

From Amateurism to Non-Professionalism in the Olympic Games

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When Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic games in 1894, he set a noble aim for Olympism: “The development of the physical and moral qualities which are the two foundations of amateur sport” (Bay, 1980). Little did he know that less than one hundred years later, the word amateur would be stricken from the Olympic Eligibility Code (Rule 26) and its by-laws, and replaced with the word “non-professional”. The purpose of this paper is to examine the evolution of the term amateurism as it applies to the Olympic Games.

In the past ninety years, the term amateurism has undergone extreme changes in terms of definition. The early definition of an amateur stated that “an amateur is one who has not

entered in an open competition for either a stake, or has not competed with or against a professional for any prize” (Vanderzwagg, 1976).

In 1928, the Olympic Committee came up with a new definition of amateur. This definition stated that “an athlete must not be a professional in the sport for which he is entered and must not have received reimbursement or compensation for loss of salary” (Vanderzwagg, 1976). The International Olympic Committee was seeking a means to cover themselves amidst a growing trend toward professionalism, and at the same time was reluctant to give up on the concept of amateurism as a worthwhile ideal.

As time passed, many changes took place in the definition of the word “amateur”. In 1980, the eligibility rule had again been changed to read more simply. The revision of Rule 26 says that athletes are eligible to participate in the Olympic games and at the same time “earn as much money as they wish, capitalize on their fame, and endorse products. Permission must be obtained from their sport federation and Olympic authorities to do all of the above” (Lucas, 1984). This definition is quite a change from the early definition of an amateur competing for the love of the game without thought of reward or payment of any kind.

From recent literature, it seems that the Olympic games will soon be opened to all qualified athletes. Open Olympic games will abolish the distinction between those who sign a legal contract stating that they are paid athletes, and between those who have no such contract. Only athletic skill will distinguish an Olympic athlete from one who is not eligible. Regardless of who competes in the games, it is hoped that the Olympic ideals, rules, and ethics will continue in the future.