

"THE IDEALS OF OLYMPISM" *abstract*

Speech by the Russian Olympic Committee President, Vitaly Smirnov, 1998

PIERRE DE COUBERTIN - THE HUMANIST

Olympism was proposed in the late Nineteenth Century as the humanistic ideal for the forthcoming Twentieth Century. Its idea was to educate through the provision and encouragement of sport as one of the humanities.

Pierre De Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, has been called 'the Olympic Humanist'. Professor Conrado Durántez, an Olympic Historian, has praised De Coubertin for giving *"the citizens of the 20th Century the extraordinary opportunity to bring together in perfect accord the enriching spirit of Olympism and a festival of peaceful competition held every four years and generating not only unity but mutual respect"* (Durántez, 1994:9).

But, have the *Ideals of Olympism* been achieved ?

Upon reviewing the 'Fundamentals of Olympism' and specifically those best related to the humanist ideals, it could be argued that the theory of Olympism in the modern era never quite achieved its ideals: racism, politics or commercialism seemed to get in the way. Examples of this downfall are demonstrated in the following paper.

The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games are calling themselves the "Athletes Games". There is an endeavour to return at least part of the motive behind staging the Games back to the original thought, that they are about athletes coming together every four years to compete in peace and harmony.

Notwithstanding that Olympism has achieved a degree of goodness in the world, the focus of its ideals in a practical sense needs to be on the rights of humans: as athletes, as spectators and as communities. Can we do better in the 21st Century ?

Pierre de Coubertin - the Humanist, and his Ideals for Olympism

Olympism was proposed in the late Nineteenth Century as the humanistic ideal for the forthcoming

Twentieth Century. It was an idea conceived by Baron Pierre de Coubertin¹ a French born aristocrat, and a mediocre yet tenacious sportsman.

Olympism had the idea to educate through the provision and encouragement of sport as one of the humanities. Its ideal was to transcend individual and national pride in competition. However, as the journalist Damian Grace pointed out in his article *"No Winners in the moral Olympics"*:

"The Games have become less an expression of the ideals of Olympism than an opportunity to prove that winning is everything. Getting a result for sponsors, national pride, the athletes and the IO& is what the Games are about. Would a modern John Landy stop mid-race to assist a fallen Ron Clarke in the Sydney Olympics? Unlikely" (Grace, 1999).

However, de Coubertin had hoped that the peacekeeping mission of the Games would be an important model for the world, stating:

"Every four years, the restored Olympic Games . . . [will] little by little dissipate the ignorance in which people live with respect to others, an ignorance which breeds hate, compounds misunderstanding and hastens events down the barbarous path towards merciless conflict" (Durántez, 1994:22).

De Coubertin also did not want sport to be exclusive, that is, to be available only to the rich and those with idle time. He wanted all sports to be available to all people, and because of this was accused of 'Utopian lunacy' for such idealism. He acknowledges this criticism and refutes it by stating "All sports for all people . . . utopian perhaps, that we should endeavour to make a reality" (Durántez, 1994:30).

It was De Coubertin's lifelong commitment to implement such ideals as noted above that led to his being called "the Olympic Humanist". Professor Conrado Durántez² states this is so because he gave us "The citizens of the 20th Century, the extraordinary

opportunity to bring together in perfect accord the enriching spirit of Olympism and a festival of peaceful competitions held every four years and generating not only unity but mutual respect" (1994:9).

However, is this really what de Coubertin and his followers have achieved this Century? And, have the ideals of Olympism been achieved ?

It can be argued that the answer is 'only in theory' if one considers the 'Fundamentals of Olympism' included in the Olympic Charter. Those of the nine 'Fundamentals of Olympism' that are specific to the humanist ideals of Olympism are as follows:

1. "Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in the effort, the educational value of good example and respect for the universal fundamental ethical principles.
2. The goal of Olympism is to place everywhere sport at the service of the harmonious development of Man, with a view to encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.
3. The goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised without discrimination of any kind in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with the spirit of friendship and fair play.
4. The practice of Sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport in accordance with his or her needs" (IOC, 1997:8).

The Olympic Games have provided competitors and witnesses alike with moments of glory that have been soul satisfying. However, this is not to say that athletes always meet in a 'festival of peaceful competition' where they generate unity and mutual respect for their fellow athletes.

In fact, it could be argued that the theory of Olympism in the modern era has never quite achieved its ideals as racism, politics or commercialism seem to get in the way. Following are just a few examples of where de Coubertin's reality has fallen short of the Olympic ideal:

1912, Stockholm: Jim Thorpe became a hero of the Olympic Games, however there was an element of

racist stigma attached to his hero status because he was labeled as a 'native'. Within a year of the Stockholm Games, Thorpe was no longer classed as an "amateur" sportsman, a pre-requisite for Olympic competitors at that time. De Coubertin claimed that "a number of people . . . maintained that Thorpe was an American citizen of Red Indian origin and that was why he had been used as a scapegoat" (Durántez, 1994:31). Thorpe did not compete at another Olympic Games.

1920, Antwerp These Games were held soon after the destruction of World War I, when the wounds of participating countries were far from healed. This resulted in these Games having a strong military influence and being highly nationalistic with countries strongly competing against one another.

The Statue planned for the entrance gate to the Stadium - and as depicted on the official posters - was a discus thrower. However this was changed to a statue of Belgian soldier throwing a grenade. This would surely have heightened nationalist fervour.

1936, Berlin: National Socialists commandeered the popularity of the Games to promote "the hollow facade of a new and better Germany" to the rest of the world (Constable, 1996:03). Unbeknown to the world at that time, this was a farce of human rights.

1972, Munich: Political terrorism precluded the Olympic Movement being able to "contribute to building a peaceful and better world". The Olympic ideals of Athletes practising sport "without discrimination", in the "spirit of friendship and fair play" were thwarted (Miller, 1992:11).

1980, Moscow: An American-led boycott was held against the Games in protest of Russia's invasion of Afghanistan and violation of their human rights. This is an interesting paradox because by protesting the violation of Human Rights, the boycottees were violating the ideals of Olympism.

1996, Atlanta: Upon an agreement with the IOC to accept teams representing both China and Taiwan at the Olympic Games, the Taiwanese flag (at China's insistence) is not allowed to be displayed.

1996 Badminton Finals: China Vs Taiwan. A Taiwanese national, residing in America was gaoled for displaying one Taiwanese flag amongst a sea of Chinese flags at the finals being attended by IOC President Samaranch and Chinese IOC officials.

GROWING COMMERCIALISM:

Since the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games in particular, commercialism has been more prevalent at each Games. Whilst sponsorship has contributed to raising the profile and audience participation of the Games, the question remains whether this influence is diluting the true meaning and the true ideals of Olympism. For example, commercialism favours the sponsorship of 'elite and bankable personalities' over the Olympic ideal of equality for all athletes.

However, IOC President Samaranch reasons that through commercialism, the symbols of the Olympic Games (i.e. five rings, flag and flame) bring to mind the world united in peace and sport - "That is our [the Olympic Movement's] motto and philosophy, and we are trying to do much more than stage a Games every two years" (Miller,1992:18).

The few examples shown above lead to the question: 'Will the Olympic Movement have learned enough lessons from this Century to better honour, implement and preserve the ideals for which it stands?'

As de Coubertin had hoped, perhaps the Games have "little by little dissipate[d] the ignorance in which people live with respect to others". For example, the past decade has seen the acceptance of Eastern Bloc nations and South Africa into the Olympic fold.

Therefore, whilst Olympism has achieved a degree of success for its human rights ideals, more attention will be required in the 21st Century to the rights of humans - as athletes, as spectators and as communities - rather than continuing the current focus on sponsors, the media and the bureaucracy of the IOC and sporting organisations.

Whether the 2000 Games are patented as the last Games of the 20th Century or the first of the new millennium, they are nevertheless at a turning point in history for the Olympic Movement which must recognise that the rules and fundamental principles reflect the society in which they are invented.

The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games are calling themselves the "Athletes Games". By this the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) mean to provide "an environment which will enable athletes to perform at their peak" (SOCOG, 1999:8). There is an endeavour to return at least part of the motive behind staging the Games back to the original thought, that they are about

athletes coming together every four years to compete in peace and harmony.

If SOCOG is successful in this endeavour, then the Olympic symbols will indeed invoke thoughts of the youth of the world united in peace and sport. Hopefully we will learn with time that these symbols also stand for other ideals, such as 'encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity'.

Then perhaps, Durántez comments can be updated to offer "*the citizens of the 21st Century the extraordinary opportunity ... [for] a festival of peaceful competitions ... generating not only unity but mutual respect!*"

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