

THE FOUNDATION OF THE SPANISH OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

By Conrado Duránte, President of the International Pierre de Coubertin Committee

The force which the playing of sports would acquire, making it the great social phenomena which it is today¹, started its European path at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the next.

A group of pedagogues, trainers and educators, dignify the sporting task, assessing it as the basic, fundamental instrument in the formation of the individual² and the some, remembering the glories of Hellenic class-consciousness, organise sports meetings which they entitled with the pompous cataloguing of "Olympic"³. Johann Bernard Basedow, Christian Guts Muths, Francisco Amoros y Gandeano, Marquis of Sotelo, Per Henrik Ling, Fedrico Luis Jhan, and a little later, Dr. Brooks of Much Wenlock, form, with others, an outstanding group of forward thinkers, who with great vision, proposed the restoration of sport in the modern world. But it was to be an English priest, Reverend Thomas Arnold,⁴ who, with his inspired system of "sports pedagogy" carried out at Rugby University where he was the principal, would influence as a decisive trigger on the key figure in the re-establishment of modern Olympism. This person would be Pierre de Fredi, Baron de Coubertin⁵, the celebrated aristocrat who, with profound knowledge of historical sociology and a visionary conception of the future, understood the enormous task of re-establishing the Olympic Games. After a century along the historical path of the inspired venture, the figure of the French humanist can be described, without any mistake in assessment, as the most famous unknown person in history⁶. Despite de fact that Olympism, with its Games, has established itself at the gateway to the 21st Century as the most important sociological force of the times⁷, the rich character of its brilliant restorer, the abundant written work with a legacy of more than 12,000 pages and the arduous problems which he had to overcome to achieve the triumph of his undertaking, are progressively disappearing in the mists of time for a high social percentage of the world today, even in the world of sport.

The initial proclamation for the re-establishment of the Olympic Games was launched by Coubertin on 25th November 1892 in the University Cloisters of the Sorbonne⁸ in Paris. The idea was warmly applauded, but was met with incomprehension and its initial attempt, full of illusion, was a failure.

Two conclusions can be made from what occurred. The first is to point out that Olympism as a cultural and humanistic phenomenon attempted to resurrect itself, as was to happen two years later in the prestigious, solemn of a famous University, presented with careful academic expression to a select group of intellectuals, rather than the expected setting of a theatre, square or market, or even in a sporting setting. The second conclusion to be considered is the patent incomprehension which reigned, in spite of the high level of intelligence of those present, over the Olympic theme, both sporting and its underlying factors. The key to the reasons for the idea were enclosed in the exceptional, lucid mind of the famous aristocrat. Looking back at the event, Coubertin was to say: "I was applauded, it was accepted and they wished me success. However, nobody had understood me".⁹ Two years later, on 23rd June 1894, in the same hall, Coubertin's undertaking was fulfilled. The re-establishment of the Olympic Games was passed unanimously by those present.¹⁰

The celebration, evolution and success of the Olympic Games in Athens, in 1896, the first of the modern era, strongly motivated Coubertin to totally dedicate his efforts to the arranging, structuring and promotion of the colossal undertaking.¹¹ His first measure was to increase the membership of the International Olympic Committee given that its meditated and calculated social influence could be a decisive guardian of his idea in the respective countries. At the end of the Athens Games, the number of members of the International Olympic Committee had risen to 16, while, as far as sport associations were concerned, there were only three International Federations and thirteen National Olympic Committees.

At the beginning of the century, and within his plan to increase the number of Olympic ambassadors in the world, Coubertin made contact with the royal family in Spain. Due to its global importance, this country was a key part of the plan formed by the farsighted restorer. Professors Aniceto Sela and Adolfo Posada of Oviedo University, together with the Rector of Law from the same university had attended the Founding Congress of Modern Olympism in Paris in 1894. In a personal letter dated 29th July 1894, Sala asked Coubertin to forward the conclusions of the Congress to him, so that he could give it the deserved attention through articles in the press.¹³

Coubertin's petition for a member of the I.O.C. in Spain coincided with the reign of Queen Maria Cristina. Her husband, Alfonso XII had died on 25th November 1883, and she had sworn the Constitution a month later, on 30th December. At the time, she was expecting the heir who would become King Alfonso XIII. The child was born on 17th May 1886 and would come to the throne on 17th May 1902, his sixteen birthday.¹⁴

The Queen entrusted Coubertin's request to the care and criteria of Prince Carlos of Borbón. He chose, from among the numerous and wealthy members of Spanish nobility with more or less international sporting interests, Don Gonzalo de Figueroa y Torres, Count of Mejorada del Campo and Marquis of Villamejor.

In a letter addressed to Coubertin and dated 21st February 1902, Don Gonzalo de Figueroa said: "I accept with satisfaction the honour of representing Spanish sport by forming part of your Committee. I am a true sporting enthusiast who, unfortunately has become a simple platonic adorer following a fall from a horse five years ago. Following the death of our cherished King, Alfonso XII, sport is not in vogue in Spain, but one can hope that with our young monarch, we will have a powerful patron".¹⁵

The timid sporting restlessness which was stirred by official actions, were mentioned in the October 1902 issue of Olympic Magazine, which takes Olympic

stock of the time with hope for rapid, notable, future action, "HRH the King of Spain has, on repeated occasions since his coronation, mentioned the interest which our work has inspired. The King has spoken to our colleague, the Count of Mejorada, on the progress and future of the Olympic Games and has recently awarded the President of the Committee with the insignias of the Order of Carlos III. Sport is slowly but finally gaining ground in Spain and possibly, and in the near future, an Olympiad could be held within the walls of Madrid. We would also take the opportunity to highlight the fact that the Count of Mejorada has just won the Steeplechase of Pau for the fourth time."¹⁶

Throughout this period, Coubertin pressed again and again for the formation of an Olympic Committee in Spain, and, as befits his efficient diplomacy of influence, on the European monarchies, he sent a commemorative medal to the Queen. Her Majesty

expressed her gratitude through Gonzalo de Figueroa, in this way expressing her interest in the Olympic Games and the work of the International Olympic Committee.¹⁷

As a result of the consultative conference of Arts, Letters and Sport,

called by Coubertin in Paris in the spring of 1906, with the objective of introducing artistic competitions (architecture, sculpture, music, painting and literature) into the Games, what would be baptised as "the pentathlon of the Muses"¹⁸, Don Gonzalo de Figueroa informed Coubertin of the existence of two colleges of architecture in Madrid and the Special College of Architecture in Barcelona. The principal association of the profession being the Sociedad Central de Arquitectura (the Central Society of Architecture) which was located in Madrid, as well as regional associations in Barcelona, Seville and Bilbao. The principal publications of the sector were: *La Construcción Moderna and Pequeñas Monografías de Arte in Madrid*, and *Arte y Construcción in Barcelona*.¹⁹ The aforementioned artistic competitions were to be introduced to coincide with the V Olympiad in Stockholm in 1912.²⁰

But national political events were to influence, in an involuntary but decisive way, on the national Olympic

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panorama. The assassination of José Canalejas by the anarchist, Pardiñas, in 1912 meant that he was followed in the Presidency of the Council of Ministers by the liberal Don Alvaro of Figueroa and Torres, Count of Romanones.²¹

The intellectual, open and active talent of the new President was to stimulate and aid his brother, Gonzalo who he convinced, influenced and motivated in his Olympic tasks, which up to that time he had carried out in a rather irregular way.

This gave rise to the new period which commenced with the creation of the Spanish Olympic Committee on 23rd November 1912, according to a letter from Don Gonzalo de Figueroa to Coubertin dated 20th November of that year, which, due to its importance is transcribed in full:

“Dear President and friend, the ghastly crime which has cast the life of Mr. Canalejas, could have also meant the loss of Mr. Alba in the Ministry of Public Instruction which would have been involved starting over again in the new Ministry. Fortunately, he continues, as do all the Ministers, under the Presidency of my brother Romanones, and I enclose his favourable response. He has accepted the invitation and is going to appoint a representative to the Congress of Sports Psychology and philosophy. He has also asked for all the information on the event. I also take satisfaction in informing you that on Saturday I will form my Spanish committee of the Olympic Games, having decided to dedicate myself to it in body and soul. I have always feared that I was not the right man for the job, but in this case you are to blame for not having replaced me.”²²

Twenty-four days later in a letter dated 2nd December 1912, the minutes of Constitution of the Spanish Olympic Committee. He says, “I enclose the minutes of the Constitution of our Committee. If there is anything incorrect, I beg you to return it for correction. I look forward to obtaining good results and once again it will be due to your perseverance and energy.”²³

‘She dynamic diligence of Coubertin is once again shown with his hasty and jubilant reply, congratulating the constitution of the S. O. C.

Villamejor replied to this on the 9th of the same month. “It gave me great pleasure to receive your

congratulations. But it is you who deserves the glory of the constitution of our Committee. As you will see when I have official paper, we are no more than a filial of the International Committee under your esteemed patronage”. After requesting that the Olympic Magazine be sent to Messrs. Padros and Sanz, Villamejor, in this stage of overflowing Olympic euphoria, adventures the project “to set up Committees in the other regions of Spain”.²⁴

Whatever had gone before. and in a sociological, juridical focus, one can state that the S.O.C. began its journey with a forceful dynamism on 23rd November 1912. This was later to warrant tribute from Coubertin when he was evaluating the Olympic events of 1912 which opened the V Olympiad of Stockholm. He said, “The Belgian, Danish and Spanish Committees (the later being recently created thank to our colleague The Marquis of Villamejor, the brother of the Count of Romanones), are working well.”²⁵ The same author wrote under the title “Chronicle of the Month”, published in the January 1913 edition of Olympic Magazine, in a summary of the year 1912, “Spain has emerged from its international indifference. Events which are multiplying and the formation of the Spanish Olympic Committee are clear indicators of this. This nation will probably have a lot to offer but this will depend on perseverance and willpower.”²⁶ At the same time, Villamejor replied to Coubertin in a letter dated 11th March 1913, stating, “although you haven’t heard from me, I can assure you that I am working hard, although, as I feared, the task is greater than my strengths. All over the country, in Madrid, Bilbao, Barcelona, etc. there are road races, football matches, etc... Dead or alive, I assure you that I will be in Lausanne on the 8th, and I am trying to convince some of my colleagues to accompany me.”²⁷

During this period, the work and activities of the S.O.C, were intensified and directed at Olympic propaganda with the printing and circulation of leaflets on Olympism. Coubertin mentions this in his Olympic Memoirs, when dealing with his visit to Madrid. A very well-printed brochure called *What is Olympism?* was widely distributed in South-American countries, thus overtaking the actions of the Spanish Olympic Committee, which thanks to the zeal and generosity of the Marquis of Villamejor had been injected with new life. In Madrid, in 1916, I had the opportunity to attend a meeting by the said

Committee from which another propagandistic effort arose with the distribution of another splendid leaflet on Olympism.²⁸ The leaflet Coubertin refers to is precisely a publication written by him which forms the structural base of a subsequent work in more depth called *Pédagogie Sportive*, published in 1921. The translator from the original text into Spanish was Pedro Jaime Matheu, consul-general of El Salvador in Paris and an active member of a Provincial Committee created by Coubertin in the French capital.²⁹ A vibrant dedication in Paris by Coubertin, dated December 1917, preceded the publication destined to "... I dedicate these pages written to the intrepid youth of Latin America, with the purpose of inviting them to prepare themselves for a continued and tenacious muscular culture, to the future splendour of those privileged regions". P.J. Matheu, who would later be co-opted as a member of the I.O.C. where he would remain from 1918 to 1941,³⁰ specified in the prologue of the translated text how the Olympic spirit and its philosophical principles were to transform American society by taking part in athletics in a *lively, regularly and tenacious*³¹ manner. Coubertin's aforementioned visit to the S.O.C in Madrid was reported in succinct accounts in the press of the time: "Yesterday, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who is at present in Madrid, attended a meeting held by the Spanish Olympic Committee at the home of the Marquis of Villamejor. The exchange of opinions with this globally recognised authority on Olympism, should be very beneficial to the aforesaid Committee, which is as we are aware the delegate in Spain of International Olympic Committee. The illustrious propagandist was very impressed with the excellent work in progress of the Spanish Olympic Committee."³²

Spain, as an Olympic go-between with the old colonies of America is used with shrewd diplomacy in Coubertin's expansion plans. Villamejor is the official negotiator to these ends and he carries them out with enthusiasm doing groundwork in Argentina, Chile, El Salvador and Brazil.³³ At an unknown time, but presumably in 1915, Villamejor in his role as President of the Spanish Olympic Committee wrote the prologue to the book entitled *"Juegos Olímpicos"* (Olympic Games) by Manuel Nogareda of the library Les Sports, in Barcelona, run by Elias y Juncosa "Corredisses who also figures as author of a volume dedicated to football".³⁴

In a letter sent by the Marquis of Villamejor to Coubertin dated 5th January 1914, and after expressing the difficulties he has to attend, together with 6 representatives, the Paris Congress, Villamejor expressed thanks on behalf of H.R.H. King Alfonso XII for the award of the Olympic Diploma which was made to him, and the hope that one of the Spanish Princesses would attend to receive it.³⁵ He stated in a letter written ten days before the development of a large national athletics competition in preparation for the Berlin Games (1916) and that H.R.H. had designated two of the six requested representatives, the Count of Cibera and Justo San Miguel.³⁶

During the XXIV Session of the I.O.C. inaugurated on 26th May 1925 at the City Hall in Prague, with 30 members present, Coubertin announced his resignation as President naming the Belgian Count, Henry de Baillet-Latour as his successor.³⁷

From this date, the great French humanist, now free of the direct pressure of controlling and directing the now complex Olympic structure which he had created, could dedicate himself to pedagogical tasks and to Olympic dissemination which he held so highly. In this new phase of his life, one can include the journey he made to Spain at the beginning of 1926 and specially his stay in Barcelona, one of his favourite cities due to its outstanding athletic and Olympic talent and to the fact that he had several friends there. These friendships had arisen as a result of the continuous attempts made by the representatives of Barcelona to obtain the Games for 1924 which will be referred to later. In a letter dated 11th January 1926 written from the Hotel Bristol in Cannes, Coubertin informs Elias y Juncosa of his coming visit to the city.³⁸ Coubertin, accompanied by his wife and daughter, arrived in Barcelona on 1st November 1926 and stayed at the Majestic Hotel in the Paseo de Gracia.³⁹ The admiration which Coubertin raised in the sporting circles of the Catalan bourgeoisie in Barcelona, together with the friendly and hospitable nature of the group, meant that a full program of official ceremonies and receptions were arranged for the illustrious visitor and his wife. Thus, on the 5th he received the President of the emblematic Sport Federation of Cataluña, Mr. Fornes, together with the members of the S.O.C. Garcia Alsina and Mesalles Estivil. Together, they visited the R.C. Maritimo where they

were received by the vice-president Roure and several leading members of the Board of Directors. Later they moved on to the Parque the Montjuic where they were informed about the location of the future stadium. They had lunch at the Martín restaurant in preparation for a full afternoon program with visits to the Polo Club, F.C. Barcelona (at Barcelona Football Club), the Tennis Club, the Equestrian Circuit and the Excursionist Circuit of Barcelona. Following a detailed cultural visit to the city on 6th November, on the 7th he went to the port of Barcelona, in the company of Elias y Juncosa, Mas Ferrer and Mesalles Estivil to watch a rowing regatta. His last engagement, on the same day, was a visit to the Fronton (Pelota) Condal of the Club Vasconia where he was received by its President, Manuel Ballet. He watched a game of pelota as a demonstration of a truly Hispanic sport. Dated the same day is the postcard where Coubertin praises the sporting vitality of Barcelona, the high level of the facilities visited and the hospitality of its leaders with the famous phrase of his personal assessment of his experiences: Before coming to Barcelona I thought I knew what a sporting city was.

Coubertin, together with his wife and daughter, left Barcelona for Madrid by tram on the 9th of the month. He sent letters to Elias y Juncosa from the Hotel Castilla in Toledo (19th November), from the Hotel Inglaterra in Sevilla (20th November) and from the Hotel Savoy in Madrid (3rd December). He returned once more to Barcelona on 5th December, and visited the Hall of Arms in the Military Casino of Barcelona the following day. On the 8th and 9th he was in Tarragona to give a conference in the French Institute before leaving for Greece by ship:⁴⁰

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ISOH WEB SITE

ISOH Vice President Dr. Bill Mallon M.D. wrote to the editor as follows:

An ISOH Web Site will shortly become a reality. The Web Site will be set up early in the year 2000, most likely at the URL Address www.isoh.olykamp.org

ISOH Vice-President Bill Mallon will be designing the site and would like suggestions and recommendations from the members as to what they would like to see placed on the web site. Remember, the ISOH Web Site is "your" site and your input is critical to its success. Members who wish to send suggestion may contact Bill Mallon at bmallon@olykamp.org or fax to (1)-919-620-1759.

For a start, please send your personal e-mail address to Bill Mallon. He then will place links to them in the ISOH web site to enable researchers and other sports historians to directly contact these members.

One item that will certainly be included in the new web site will be the index of all articles published in the *Journal of Olympic History*, since its inception in 1992.