

**Reuben B. Frost**

# **Sport and the Olympic Ideal**

Ideals are mental images of perfection. The ideal world is a perfect world, the ideal person a perfect person, and the ideal athlete a perfect athlete.

Ideals are unattainable goals, pointing directions and beckoning us onward. As Tryon Edwards has said:

We never reach our ideals, whether of mental or moral improvement, but the thought of them shows us our deficiencies, and spurs us on to higher and better things.<sup>1</sup>

## **I**

The Olympic ideal was born and nurtured in the beautiful and peaceful village of Olympia, situated between the watersheds of the Alpheos and Kladeos Rivers and nestled at the foot of Kronion Hill. While legend has it that the beginnings of the Olympic Games were "lost in antiquity," it is also told that they were begun by Heracles in the second millenium, B.C. The year 776 B.C. is, however, usually given for the official founding of the Olympic Games and the establishment of Olympiad I. The Games were held every four years and the contests were so important that time was reckoned by the four year intervals between them.

Coraeus of Elis, who won a race in the Sacred Altis of Olympia, was the first recorded victor. He was crowned with a wreath of wild olive and for centuries thereafter this was the symbol of achievement for the athletes who won their contests. By the 61st Olympiad, however, statues were erected in honor of athletes who were victorious in three or more Olympic contests.

While a single race called the "Stade" comprised the Games in the first thirteen Olympiads, longer races and a variety of other contests

were gradually added. Boxing and wrestling were among the first to be included. The pancration (a combination of boxing and wrestling) and the pentathlon soon became popular. The "four horse chariot race" and the "armed race" also became Olympic events.<sup>2</sup>

Participants in the early Games were required to be free Hellenes and to take an oath on the altar of Zeus to abide by the rules of the Games. Contestants who broke the rules were required to build small temples (Zanes) along the pathway to the Stadium and to inscribe on these a description of their violations. However, corruption and other signs of decay gradually crept in. After about two hundred years, the Games lost some of their appeal. Overspecialization, professionalization and cheating became rampant. Hired athletes, lack of training and excessive commercialization became common. The high Olympic ideals, which had served as splendid guides for the Games for several hundred years, were almost entirely forgotten. In 393 A.D., after centuries of meaningless spectacles, Emperor Theodosius put an end to the Games.<sup>3</sup>

Sport had flourished in Greece when it constituted the principal ingredient in the education of youth. As long as the acquisition of bodily beauty and grace was considered of paramount importance in the development of individuals, the activities of the gymnasium held great prestige. As philosophy and art attained a higher priority in Greek society than did athletics, the Olympic Games became less and less significant.

Other factors were involved in the downfall of the Games. Overeating by the athletes, coupled with a decrease in exercise, contributed to the decay. Military drills became more important to the leaders than athletic competition. The Games took on the aura of spectacles where men fought with beasts and gladiators replaced athletes. Duelists and competitors were no longer free men but mostly conquered slaves. Victory could be purchased and the Games lost their splendor and their prestige. And so the Games, without the idealism and meaning which had made them great, finally died.<sup>4</sup>

## II

Late in the 19th century, it fell to Baron de Coubertin to engineer the rebirth of the Olympic Games. A humanitarian with a deep interest in sociology and education, he began seeking ways in which to improve the education of the youth of France. Travel in England and America convinced him that participation in athletics would develop many of the character traits needed in France. He began by associating himself with rowing, and scheduled contests between English and

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French oarsmen. The need for better communication and some standardization of rules became immediately apparent.

Seeking a means of capturing the interest of people and nations, he conceived the idea of reviving the Olympic Games. After many rebuffs and discouragements, he was able to bring the matter up for discussion at an international meeting assembled to study the question of amateurism. Coubertin's enthusiasm and eloquence were so persuasive that on June 23, 1894 the group agreed to revive the Olympic Games and formed an International Committee to plan and organize them. The first of these was held in Greece in the Olympic Stadium in Athens in 1896. Coubertin became the Director of the Games and presided over the meetings of the International Olympic Committee until 1925. It was largely through his vision, tenacity and untiring efforts that the dream became a reality.

### III

Eighty years have now elapsed since the revival of the Olympic Games. They have become the world's most splendid sports event. As the athletes march in, as the torch is lit, and as the Olympic Oath is recited for all to hear, one cannot but marvel at the wonder of it all. One sees the beautiful men and women warming up and performing, explaining in action those three Latin words, "*Citius, Altius, Fortius.*"

What is the Olympic Ideal today? It is typified by Roger Bannister's giving his version of the *motto* as he says, "The urge to struggle lies latent in everyone . . . no one can say, you must not run faster than this, or jump higher than that. The human spirit is indomitable." It is in the meaning of the *rings*, linked together to show the sporting friendship of the peoples of the earth, whatever their creed or color. It is the *athletes* and *spectators*, from all parts of the globe, mingling, communicating, and beginning to know and understand each other a little better.

The Olympic Ideal is expressed in the *Olympic Creed*: to give everything one has of muscle and mind and spirit, to fight well, to take part; to lose with dignity if lose one must, to conquer without arrogance. The essential elements of the Olympic Ideal are found in the *Olympic Oath*: abiding by the rules, showing respect for officials, exhibiting the true spirit of sportsmanship, upholding the honor of the teams.

As one studies the ideals of the Ancient Olympics and the Modern Olympics, one sees there are many more similarities than differences.

Both have a spiritual or ethical quality, both emphasize the pursuit of excellence, both speak of brotherhood and understanding among peoples from all over the world, both include respect for the rules of fair play. However, because the ancient world and the modern world are different, rules, mottoes, and creeds must be rewritten and adapted to societal and political realities.

The problem, as it has always been, is to be perceptive enough to distinguish between those things which are transient and those which are permanent. To discard ideals which are worthy just because they are old is no more justifiable than to institute something new without trying to determine its value. Both the old and the new must be re-examined and continuously evaluated to ascertain their significance and worth.

Ideals should be distinguished from rules. Rules and regulations are statements which should govern conduct and influence behavior. When they become so difficult to live by that violations on the part of well-meaning people are common, they should be reviewed and possibly revised. Even rules and regulations should not be discarded merely because there are some violations. If the object of a rule is worthy but adherence is difficult, it should be examined to see if it can, with additional effort, be enforced. Strengthening the enforcement machinery may be preferable to changing the rule.

#### IV

It becomes evident that the problems and the principles of conducting the Olympic Games are comparable to those in society generally. In society, laws are passed and regulations promulgated, but human beings break laws. Sometimes total societies become corrupt. Occasionally everything becomes so bad that a given society or institution collapses. Such decadence sometimes occurs so gradually as to be hardly noticeable.

The Olympic Games are a great and wondrous institution. Their ideals are lofty and worthy. Most athletes are honest and sincere and their performances are improving at an incredible rate. Most of the time, the festivities are inspirational and glorious, but recently some corrupt practices have crept in. There has been a lack of integrity in the administration of some rules; the conduct of some contests has been criticized; it has been difficult to administer regulations uniformly to many nations of differing political and religious philosophies; selfish interests, profit motives, and commercialism have appeared; prejudice is evident, and lack of respect for revered symbols has manifested itself. Many things are wrong.

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The most serious problem is the inconsistency with which rules and regulations are interpreted and enforced by the various nations. Language barriers, differences in philosophies, variations in local rules, and the many diverse practices in education, sporting competitions, and politics — all of these make uniform interpretations difficult. Nevertheless, if the Olympic Games are to fulfill their opportunities and their promise, the effort must be made.

### **works cited**

1. Tryon Edwards, *Useful Quotations*, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1933, p. 269.
2. *The Olympic Games*, United States Olympic Committee, New York: Olympic House, 1967.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Cleanthis Paleologos, "The Reasons of the Decline of the Ancient Olympic Games," *The International Olympic Academy*, Eleventh Session, Athens, Greece: The Hellenic Olympic Committee, 1971, pp. 54-70.