
A Touch of Genius

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Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, has become a controversial figure in sport history. He is revered by Olympic enthusiasts for his far-reaching vision and scorned by Olympic critics for his unrealistic views on amateurism and women's sport. Disregarding these controversies over Coubertin, a careful analysis of his blend of ancient and modern culture and sport in his vision of the modern Olympic Games reveals a touch of genius — an intuitive and imaginative combination of the old and the new.

Coubertin selected four elements of the ancient Games to incorporate into the modern Games. First was the basic concept represented at Olympia, the very notion of a special competition set above and apart from other competitions — Olympic Games! Coubertin also utilized the Olympiad time period of the ancient Games. Third, the International Olympic Committee is patterned after the administrative organization of the ancient Olympics. To emphasize the extraordinary qualities which set today's Games apart from other modern athletic events, Coubertin selected the fourth element to emulate — the quasi-religious ceremonies, rituals, and symbols.

Coubertin found it necessary to modify many aspects of the ancient ceremonies, rituals, and symbols. In addition he adapted two other ancient customs. In the modern era, Coubertin desired world-wide competition. To achieve this cities were to be responsible for the games to emphasize that country was not competing against country. He wished the Games to be open to all male amateur athletes regardless of race, religion, or political beliefs. The other major change which revealed Coubertin's sense of the times was his insistence that the programs of the modern Games reflect the contemporary sport world.

Coubertin did not attempt to replicate the ancient Olympic Games. He carefully designed the modern Games, retaining some characteristics and modifying or changing others to capture the quintessence of a great, quadrennial, world-wide athletic event. He displayed a touch of genius in creating the basic framework of the modern Olympic Games.