

## The Games

The Olympic Games are upon us again, with their displays of athleticism and endurance and their political threats. The inspiration for the founding of the modern Games is said to have been the idea that the ancient ones were a reason for the Golden Age of Greece (which rested, in fact, on the exploitation of slaves). The various national representatives to whom Baron de Coubertin put his belief in 1894 might have told him he was a mistaken ass, but set that aside in favour of the prospect of a regular festival of commerce and the nation-state.

The presumptions of the Olympic Games were socially irrelevant even in 1894. Running, jumping, javelin-throwing, boxing and wrestling, equestrianism were valued as military exercises in the ancient world, as archery and quarter-staff were in the Middle Ages; at the end of the nineteenth century the modern era in warfare was beginning and national armies were being remodelled. Amateurism in sport, which the Olympic movement took for granted, was starting to be replaced by professionalism. To the extent that amateurism survived, it opposed the Olympic ideal of transcending social status, since it was plainly the province of the leisured and better-off.

It may be thought this irrelevance is the virtue of the Olympics—that they represent sport for its own sake not as a contribution to other purposes. Nothing would be less true. From the London Games of 1908, the last ones to be monopolized by Britain and the USA, they have provided a bargaining-counter for political conditions. The Germans were excluded from the 1924 Games in Paris; before the 1936 ones in Germany there was a strong movement in the USA against participation. Germany and Japan, the defeated nations in World War II, were absent in 1948, and at every Games since then there have been withdrawals and threats of them on political grounds. The present ones in Montreal were preceded by a dispute over the recognition of Taiwan as "The Republic of China" that involved a trade deal between Canada and Communist China and a threat by America to withdraw—implying an irreparable loss of commercial support—from the Games, and then the withdrawal of 21 African and Arab states in protest against New Zealand's inclusion because the latter had played games with South Africa.

For each nation the Olympic Games are a manifestation of strength; not simply the symbolic vigour of its young men and women, but the amounts of money put into colleges and facilities. The prowess of the USSR since it first won Olympic medals in 1956 has had this effect and since 1960 athletes from the African countries have begun to come to the fore. On the other hand, the scantiness of victories for British competitors is taken as a conformation that Britain is "in decline". The staging of the Games also carries prestige for the nation concerned, implying prosperity and confidence to deal with a rush of commerce.

Given this importance in the economic and political rivalry between nations, the "true spirit of sportsmanship" of the Olympic oath (pronounced on behalf of the competitors before each Games) becomes derisory. Amateurism has been demolished by the intensity of the competition, which demands full-time training; likely Olympic participants are supported by their governments or by commercial firms in return for advertising. However, the continual pressure for higher levels of performance has inevitably led to devices for overcoming physical limitations. The spectacle now is of athletes driven on by stimulants, heavy men enlarged by steroid drugs and, in the case of girls, pills to suspend their menstrual cycle. In an interview published in the Sunday People on 11th July a champion hammer-thrower said: "One thing's certain—the influence of drugs on performances will be at its peak . . . It's the only way you can compete with the world's best, particularly from the Iron Curtain countries."

It is still claimed, in periods of respite from them, that sporting contests promote good will among nations. What can be seen clearly from the Olympic Games, as well as international football and most other contests, is they do nothing of the kind; they do not even start with that intention, and

usually end with an intensification of ill-will. Of course sport in itself is not a cause of international rivalry. Its development into world competitions is an effect of nationalism—the political voices of the economic structure of capitalism. Nor is there anything wrong with games and contests as such. Indeed, one of the regrettable consequences of big-scale sport with commercial and political motives is the damage done to sports as recreation.

In the light of the tensions which now surround them. It is possible that in a few more years the Olympic Games will be abandoned and replaced by competitions among particular groups of countries. In that case, each will no doubt swear its dedication to the highest sporting ethics before trying to do down the others by every means. That is not human nature: it is the ubiquitous reflection of the capitalist system. When we talk about Socialism, it is not just "politics". It is the desire for a world where we can enjoy ourselves and exercise the co-operative faculty which distinguishes man and capitalism does its best, but never manages, to stamp out.

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