
A String of Pearls: Avery Brundage Discourses 1929- 1972.

by
JOHN A. LUCAS
The Pennsylvania State University
(*John R. Betts Address*)

Prologue

During the last quarter century the most important sports leader in the world has been Mr. Avery Brundage of Chicago, Illinois. If this statement brings instant rise to argument from some, then certainly all voices will be silent when he is looked upon as the most controversial and least understood sportsman in the world during these same years. Avery Brundage has been called a scurrilous capitalist, a fascist, a communist, a Nazi lover, a bigot, a racist, an unfeeling millionaire — a thoroughly unlikable old curmudgeon. In a quieter voice, and usually not in North America, he has been called a great athlete, magnificent sports leader, connoisseur of art, an idealist, a loyal American and a cosmopolitan — the last link with the essence of sport and the pure play concept.

Discourses 1929-1972 — Lustrous and consistent

Of Scotch-English ancestry, Avery Brundage was born in Detroit on September 28, 1887, received a degree in civil engineering from The University of Illinois in 1909, and competed in the 1912 Olympic Games decathlon and pentathlon. Plunging into the business world, the poor boy Brundage made a million dollars by the time he was thirty. From 1929-1952 he served as a tough but brilliant sport administrator of the Western Conference Athletic body, the Big Ten Alumni Association, the A.A.U., the American Olympic Committee, and member of the International Olympic Committee. From 1952-1972, he served with distinction as president of the I.O.C.

The melding of physical fitness, flourishing intelligence, and a kind of omniscient fair play marked Brundage's conception of the Olympic Ideal and of amateur sport. Professionalized athletics, or glamorous commercial entertainment, as he called it, is simply structurally incapable of such lofty human ambition. It was to be his theme for fifty years.

Epilogue

Lord Killanin of Ireland is the new Olympic chief. Brundage continues an active retirement. He will probably be remembered more fondly when he is gone than during his half-century of sports administration. He continues to view the Olympic Games as a unique and private affair; no one is required to, and no one has the right to participate in them except in full compliance with an Olympic Code. Brundage himself is revitalized after each Olympics; he continues to have faith in idealized sport and the human race. In his own peculiar way, he prays for peace. "Whatever happens in the world," he once said. "the dream does not wholly die. The sportsmanship of strength, of skill, of justice and of gentleness survives and will continue to survive." Ever so long ago, while a college undergraduate, the young Brundage wrote an essay in the school paper called, "The Football Field as a sifter of man." Man's "virgin nature" is exposed and strengthened in honorable athletic combat, he said. For over sixty-five years he has had no reason to change his mind. Music critic Paul Henry Lang once said that "Art is neither mere performance nor a commodity that can be administered along profitable business lines." For such a long time, Avery Brundage, too, has been saying that pure sport is much more than entertainment. He once told Robert Creamer of *Sports Illustrated* — his arms spread wide:

'What can't sport teach? What can't it achieve? You can't say this, because people wouldn't understand what you mean. But amateurism is a sort of religion.' Then he was off again in his driving sprint, across the lobby and into the restaurant, his shoulders squared, his chin out, looking, as always, like a man carrying a banner.

Now in his eighty-sixth year, having weathered all the slings and arrows as well as universal accolades, Avery Brundage's life and significance gives rise to a new Song of Solomon: For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.