

Baron de Coubertin and Brazil

By Christian Wacker



Charles-Édouard Le Prince (Baron de Crespy): Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin in 1823, drawing in Indian ink and charcoal.

The following story neither is a portrait of a famous athlete nor another puzzle piece in our field of the history of the Olympics nor a cultural historical analysis of a phenomenon in sports heritage. It is not related to sports at all! But the glimpse to follow sheds light on a story in Rio de Janeiro, Olympic Games city 2016, involving the grandfather of Pierre de Coubertin, Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin, who lived several months below the sugar loaf exactly 200 years before the year of the big event in 1816.

Brazil and Latin America in general only started to develop their Olympic activities at the beginning of the 20th century, even though involvement of personalities from Latin America go back as early as 1894.¹ The Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB) was founded in 1914, but not involved in organised sports at all. Even the nomination of the Brazilian team to the Olympic Games in Antwerp 1920 had been done by the Brazilian Sports Confederation (Confederação Brasileira de Desportos, CBD) and not the Olympic Committee.²

The development of sports on an international level was still a task of individuals and not yet carried into the societies. Pierre de Coubertin recognised this gap and distributed to Latin America in 1917 a brochure called *Que es el Olimpismo?* with the support of the YMCA. But still involvement with the Olympic Movement in the 1920s and early '30s was mostly confined to idealistic athletes and IOC officials who even lived in Europe. Pierre de Coubertin used his excellent connections in diplomatic circles to bind upper class European residents from Latin America to his Olympic ideas. But the Olympic Movement itself had not yet arrived in Latin America.³

For Pierre de Coubertin and other IOC Members the report of Henry de Baillet-Latour, who travelled to Latin America in 1922/1923 to observe the Regional South American Games in Rio de Janeiro 1922 among other duties, must have been sobering. The Count pointed out a lack of sporting education both on an athletes' level but also inside the societies and suggested stronger relations between National Olympic Committees and the IOC as well as the nomination of a Director of Latin American Games.⁴ Those might have been tasks too huge for Pierre de Coubertin to further develop Olympism in Latin America. Furthermore, he stepped down as IOC President in 1925 and therefore never had a chance nor felt it necessary to visit Brazil.

Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin, the grandfather

Perhaps Pierre de Coubertin had heard about Brazil from inside the family. His grandfather, Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin, who died eight years after the birth of his grandson in 1871, travelled to Rio de Janeiro and stayed there for about six months. Probably he remembered some exciting stories from 1816, the year the Bourbons

in France recovered power after the defeat of Napoléon at Waterloo 1815.

Most of what we know about Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin derives from a chronicle written by Paul de Coubertin, Pierre's brother, in 1925 and few secondary sources. He must have been an excellent official, loyal to different political powers and always prepared to make decisions and to manage difficult situations during his different assignments in northern Germany, Brazil, Belgium and Spain.

During his stay in Bremen and Oldenburg between 1809 and 1811, his management style as an official in implementing the French bureaucracy of the Bonaparte régime was described as fast acting with "Prussian" virtues like punctuality, commitment, reporting, writing minutes and others. He had been the antithesis of the stereotypical French bon viveur and womaniser – a drab and fully loyal servant of the Empire, sometimes even dry and unemotional.⁵ In German chronicles he had been attested to be adaptable, using the German noble title "von" Coubertin instead of "de" Coubertin.⁶

The professional character of Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin seemed to have been straightforward, thoughtful and responsible. But he also had an emotional and sensitive side, delicate and benevolent as described by an annalist 1815.⁷ After his retirement from governmental duties in 1827, his preferred occupation became music and he had been an excellent violin player, receiving his artistic peers around him in Castle Coubertin in Saint-Rémy-lès-Chevreuses near Paris.⁸

Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin was born 1788, one year before the French Revolution. His father, Louis François (1752–1807), was a lawyer and married to Jeanne Genéviève Sandrier (1762–1826). The family, with the only son Julien and one daughter, probably stayed at the countryside during the revolution, as Castle Coubertin had not yet been destroyed.

He must have enjoyed an excellent education, because we find him again 1809 in northern Germany, where he served as a consular agent for the Bonaparte régime. At that time, Napoléon erected a continental blockade to cut off trade with Britain and established control of the port accesses in northern Germany. One year later, Holland and the three main ports in northern Germany were occupied by Napoléon. Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin was given responsibility for those ports.

Another year later, in 1811, he became Deputy-Governor of Oldenburg and was responsible for reorganising the administration of the whole department and abolishing the 600-year-old city council. At the age of 23, he modernised the local and regional authority districts and municipalities of the Oldenburg region and can be regarded as a reformer and somehow the first Governmental President of the region.⁹



By the end of 1811, Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin disappeared from Oldenburg in mysterious circumstances. He asked for vacation, which was refused, and he evidently returned to France, where he stayed quiet until 1814. On the day of Napoléon's abdication, 11th April 1815, he entered the new Bourbon army as Lieutenant. A year later he had been awarded the "l'ordre de Lys", emblem of the Bourbons, and joined King Louis XVIII in Belgium. In 1816, Pierre's grandfather was part of an official mission to Rio de Janeiro under the Duke of Luxembourg, but returned the same year. In 1817, he became Captain of the Cavalry, and a year later Captain of the General Staff. In 1821, he was awarded the title "Baron" by Louis XVIII and married Caroline de Pardieu, mother of the famous painter and father of Pierre, Charles de Coubertin.¹⁰ Between 1823 and 1824 he participated for the last time in an official diplomatic mission in Spain.¹¹

Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin made his career under King Louis XVIII, who died 1824; in the same year he returned home to Castle Coubertin at Saint-Rémy-lès-Chevreuse and stayed there for nearly 50 years more. He was twice elected Mayor of the small town and dedicated his life to art, music and culture. A year before his death on 17th February 1871, the Prussians occupied Castle Coubertin and forced him to flee to his wife's family home, where he finally died.¹²

Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin in Rio de Janeiro

In 1808 the Portuguese King João VI and his entire court were forced by Napoléon to leave Portugal for Brazil, and in 1815, the King declared Brazil an independent

Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin: Baye de bottafoga, côté droit, 17th July 1816 (water-color).

Source: Catalogue Christie's, Exploration and Travel, London, 1996

kingdom. Unlike other European rulers who decided to return to their kingdoms, João VI stayed in Brazil and governed his Portuguese realm from there. Thus in December 1815 he became the King of Brazil, Portugal and the Algarves.

Diplomatic exchanges with the new powers in Europe started immediately and France despatched the Duke of Luxembourg, together with Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin as Goodwill Ambassador (“Ambassadeur Extraordinaire”) to install the first French Consul General Jean-Baptiste Maler as the Bourbon representative. The visa for Coubertin is dated from February to December 1816¹³ after having been made Mayor by the Duke of Luxembourg in November 1815.



Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin: Hotel du Duc de Luxembourg, 1816 (watercolor).
Source: Catalogue Christie's, *Exploration and Travel*, London, 1996

João VI had instigated a new infrastructure for Rio de Janeiro with a bank, press, schools, libraries, theatre, botanical garden and an academy of art and science. It had been obvious that artists from abroad would have to come to Rio de Janeiro to fulfil the duty to develop and document this exotic new kingdom. The huge potential in art and science in France also had been recognised by the Portuguese ambassador in Paris, Pedro José de Meneses. Although many unemployed artists and scientists had been connected to the Bonaparte Empire, the ambassador had been rational enough to understand that artists were very well used to serve their contractors. On top of it, Joachim Lebreton perfectly understood to influence the Portuguese decision makers and was even able to convince the Portuguese minister, José Maria de Brito, to personally cover his expenses for the travel to Brazil.

The group of French artists and scientists had all been connected to Napoléon and therefore had been somewhat desperate for new jobs after the defeat of the Emperor 1815. The chance to develop an academy for art and science in Rio de Janeiro and get paid for it must

have been highly attractive. Approximately 40 artists and scientists and their families arrived from Le Havre in Rio de Janeiro on 26th March 1816. That was the very same day that Maria I, Queen of Portugal, died and João VI officially became the King of the United Nations of Brazil, Portugal and the Algarves.¹⁴

Joachim Lebreton had been the intellectual and organisational leader of the group of artists and scientist, which had been called “Lebreton colony”.¹⁵ The most famous of this them had been Joachim Lebreton himself (former secretary of the French Institute of Art), Nicolas-Antoine Taunay (painter at the same Institute), Jean-Baptiste Debret (historical painter), Grandjean de Montigny (architect) and François Ovide (engineer).

The foundation of an academy of art and science in Rio de Janeiro in 1816 happened more or less independently of arrival of the Duke of Luxembourg and Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin in Brazil. Jean-Baptiste Maler as diplomatic and official representative of the new Bourbon kingdom deeply mistrusted the “Lebreton colony” and had been supported by the Duke of Luxembourg and his followers (including Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin and the Austrian composer Sigismund Neukomm).¹⁶ They stayed in Rio de Janeiro during the first months after the arrival of the artists, probably making sure of controlling the implementation of the academy. Nothing is known about the political activities of Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin in Rio de Janeiro, but he produced a series of at least 23 watercolours, mostly landscapes, in a booklet during July and August 1816.¹⁷ The “Lebreton colony” might have animated him!

Will this story change Olympic history? No! But it might shed light on an interesting personality, a highly capable official and manager, who was also attracted to art, music and culture. The son of Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin, Charles became a famous painter in Paris, his grandson Pierre a universalist involved in sports, art and culture, education, politics and more. ■

- 1 TORRES 2012, 115ff. Pierre de Coubertin had chosen the Argentinean José B. Zubiaur as member of the first IOC emphasizing that also athletics in Latin America raises its flag.
- 2 NETO-WACKER – WACKER 2010, 85ff. Despite the foundation of the NOC the Brazilian Sports Confederation continued to control national sports and the very few international sports involvements. The COB was forgotten and its therefore makes no wonder that an Olympic Committee had been founded again in 1935.
- 3 KRAEMER-MANDEAU 1997, 182ff; NETO-WACKER – WACKER 2010, 145f.
- 4 NETO-WACKER – WACKER 2010, 148. TORRES 2012, 142ff published the report of Henry de Baillet-Latour.
- 5 SCHMIDT 2002, 414, 446, 471.
- 6 SCHMIDT 2002, 449.
- 7 SCHMIDT 2002, 466–469. See also the characterization in RICKLEFS, Friedrich Reinhard: „Deutscher Edelmuth im Kampf mit Französischer Barbarey bey der Marine-Conscription im Oldenburgischen“,

in: *GERMANIA. ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR DEUTSCHLANDS GEMEINWOHL*, Vol. 3.1, Oldenburg 1815, pp. 64–102.

- 8 SCHMIDT 2002, p. 509.
- 9 SCHMIDT 2002, pp. 406–413, 473–483.
- 10 MARIOT 2008.
- 11 SCHMIDT 2002, pp. 496–506.
- 12 SCHMIDT 2002, pp. 507–509.
- 13 SCHMIDT 2002, p. 502 mentions the year 1815 as year Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin travelled to Brazil. He obviously read the family chronicle written by Paul de Coubertin by hand in 1925 wrongly, as all watercolours produced by Julien Bonaventure de Coubertin in Rio de Janeiro are dated 1816.
- 14 SCHWARZ 2008, pp. 176–178, 195–197.
- 15 SCHWARZ 2008, pp. 175–188 analysed the group of French artists and scientists and convincingly states that those people around Joachim Lebreton did not arrive in Rio de Janeiro as an official diplomatic mission, but much more as a private collection of creatives. This is why the group has to be called “colony” and not “mission”.
- 16 SCHWARZ 2008, 14, pp. 209, 233–235.
- 17 The watercolours are today in unknown private possession and therefore not published except two drawings published in a sales catalogue from Christie’s, Exploration and Travel, London, Friday, 27 September 1996, 10.30 am.

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International Association of Olympic Memorabilia Collectors consolidated

In recent years a small but significant group of Olympic memorabilia collectors met several times to discuss and adjure the urgent need to formalize their network. At 4th December 2011 the association Prolympo e.V. had been born under the leadership of Karl Lennartz, who sadly passed away last year. Some months ago the group met again at 20th November 2014 in Stuttgart with the clear and serious decision to re-organise their association. A new board became elected with Christian Wacker as President, Jürgen Wagner as Vice-President and Klaus Fink as Secretary-General and Treasurer. Ingrid O’Neil and Markus Osterwalder had been chosen as Assessors.

With the consolidation of the association Prolympo e.V. a story came to an end that started at the 14th World Olympic Collector’s Fair 2009 in Warsaw. Back then the Olympic memorabilia collector Roberto Gesta de Melo pointed out the urgent need for the collectors’ world to develop objective collectors’ catalogues and ideally collectors’ readers for a broader public. With the support of the key collectors of Olympic memorabilia it should be possible to define relevant catalogues for the ascertainment of medals, torches, badges, pins, reports etc. A first meeting took place with a dozen collectors in Brazil and the group had been convinced conjointly that the immense network



of knowledge should be banned in a series of catalogues to be available for everybody interested in Olympic memorabilia. This initiative should and will help at the end to identify items, to streamline the market and to prevent the circulation of falsification. Most collectors’ markets like archaeology, art, furniture, vintage cars etc. use catalogues for ascertainment since decades and it is more than necessary in a steadily growing market like Olympic memorabilia to get similar tools in place as soon as possible.

Prolympo e.V., the International Association of Olympic Memorabilia Collectors, offers membership to everybody interested in the topic. The association aims on knowledge creation, capitation and transfer of all kind of memorabilia dealing with the Olympic Movement. This knowledge should be made available to collectors, researchers

and museums. Olympic memorabilia are works of art and therefore have to be regarded as cultural property of sports. In preserving them and developing knowledge about them Prolympo e.V. makes a significant contribution to secure important aspects of Olympic history for the purpose of education and research.

Prolympo e.V. promotes the exchange of collectors with other collectors, sports museums, archives, Olympic research institutes and collections with the aim to boost museological, pedagogical, archival and collection practice in the area of the Olympic Movement. In detail the association plans to organise conferences, collectors’ meetings, fairs and exhibitions. Furthermore it assures consultancies, evaluations, exchange of loans, documentation of collections, publications and transparency of information. First priority will be given to the publication of the collectors’ catalogues and the collectors’ readers as initiated back in 2009. Prolympo e.V. cooperates with national and international Olympic institutions, museums, archives and libraries and sports associations.

Contributions and memberships are very much welcome! For further information please refer to info@prolympo.org or consult our web-site www.prolympo.org to be online soon.

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