

## BOOK REVIEWS

***Pierre de Coubertin: Pròleg de Juan Antonio Samaranch*** by Andreu Merck Varela. (Col·lecciò Pere Vergés de Biografies, vol. 39, Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1992). Reviewed by Arnd Krüger, Georg-August-University, Göttingen, Germany.

From an almost non-descript little booklet published at the time of the Olympic Games in an Olympic city you would not expect anything surprising, even if the President of the IOC writes an Introduction. I bought the book three years ago, simply for curiosity's sake and as an ardent book collector. It said on the cover: "*La primera biografia catalana del pare de l'olimpisme modern.*" Anything "first" is worthwhile having as a collector - even if *Catalan* may not be your first choice as a language.

But I must apologize to the author Varela, as his sixth sport -- and primarily Olympic -- history book does contain untapped Olympic information which should have made me plow through the book right-away. Unfortunately, I had underestimated the little gem in the first place. Much, of course, is the standard, though professionally well constructed Olympic history - it speaks well for the author, for he has used decent secondary literature from five different languages. But what is really new, is the Barcelona and Catalunya angle. Here, the author uses local but previously (at least internationally) unknown photographs and sources, including letters to and by Pierre de Coubertin himself.

We are all aware of the special *Olympic geography* which Coubertin had defined and which could differ from political geography. Through Coubertin's conception of Olympic Games, Finland and Bohemia participated with separate teams although politically each were parts of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, respectively. Poland was a nation, divided into three parts (Russian, Prussian, and Austrian) and had no Olympic team. Although in football and cross country the British have had national separate representation of England, (Northern) Ireland, Scotland, and Wales in the Olympic Games they chose or -- as in the case of most of Ireland -- were forced to have a united team.

Peter O'Connor, world record holder in the long jump, tried to establish a separate Irish team in Athens at the 1906 Games. Prince George, the chief organizer of the Games, was reputed to have said that this was not possible unless Ireland had its own Parliament. After his victory in the long jump, when the flag was being raised, O'Connor, who was also a very good gymnast, climbed up the twenty foot flagpole to wave the green Irish flag in protest. O'Connor was just reclaiming the same right as the Finns had within the Russian Empire, but the case did not go well with the English press.<sup>1</sup> The anglophile Coubertin, who was not in attendance, would not have liked such an act either. (Although personally Coubertin enjoyed such actions as perfect expressions of the *débrouillardise* which he cherished so much).<sup>2</sup> Ian Jobling and others have shown that for some time it was even discussed

among British Commonwealth members to organize an all-Empire team in order to compete with the Americans in terms of numbers of medals won.<sup>3</sup> But what about the others?

From a German perspective, the Bavarian team that appeared at the Paris Olympics in 1900 is not indicative of long exhibited Bavarian nationalism, but simply of mismanagement. The Bavarians -- at least to my knowledge -- never attempted to set up a separate national Olympic team.<sup>4</sup>

The various levels of "nationalism," from local city *patrie*, via the traditional local region, to the nation in the sense of the nineteenth century has never been fully studied in sportive terms, although it can be worthwhile as Grant Jarvie and Graham Walker have shown in the case of Scotland.<sup>5</sup>

Varela examines the situation for Catalunya. You will remember that Samaranch, a Catalan himself, addressed the Olympic audience at the Barcelona Games not only in Spanish but also in Catalan. Although some of the division of Spain goes back to the times when Catalunya (with the capital Barcelona) was basically Aragon fighting the Castille Kingdom with the capital Madrid, the drive for independence of the Catalan people has existed through many centuries. Even in Franco's fascist Spain, when the Catalan language and culture were suppressed, the Catalans rightfully complained that they were earning the money Madrid was spending. Today, the Spanish regions have a high degree of autonomy and readily make use of it in a Europe so rich in "Regions." The Catalan language is again widely used but, although it is spoken by more citizens of Europe than, for instance, Danish, the latter is an official language of the European Union, while the former is but a "regional" language.

In the 4th part of the book (pp. 137-48) Varela deals with Coubertin and the Catalunya question. From 1912 onward Josep Elias Juncosa, senior sports writer of the Barcelona *La Veu de Catalunya Daily*, corresponded with Coubertin, founded his "regional" Olympic Committee (*Comitè Regional Olímpic Català*) under the chairmanship of the Marquis d'Alfarràs and the Marquis d'Allella, and tried to convince Coubertin that Catalunya was a "nation." On the other hand, Coubertin insisted that there was only one Olympic Committee per country, that the country was Spain and that Elias should cooperate with the Marquis de Villamejor, the IOC Member for Spain from 1912-21.

Coubertin had exchanged honors with the young King Alfonso XIII, after he had praised him in the *Revue Olympique* (February 1906). The Spanish King received the *Diplôme Olympique* (11th recipient), and Coubertin, the Order of Carlos III, one of the more prestigious Orders Spain had to offer. So it might just be understandable that Coubertin accepted the royal position in the case of Spain. After Alfonso had granted considerable autonomy to Catalunya in 1913, there would have been a theoretical chance for a separate Catalunan team for 1916 -- or what were Coubertin's criteria in his Olympic geography?

It is surprising to note that, although three Spanish professors from the (Northern Spanish) Asturian University of Oviedo, Adolfo Buylla, Adolfo Posado and the rector of the university, Aniceto Buylla, were present when the IOC was formed in June 1894, none of them became a member of the original IOC. Coubertin was not just looking to have a large amount of countries represented on the Committee, there also

had to be a minimal infrastructure for sports. There was some physical education along the lines of Amoros in Spain, but that was not what Coubertin was looking for, and, after all, sport in Spain, in the British sense of the word, was still minimal. As the Austrians are freedom loving as the Catalunyan, the situation for the separate representation of the Spanish Nations (*regions* for the Centralists) might have been different if they had been invited by Coubertin to join. When the Castillian Count Meijorado de l Campo became the first IOC-Member for Spain in 1902, Madrid formally took over the "Olympic" leadership in relation to Barcelona -- although in actual athletic terms Barcelona was at least even. Although a lone Spanish rowing boat participated in the 1900 Paris Olympics, Spain's actual representation does not commence until 1920. When the first Spanish team (60 members) took part in the Antwerp Olympic Games in 1920, it actually consisted of two separate teams: swimmers, waterpolo and track & field athletes came from Barcelona; marksmen and footballers from Madrid.

Villamejor wrote a desperate letter to Coubertin on April 15, 1920 in which he warned the IOC-president of the attempts of Catalunya and the Basques to send separate teams to Antwerp. Basque separatists have in the past been even more violent than Catalunyan separatists (eventually with the bombing of the FTA guerrillas). As the Spanish government had not granted the requested travel subsidy of 230,000 pesetas for the Spanish Olympic team to go to Antwerp, it was difficult to send a Spanish team at all. In this situation the rich regions were willing to send their own teams as "independent nations." Although eventually a united Spanish team went to Antwerp, Elias used the possibility of meeting Coubertin in Antwerp and applied to stage the 1924 Games in Barcelona -- they eventually went to Paris, but Barcelona was one of the eleven cities applying in the first round.

When Villamejor resigned from the IOC in 1921, he proposed Horacio Echevarrieta of Madrid as his successor, but the rich entrepreneur was never as active as the Catalan Olympic Committee. The Catalunyan Committee even received the Olympic Cup in 1923. Eventually, Coubertin chose to have a Madrid and a Barcelona representative on the IOC: Baron de Guëll was the first to represent the IOC in Catalunya (1922-54). Samaranch eventually was the second.

It is surprising that Coubertin never visited Barcelona while he was president of the IOC. When he finally went there, in November and December 1926, he understandably enjoyed the Catalunyan capital city. His financial state was already unfavourable and the experienced businessmen of the city tried to help him regain some of his Italian investments. Coubertin lectured at the Institut Français and enjoyed outdoor life at Tarragona. Although Coubertin went only once to Catalunya he must have enjoyed it very much, as de Guëll was given another Olympic Cup. At the end of his visit, Coubertin explained in an interview with the local journalist Narcis Masferrer, "After I have known Barcelona, I think it is really a sporting city," a statement that went so well with the Catalunyan that they used it in their bid for the 1992 Games.

Varela produced a neat little book. It shows Olympism from a different perspective and raises the familiar question whether there really was a *system* in Coubertin's Olympic geography -- or whether it was just a question of *personal loyalties*. I think it will take some time until all such Olympic stories from the

itinerary and agenda of Coubertin are told---until then we can be glad that scholars take up the task of adding new stories to what seems to be such a well known development.

### Notes

1. P. Griffin, *The Politics of Irish Athletics: 1850-1990*. Ballinamore, Col. Leitrim: Marathon 1990, pp. 52f.
2. A. Kruger, "Olympische Bewegung - 100 Jahre Völkerverständigung und Wettkampfpädagogik," in *Leistungssport* 24 (1994), 3, pp. 41-44.
3. I.F. Jobling, "The Lion, the Eagle and the Kangaroo: Politics and Proposals for a British Empire Team at the 1916 Berlin Olympics," in *Sport and Politics* (Gerald Redmond, ed.), Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1986, pp. 99-107.
4. For the complex situation in Germany see my "The German Sonderweg in Turnen and Sport. 1870-1914. What's so German about the Germans?" In *Festschrift for Professor Dr. Juro Naritu*, Tokyo: Tsukuba 1996 (in print).
5. G. Jarvie & G. Walker (eds.), *Scottish Sport in the Making of the Nation. Ninety-Minute Patriots?* London: Leicester University Press, 1994.
6. J. Ulmann, *De la gymnastique aux sports modernes*, Paris: Vrin, 1971, pp. 295ff.