An intimate look at the Baron Pierre de Coubertin

by the Comte de Madre

Mr. Geoffrey de NAVACELLE, great-nephew of Baron Pierre de COUBERTIN, has been good enough to authorise the publication of the article below, written by his uncle, the Comte de MADRE, himself a nephew of the Renovator of the Olympic Games.

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Perhaps one day an author will undertake to write the biography of Baron Pierre de COUBERTIN, the reviver of the Olympic Games.

By consulting the many works left by Pierre de COUBERTIN and the countless articles devoted to his achievements, he will find it comparatively easy to ascertain and describe the main stages in his life and to give an accurate analysis of the very different sides to this profound mind. But he will undoubtedly find it less simple to portray the living physiognomy of this great man.

Men who leave behind them achievements as complete, varied and noble as he did, are always remembered by succeeding generations as the grave, thoughtful, venerable old figures of their declining years. People have difficulty in visualizing them in their youth and their prime, when they did their greatest work and were at their most active.

At the recent jubilee in Lausanne, for the fiftieth anniversary of the revival of the Olympic Games, a number of very eminent people made brilliant speeches in honour of Pierre de COUBERTIN, the historian, teacher, athlete, etc... But none of them - and for good reason - was able to evoke the man himself in the course of his daily life, as he appeared to his friends and family. Those who knew him as a young man are fast disappearing and soon nobody will be
left capable of making good this omission.

That is why I have decided to do so, to the best of my ability — even though my attempt will still be very incomplete.

Pierre de COUBERTIN was my uncle, 16 years older than I was, but even so the youngest of my uncles. I lived very near to him and there are very few of my early memories in which he is not included. I was on close terms with him, and he treated me as a young friend. In addition, he had a direct influence on my education, because it was thanks to him, that I did almost all my studies under the famous Dominican Friar, Father DIDON. Finally, I watched his early efforts and the birth, under his influence, of an active interest in sport in France; and throughout the whole of my adolescence I was able to follow very closely the irresistible movement that he had created. In the light of the above, I shall try to sum up quite simply what I saw and what I know of his character, in order to bring his physiognomy alive again for those who would like to see him as he really was.

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First of all, I intend to give a few brief genealogical notes, and describe the setting in which he lived.

Pierre de COUBERTIN was born in Paris, on January 1st, 1863. He was the fourth and last child of Baron and Baroness de COUBERTIN, née de CRISENOY. Through his father, he stemmed from Normandy and the Ile de France, through his mother, from Normandy. The de Coubertin estate, at the entrance to the Chevreuse valley, some 25 miles outside Paris, consisted of quite a fine 18th century château, set in a walled park, surrounded by several properties and farms. His grandmother, Baroness de COUBERTIN, née de PARDIEU, died there in 1887, at the age of 90, leaving the estate to her son, my grandfather. The latter however very soon made a gift of it to his eldest son Paul, who settled there after his marriage.

The reason was mainly that my grandmother preferred to spend the summer at her property at Mirville in Normandy, a small and attractive manor-house in brick and silex, built in the style of the Caux district, 19 miles from Le Havre and 2 1/2 from Bolbec.

The Marquis de Mirville — whose title has since died out — was the great-grandfather of Pierre de COUBERTIN; he had written a book on spiritualism, which for a long time was considered a standard work on the subject.

Pierre de COUBERTIN had two brothers and a sister. The eldest, Paul, the Baron de COUBERTIN mentioned above, lived
partly in Paris and partly at Coubertin. The second, Albert, went to St. Cyr and became a regular cavalry officer; he died a retired colonel. His sister, Marie, married Count David de MADRE, a diplomat, who soon left her a widow; she was my mother. Pierre de COUBERTIN himself died in Geneva on September 2nd, 1937, aged 74.

So much for the family tree.

In order to make clear the evolution of Pierre de COUBERTIN's ideas, I must, first of all, describe the setting in which he lived, and say a few words about his parents - my maternal grandparents.

My grandparents belonged to what can be called the middle aristocracy. This class of society preserved traditions and ideas that had been outdated by events. Some of its members made their career in the army and diplomacy, sometimes even in the liberal professions. Of commerce or industry, there was usually no question. Most - at least the eldest in the family - possessed estates and châteaux. Depending on their means or their tastes, they lived there the whole year round, or only part of the time, for holidays or hunting.

My grandparents owned a mansion in Paris, at 20 Rue Oudinot, in which they lived almost the whole of their lives and where they both died. It was a four-story building of no particular architectural value. The district had a special aura all its own, being part provincial, part monastic and part Ancien Régime. This was the setting into which Pierre de COUBERTIN was born, and in which he lived.

Pierre de COUBERTIN lived on the entresol, overlooking Rue Oudinot, in a room with two windows and a smaller adjoining anteroom, situated right above the caretaker's lodge and the arch. In his room, he had an upright piano and, as was his wont, a great array of photographs, trinkets and souvenirs. Behind his room was a rather dark dressing-room.

Both my grandparents were cultured and artistic, each in his own way. My grandmother had received a classical education, and even learned Latin by following her brothers' lessons. She showed me, with great pride, her old Virgil which she guarded jealously. But she did not seem to continue much with her reading and studies later in life. She wrote many letters, loved to go visiting and receive friends, never went out except by carriage, even in the country, and devoted a large part of her life to charitable works. In spite of her keen intelligence, her judgement - and consequently her likes and dislikes - was never entirely devoid of unconscious partiality. When I have added that she was a good musician, and drew admirably, I shall have completed this brief portrait of her.
My grandfather, for his part, was quite a handsome man, very attached to his religious and other principles, but much colder in temperament. His mother was said to have been a Jansenist and he was considered to have inherited some of her austerity. At any rate, his judgement was sound and carefully reasoned, and his nature upright and loyal. He was very cultured, and never ceased to be interested in every-thing, right up to his last days. When he suffered from cataract and was no longer able to read, he engaged an intelligent reader, with whom he could discuss the works he had asked her to read to him. But his real vocation was painting. While very young, he had worked with some of the best artists of his day, and remained on very friendly terms with a number of them. As long as his eyesight permitted, he continued to paint, and left a fairly considerable number of paintings behind him, several of which are to be seen in museums, in particular, his "Pontifical Procession," which is in the Vatican. On the whole, his painting is serious and straightforward, although varying in quality. From his youthful travels, especially in the East, he brought back many fresh water-colours in luminous colours. But under my grandmother's influence, he gradually went in more and more for the painting of religious subjects. Many churches and chapels are decorated with his works. Apart from her great piety, my grandmother was an ardent legitimist, more from tradition than any profound conviction.

Pierre de COUBERTIN was a child of gentle character and peaceful tastes, from what my mother told me. He loved quiet games, and would draw for hours. My grandmother, who always had a soft spot for him, devoted a great deal of time to him. Intelligent, hard-working and gentle, he was all a mother could wish for in a son. Of his boyhood, I know very little, but it is interesting to note that his gifts of observation were very marked even at an early age. Among the manuscripts he left behind is an account of a journey he made with his parents to the Tyrol, in 1876 or 1877. My grandmother admitted only two sovereigns: first of all, the Pope-King, reigning in Rome, and then the Comte de Chambord, the only legitimate King of France, while the "Orléans," the "Bon-apartes," and the Republic were all considered usurpers to an equal degree.

This journey to the Tyrol in fact seems to have been taken for the express purpose of making a "pilgrimage" - as they called it at the time - to Frohsdorf Castle, where Henry V lived.

Pierre de COUBERTIN therefore accompanied his parents, and was received by the pretender to the throne. His very vivid account of the visit is interesting, in that it shows us how the keen sense of observation, the facility with his pen and the gift for
description that marked all his works were already present in his early youth.

It is also interesting to see his juvenile sentiments of ardent royalism, which prove to what extent his environment had influenced him till then; in the light of his subsequent liberalism and the radical evolution that occurred in him, the contrast is quite curious.

He attended the Jesuits' College in the Rue de Madrid, as a day-boy, while his elder brothers had been boarders at the Collège de Vaugirard. For quite a time, he was even president of the Old Boys' Association of his school. As a day-boy, he was always able to take an active part in family life.

The regular army was highly thought of as a career at the time, and the Jesuits prepared many of their students for it at their school in the Rue des Postes. It is quite likely that Pierre de COUBERTIN too thought, for a time of making the army his career. However, whether prepared for it or not, he did not go to St. Cyr, the Military Academy. Instead, he went to the School of Political Sciences, where he followed enthusiastically the courses of his eminent masters. He remained closely attached to several of them, and even gave many lectures there himself afterwards. Studies of this kind could have led to a career in diplomacy, but the originality of his mind would have ill suited him to a routine post. It was probably about this time that he became deeply interested in history and education, for it was shortly afterwards that he went on his first visit to England, which in fact, changed the whole course of his life, and decided his career for him. But let us leave the serious side, and see what the man was like in his private life. There was nothing pedantic nor gravely serious about him. He was an energetic young man full of enthusiasm and gaiety, and very sociable. His parents' wide circle of friends opened the doors of all Paris salons to him, and he did not fail to take advantage of the opportunities this offered him. Besides, he was an excellent companion, who liked to laugh and enjoy himself, frequently organizing small parties where his personality had free reign.

In his amusements, he had even that rather boyish, schoolboy type of wit and fun, in which men whose lives are otherwise devoted to hard work often find relief as a change from the austerity of their thoughts.

At the Château de Mirville, where he often spent the summers with his parents, he was the life and soul of family parties. He produced and arranged a thousand and one entertainments, and I remember the tricks and games he used to play, even the childish game of goose. On other
occasions, he organized lotter-
ies or small displays of fire-
works on the little lake for
neighbourhood friends and
house guests.

Artistically gifted, he
drew with great ease, was a
natural pianist, and loved to
compose and decorate programmes.
We still have one which he
made, on his first Atlantic
crossing on his way to America,
for a gala party in which
Coquelin Aimé and Maria Leg-
ault took part.

On the pond at Mirville
he kept a canoe and a small
skiff, which he named "Tam-
Tam." It was he who taught
me how to row. While tennis
was still in its infancy as a
popular sport, he installed
a court on the small lawn at
Mirville in front of the
château; it was a very rudi-
mentary affair with the limits
marked by strips of cloth.

As soon as the bicycle
appeared, he became a keen
cyclist. One of the first cy-
cles he ever had was called
"Nini patte-en-l'air" (Nini
with her foot in the air) from
the name of a famous dancer of
the day. He explained that
the name was apt because one
pedal was always up in the air
while the other was down.

This trivial fact illus-
trates clearly the amusing
side of his character. His
memory was prodigious; he was
never mistaken about a date,
remembering exactly what he
had seen and heard. The same
was true of music and at Mir-
ville, I used to enjoy getting
him to play some of my favour-
ite tunes on the piano for me,
which he always did by ear,
with an astonishing sureness
of touch and musical sense. I
never saw him with a page of
music in front of him; he
claimed in fact that he did not
know how to read music. He had
undoubtedly been given a few
notions of it by his mother,
but had never worked at it
seriously.

One of the last times
that he came to see me in Paris,
about 1934, I invited him to
play a little. And although he
had not touched a piano for a
great many years, he played
with the same obvious pleasure
and the same astonishing ease.
For it was among his friends
and relations that Pierre de
COUBERTIN revealed all his
charm. His conversation was
always lively, full of great
learning, which enabled him
to discuss any subject with
equal ease and interest.

And then, a side less
well known to his character,
but very engaging nevertheless,
he was very sentimental. He
liked to collect souvenirs; he
attached value to everything
that could remind him of a mo-
ment of emotion. In this way
he collected dried flowers,
picked here and there on his
travels and walks, keeping them
in small envelopes on which he
noted the date and place and a
few other details. He evoked
with endearing sensitivity
a host of little incidents of
the past, seemingly trivial facts, which nevertheless woke dormant echoes in him. It is rare not to find a few reminders of this kind in his letters to his friends and relations. He attached great importance to traditions, anniversaries, everything that evokes and keeps the past alive.

Such keen sensitivity often leads to a certain susceptibility, but he was too intelligent for his ever to become exaggerated. Such was the man in his youth, and such he remained deep down inside later in life, in spite of the gravity imposed on him by the heavy burden of work and cares.

In 1894, Pierre de COUBERTIN married Miss Marie ROTHAN, from an old family of Alsace, whose father, a famous diplomat, had played an important role in Franco-German policy, up to 1870. Mr. ROTHAN was also a great collector, who owned a famous private collection of paintings. From then on, Pierre de COUBERTIN spent less time in Normandy each year, and much more in occupied Alsace, on his parents in law's lovely estate at Luttenbach, near the Schlucht. But this house, caught for a long time between two fires, was destroyed during the 1914-1918 war, with everything of value that it contained, and this was a very hard blow both to himself and to his wife.

The two children born of this marriage were delicate in health, which was a source of constant worry to him. But the trials and tribulations of life were always borne with great stoicism by this hard worker and fighter. And no one, apart from his close circle of friends and relations, was allowed to see the anguish and sorrow that filled his heart; the Baroness de COUBERTIN always succeeded by her presence and her devotion in backing his enterprises, and helping him in his overwhelming task.

Another quality of Pierre de COUBERTIN's that cannot be ignored was his disinterestedness. With his countless gifts, he could easily have made a lucrative career for himself. But when one has the soul of an apostle, one attaches to material contingencies only the importance needed to lead a worthy and honourable life. Not only did Pierre de COUBERTIN never seek to make his fortune, but he spent everything he had without hesitation for the work he undertook, and it is paying him great tribute to say that his last years were spent in the shadow of material cares which compelled him to live modestly. I have said that in his youth, he played tennis and went in for rowing; the latter sport always remained his favourite, and he practised it for a long time. But without aiming at any championship, he practised almost all sports: boxing, riding, fencing, etc. He mastered them perfectly; he even created a new sport: fencing on horseback, which
never, however, became widespread.

It was his first journey to England, as I have said, that shaped his whole career. He discovered there, in fact, a method of education unknown in France, that of the famous Thomas Arnold, who can be said to have put new life into old England. It was his principles of self-control, responsibility, fair play, healthy bodily and mental equilibrium in a liberal and traditional atmosphere that showed de COUBERTIN the path to follow.

Among the great teachers of his day, he was lucky enough to meet and inspire Father DIDON. The latter, a famous Dominican preacher, had been persuaded to become a teacher and put new life into Arcueil School. A keen, generous, extremely upright person, he gave Pierre de COUBERTIN his wholehearted assistance, and Arcueil School became the first private school to go in actively for sport and have teams taking part in interschool competitions.

At any rate, after England, Pierre de COUBERTIN decided to visit the United States. He went there with one of his friends, Georges HERSENT; it was a wonderful journey. We all went from Mirville to see him off on the "Normandie," and it made a great impression on me.

What he brought back from this voyage, what followed, there is no point in my describing. His own writings and his deeds are there to tell us, and from now on, both from the sporting and the educational point of view, his life can be followed step by step. What I wanted was to give a glimpse of the intimate and familiar side of this extraordinarily gifted man, his kindness, his gaiety, his charm. And for me, he has always remained what he was in his twenties and for many years after - affectionate, sensitive, an idealist, loyal in friendship, and always understanding.

May this brief portrait complete the memories kept of Pierre de COUBERTIN, by those who knew him later in the more difficult years of his life.

C. de M.