SOME BASIC IDEAS OF COUBERTIN'S OLYMPIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE HANS-HEINRICH SIEVERT PRIZE[1]

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Abstract. Coubertin's Olympic elitism was apparently ideally materialized by Olympic athletes such as Pythagoras and Plato. Even in recent years there are some, although few, Olympic champions and athletes who reached highly prestigious positions in political and scientific life. Sports, though taken seriously, though demanding as regards energy and perseverance, should not dominate the whole of life. Accomplishments in other fields – social, scientific fields etc. – are even more important. The idea of the Sievert Prize is dedicated to a combination in person of extraordinary achievements in sports and in extrasportive, preferably professional and/or intellectual life.

Key words: sportive and extrasportive achievement, elitism, Hans-Heinrich Sievert Prize, Olympic philosophy

After conveying my cordial congratulations to Sir Roger for being awarded the Hans-Heinrich Sievert Prize, allow me to state some basic ideas underlying the existence and justification of the award presented here.

Let me start with some quotations from Sir Roger Bannister's famous article "The Meaning of Athletic Performance":

> We run not because our country needs fame, nor yet because we think it is doing us good, but because we enjoy it and cannot help ourselves. For each of us, it gives the chance to release a power that might otherwise remain locked away inside ourselves. I am sure that this urge to struggle lies latent in everyone, and the more restricted our lives become in other ways, the more necessary it will be to find some outlet for this craving for freedom.
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> Sport has an individual basis and an individual meaning, and is not a national or moral affair. [That is why f]riendship[s] formed under this baptism of fire, if I can use that phrase, have a curious permanence.
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> As a result, sport leads to the most remarkable self-discovery, of limitations, as well as of abilities. This discovery is partly physical – one

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> learns, for example, that feeling tired does not mean that one is reaching the limit of exhaustion. But mainly the discovery is mental and brought about by the stresses which sport imposes. The self-discovery is most rapid if we set out on the early stages of this journey alone. In time we learn how far from being self-sufficient we are, we realize the value of co-operation and assistance from others. But unless we start out alone, we never learn questions others can best answer and those which we must answer for ourselves.
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> To many of us, action may not come easily. We can allow ourselves to be blown along like leaves in a wind, or on the other hand, we can try to impose our own will on external events. Trying to bring the finishing tape nearer us, which we sometimes may do in later life, is the alternative and direct contrast to what the athlete is attempting to do, attempting to reach a rather idealistic goal more swiftly. These are my reasons for reiterating in a modern context Baron de Coubertin's view of the educational necessity of sport, as he conceived it, on a universal scale. (Bannister 1964, pp. 64–73)

If we add and paraphrase Sir Roger's statement: "Fitting sport into the rest of life until one's work becomes too demanding – this is both the burden and joy of the old-fashioned amateur – a path which any athlete is still free to choose, however difficult or rare it may be", we get the starting point for some reflections on the ideas underlying the Hans-Heinrich Sievert Prize and Coubertin's Olympic moral and social philosophy:

1. The Award is slated to honour true old-fashioned amateur accomplishments achieved exclusively for its own sake and (by the way) not only in sports.

2. As Coubertin tried to generalize the idea of an ever-increasing achievement and self-improvement to hold for social, moral and spiritual attitudes, too, the idea of the Sievert Prize is dedicated to a combination in person of extraordinary achievements in sports and in extrasportive, preferably professional and/or intellectual life.

Thus Coubertin's Olympic philosophy was meant to depict a general philosophy of striving and achieving man, highlighting an aphorism my former teacher, coach and fellow-coach, the successful rowing coach and high-level intellectual of sport theory and philosophy, the late Karl Adam, repeatedly stated: "The structure of achievement is equal in all realms of life."

At the same time he postulates that sport itself, though taken seriously, though demanding as regards energy and perseverance, should not dominate the whole of life. Accomplishments in other fields – social, scientific fields etc. – are even more important. Sports are not to deflect us from, but to stimulate accomplishments, attitudes, motivations in these more important realms of life. It is only in this sense that sport can be utilized to exert its educational values – nowadays as ever and, as we hope, also in the future.

Coubertin also tried to analyze the "moral and social impact of athletic exercises" and the mutual interaction between athletic practice and qualities of character and mind desirable from an educational point of view. He wanted to utilize the Olympic athlete as an ideal model, as a guideline for educational aims. Coubertin was pleased to see how, during and after the first Olympic Games of

modern times, young boys in Athens started to play "Olympic Games" and to imitate Olympic athletes. Since young boys and girls tend to pattern themselves after living personalities and personified images, this pedagogic sequence of stimulation and attempted imitation has been confirmed many times in social scientific analyses. The results reveal the significant status of Olympic calibre athletes for the attitudinal and goal orientation of young athletes.

It is erroneous, therefore, to say that the Olympic Games are in danger of losing their connection with sports because of the incredibly high level of performance. Via this educational and motivational sequence, they certainly still fulfil a more or less direct educational function, retain their stimulating and motivating force for the emulating young athlete. Television enhances this impact through the extended visibility of the Olympic contests all over the world. Coubertin did not interpret the Olympic elite as tied to a specific social class, but as a rather independent functional elite of achievement and endeavour, an elite of "equal origin", of democratic equality of opportunity, so to speak. That elite would serve as an ideal educational model for achievement-oriented youth generally, for the joy of achieving an unobtruded goal, in particular in sports: "In order that a hundred dedicate themselves to physical culture, fifty have to practice sport. In order that fifty practice sport, twenty have to specialize. In order that twenty would specialize, five have to be capable of amazing achievements" (Coubertin 1949, p. 12f).

Thus Coubertin, by this "law of educational transfer" wanted to use the sporting human elite for education in general.

Therefore, Coubertin did not intend the Olympic *Citius-Altius-Fortius* only in the sporting-technical sense. Also "the nobility of conviction, the cult of unselfishness and honesty, the chivalrous spirit and manly energy" should be covered by this motto, since modern democracies at first need these virtues required and taught by athletic contest (Coubertin 1931, p. 22). Thus, Coubertin stressed that "qualification figures under a manifold aspect; it should and can be technical, ethnic, social, moral" (Coubertin 1910, p. 11). Not only should a technical qualification identify an athletic Olympic elite in order to provide excellent and equal contests worth watching and really enhancing physical achievements, but the Olympic elite should at least ideally be a "school of nobility and moral purity as well as of physical endurance and energy […] but only on the condition that you permanently raise your concepts of honour and sportsmanship to the same height as the strength of your muscles. The future depends on you" (Coubertin 1925). This, incidentally, ideally excludes any justification of doping. Coubertin's slogan *Citius-Altius-Fortius* therefore, was not meant in a totally unrestricted sense.

Referring to the Greek ideal of *Kalokagathia*, the harmonically developed personality and unity of body and mind, Coubertin wanted to replace Juvenal's famous – and almost always misinterpreted statement *Optandum (e)st, ut sit mens sana in corpore sano* as being too medical with *Mens fervida in corpore lacertoso* ("a glowing spirit (mind) in a physically strong body") (Coubertin 1931, p. 115f.).

Coubertin's Olympic elitism was apparently ideally materialized by Olympic athletes such as Pythagoras and Plato. They are said, according to not very reliable

sources though (Diogenes Laertius, VIII, 12, 47; III, 4), to have participated in the ancient Games in pugilism and wrestling, respectively. Pythagoras allegedly was an Olympic champion in boxing and the coach of a successful athlete from Samos, and Plato successfully participated in the Isthmian Games. Milo of Croton, the most successful wrestler of antiquity and a member of the Pythagorean School of philosophy, wrote a book *About Nature* which unfortunately has been lost. Euripides was said to have judged that man, the most perfect of creation, who had written the *Iphigenia* with the same hand by which he wreathed his forehead with the victory laurel at Olympic Games.

Even in recent years there are some, although few, Olympic champions and athletes who reached highly prestigious positions in political and scientific life. To mention only some politicians: Former U.S. Congressman Mathias, twice (1948, 1952) gold medallist in decathlon and former winner of the Sievert Award, and U.S. Governor Anderson, Olympic champion in ice hockey in 1960. There are a few others in science and physical education, and I even know of one in theology. One Olympic silver medallist in the 1500m run, Sir Philip Noel Baker, the former President of the International Council of Sport and Physical Education, was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. He certainly could figure as a most logical candidate for the Sievert Prize. How far, indeed, the qualities of the sporting elite actually carry over to general personality, to intellectual, moral, character traits and would describe an "all-human" elite of achievement remains an open question, but this is not the point here.

While there is no automatic carry-over of the mentioned type, an athlete can nevertheless consciously and intentionally utilize some of the qualities schooled on the athletic field in other realms of life, especially in risky, competitive situations. This is true particularly if this transfer is pedagogically encouraged by a teacher, coach or parent. Moreover, and this is the important indirect educational social impact a popular Olympic athlete has as an ideal model for young emulating boys and girls, effects that he or she triggers and fulfils notable of a paragon function for which, whether willing or not, the athlete must take a certain moral responsibility.

To stress this moral responsibility and to honour the combined accomplishments in sports and in other realms of life – this is again the Coubertinian legacy underpinning the idea of the Hans-Heinrich Sievert Prize. Olympian International was right to inaugurate such an award reflecting the best ideals of Coubertin's Olympic philosophy. And Olympian International was equally right this year to honour Sir Roger Bannister, the first man to run the less-than-four-minute mile, a successful doctor, an excellent physiologist and neurologist also serving on advisory and research committees in sport, e.g. in the U.K. as President of the National Fitness Panel, as Chairman of the Sports Council and, previously, of its Research Committee, as well as currently, on an international scale, as the President of the International Council of Sport and Physical Education. Even more important, he was a great sportsman.

However, I was not asked to give a wholesale *laudatio*. Instead, let me close with some of Sir Roger's own really intriguing words pertaining to sports, but also to

mental spontaneity, vivacity and rhythm of psychic and spiritual life, pertaining to some elements present in varying degrees in most sporting performances as well as in other creative actions. Life is a physical and a metaphysical effort, goal-guided activity, dynamic rhythm and externalization of the self in feats, in doing, or works, a continuous ran for one's best potentials. Sir Roger wrote:

> The first is a curious physical spontaneity and rhythm. I can still remember quite vividly a time when as a child I ran barefoot along damp, firm sand by the seashore. The air there had a special quality, as if it had a life of its own. The sound of breakers on the shore shut out all others, and I was startled and almost frightened by the tremendous excitement a few steps could create. It was an intense moment of discovery of a source of power and beauty that one previously hardly dreamt existed. (Bannister 1964, p. 64)

Like Newton's confession of a great scientist that in his scientific endeavours he felt like a child on the seashore finding some beautiful shells or pebbles, it is a great athlete's confession that joyful and vivid, at times demanding, play lies at the very roots of culture, of self-discovery and self-improvement, if not perfection. To echo Sir Roger's paper of 1964 again stressing the necessity that "a boy develops some demanding activity that tests to the limit his body as well as his mind", I again quote:

> Each adolescent has to find this demanding activity for himself. It may be mountain-climbing, running or sailing, or it may be something quite different, it may not even be sport at all. But by absorption in this pursuit, he forgets himself and it fills the void between the child and the man. And later, when he finds a career or some other loves, he will be surprised at the extent to which he has grown. (Bannister 1964, p. 65)

Let me add in closing that this seems to be a sense in which Schiller's classical phrase on play which at times can be a rather serious and demanding play with one's best potential, might still be valid even today, pertaining to the dynamics of activity, creativity and freedom: Man (or, rather, the human being) "is only man", i.e. human, "when he plays" (… *der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt*) (Schiller, Letter 15).

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