
YOUNG, DAVID C. *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Pp. xv, 252. Notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cb.

David Young, a professor of classics at the University of Florida, is a scholar on a mission. Specifically, he wants to rescue from comparative oblivion three men he sees as the “true” founders of the modern Olympic movement: Panagiotis Soustas, Evangelis Zappas, and, especially, Dr. William P. Brookes. Soustas was a Greek-born poet whose romantic nationalism led him to call for a revival of the ancient Greek Olympics as early as the 1830s. Zappas, a member of the Greek anti-Ottoman resistance forces, moved to Romania in 1831, became a wealthy businessman, and financially supported Soustas’s attempts to resuscitate the Olympic movement. In fact, what Young calls “the first Zappas Olympiad” (p. 13) was held in Athens in 1859.

But Young’s most prominent Olympic hero is an obscure medical doctor from Much Wenlock, Shropshire, England: one William Penny Brookes. Dedicated to improving “the lot of the English working class in his area,” in early 1850 Dr. Brookes established the Wenlock Olympian Class in order to encourage “out-door recreation,” including annual “public Meetings for skill in athletic exercise,” at which prizes would be awarded (pp. 8-9). In October of that year, the first annual Wenlock Olympic Games were held, with “nine events and . . . cash prizes for each victor” (p. 9). According to Young, these games, along with the Zappas Olympiad, directly and clearly influenced Pierre de Coubertin, the French aristocrat who has unjustly been credited with founding the modern games.

Indeed, Young spends much of the book pointing out the direct and indirect connections between Brookes’s ideas and those of Coubertin. The Frenchman corresponded with Brookes, and Brookes encouraged Greek officials to listen to

the baron's proposals for an Olympic revival. Young insists that Coubertin adopted many of the Englishman's ideas, especially in regard to the games' location in Athens, their international scope, and their emphasis on brotherhood. In perhaps the most poignant part of the book, Young notes that when Brookes's dream finally became reality in 1896, Coubertin never publicly mentioned the doctor's role, ideas, or friendship. Apparently, the Frenchman's ego would not allow him to share the glory.

If Brookes is Young's hero, clearly Coubertin is a villain of sorts. In Young's telling, he comes across as a vain poseur who petulantly wants things his own way. He not only ignored Brookes's role in reviving the games, he contributed little to the day-to-day planning of the 1896 spectacle, apparently out of pique because he suspected that "his own name might not be prominent enough in the Athens preparations" (p. 124). Nonetheless, Young does finally (and somewhat grudgingly) grant Coubertin his place in the sun: "Coubertin's. . .Olympic efforts in many ways saved Soustas's and Brookes's life work, which might have otherwise been in vain. He picked up the torch" (p. 169).

The Modern Olympics serves as a very useful corrective that will certainly influence sports historians to revise parts of their lectures on the origin of the modern Olympic movement. Young's research is impeccable; he has scoured the archives, including the Brookes Papers, which "are housed (at least as of 1991) in an old trunk in a second-story room of the Much Wenlock Corn Exchange Building" (p. 173). Like many minor pioneers, however, Young is almost too excited about his discoveries. Coubertin probably deserves more credit than Young wants to give him. Moreover, to prove his point, he too often resorts to words like "surely" when he doesn't have direct evidence (p. 10). His prose can also become excessively breathless and portentous at times; in quoting from one Coubertin letter, for example, he writes: "This previously unknown letter has such remarkable historical importance that I quote portions" (p. 113). Finally, one wearies of the detail. Do we really need a two-page list of the winners in the 1866 London "Olympics" (pp. 36-37)? In other words, this work might have been more successful and convincing as a 30-page article than as a 250-page book. But we can forgive Young his excesses. His thoroughness and passion make this an important contribution to this one aspect of the history of sport.

—Anthony O. Edmonds
Ball State University