Samarou and Palamis is played, words sung in Greek by a male voice choir. It is one of the most beautiful and moving moments imaginable.

The words of welcome come from the Greek government and the Hellenic Olympic Committee before the session is opened by the President of the IOC. Then the parties depart for Olympia crossing the Corinth canal. The Dean of the Academy is there to welcome the delegates in Olympia and wreaths are laid at memorials to Coubertin, Diem and Ketseas. Three flags adorn the entrance to the IOA - the Greek standard, the Olympic Rings and the flag of the Academy - rings interlocked in gold with initials of the Academy. The days at Olympia are founded on lectures which center on the theme of the session and discussion groups, but time is also made available for sports competitions. Swimming, volleyball, football, basketball and tennis are widely played. It is not necessary to be an Olympian to participate but those who have been to the Games are encouraged to pass on their Olympic experience to others. In 1986 an example came to be an innovation. The theme chosen was Olympism and Art. The IOA was able to call upon Robert Fitzpatrick (USA) who had organized the cultural activities at the Los Angeles Olympics. Ever since that time a permanent art workshop has been in place in Olympia for the duration of the session, led by the Olympic artist Kevin Whitney (GBR), a painter, and Elizabeth Hanley (USA), a dance teacher, and there are moves afoot to develop the program still further.

There are also demonstrations of indigenous sports such as Faustball and Icelandic (Glima) Wrestling which have now become a valued part of the session. There is an opportunity for the scholar to carry out research in a library study area.

The 1985 session saw the development of a past participants association, the IOA Alumni Association, and their working sessions organised every two years are now another important aid to keeping Olympism alive between game. In 1996 the IOA was represented by the association in the Olympic torch relay festivities. Days are long and golden - they can begin with the view of the sunrise above Mount Kronos - or to swim as the sun gilds the mountain tops at the beginning of what will surely be another glorious Olympic day beneath the benevolent and reassuring sight of the Olympic rings.

The IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch has been a staunch supporter since taking up his office in 1980. He called the IOA “the spiritual center of Olympism.” Many Olympic competitors have attended down the years. Amongst the first to attend was the great Emil Zatopek (TCH) to be followed by the likes of Miruts Yifter (ETH), the Bounding Basque Jean Borotra (FRA), Svetlana Otsetova (BUL), Pirjo Häggman (FIN) and Peter Snell (NZL). The late Erich Kamper was one of many eminent journalists and historians to lecture at the sessions. Participants are selected by the individual NOCs who have various methods of selecting candidates to go to Olympia. Often they are chosen by written essay or interview.

As far as I know, that great Olympian Jesse Owens never took part in the IOA but his words, spoken at the 1976 Montreal Olympics seem totally appropriate to the work of the IOA, “This is where you break bread with the rest of the World.”

Those who have experienced the Olympic Spirit at the IOA will know exactly what he meant.