

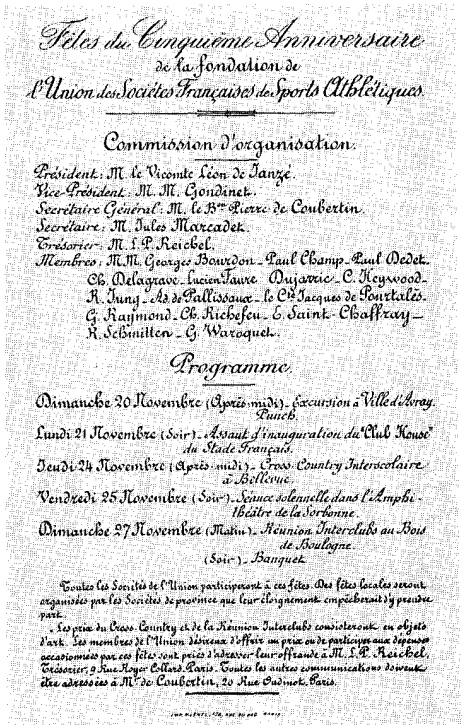


“Olympic Genesis: the Sorbonne Conferences of 1892 and 1894”*

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The Modern Olympic Games, the creation of the fertile mind of Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937), are among the world's most important social phenomena. Coubertin's personal and sporting philosophy was an exotic amalgam of the ancient Athenian pursuit of excellence, a mystical, medieval chivalric code of honour grafted to physical robustness, and, lastly, a modern English gentlemanly concept of sport as both amusing and morally uplifting. For several years, the young idealist, Coubertin, worked towards the redemption of physical vigour among his own French countrymen. Slowly, daringly, the secret concept of an Olympic Games renaissance, cosmopolitan and glorious in nature, emerged as well; the twenty-nine year old Baron called for an athletic conference in the sumptuous auditorium of the Paris Sorbonne, France's most prestigious university.

The Sorbonne Conference of November 25, 1892, was the culmination of a week-long sports festival, ostensibly to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the USFSA—the French confederation of athletic clubs. Pierre de Coubertin was beyond such mundane celebrations and dreamed of bigger things. French President Carnot acted as festival patron; Grand Duke Vladimir of Russia, another of Coubertin's political and social friends, agreed to preside over the conference. For a week, cycling races, cross-country, pedestrian, and fencing matches, hopefully “softened” the delegates for the culminating evening session when Coubertin would reveal his plans for a Modern Olympic Games and seek their endorsement¹. As usual, the Baron supplied most of the finances



for his project, although assisted by French aristocrats and the famous peripatetic American newspaper editor-sportsman, James Gordon Bennett.

* The most thorough research on this facet of the Olympic Movement is the history senior thesis of Peter C. Diamond, Yale University, 1974, titled: "Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the Founding of the Modern Olympic Games, 1892-1894".

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Gymnastics Society leader, Ernest Callot, composed a special ode for the opening ceremonies.

Diamond's research² indicates that the evening of the conference was a cold and grey one. As the delegates settled into their seats, they could see the men whom Coubertin had chosen to sit with him on stage. They were Janze, President of USFSA, Octave Greard, Rector of the Sorbonne, and Prince Obelensky, Marshall of the Court of Grand Duke Wladimir (the Duke's replacement). To indicate the importance of the Russian participation, the room decoration consisted of alternating Russian and French flags³. Obelensky called the meeting to order at 8 p.m. as the program began with the singing of "La Marseillaise", followed by the Russian anthem. Then the delegates were treated to *Second de l'Odeon's* rendition of Callot's original ode de circonstance—Sophoclean verse translated into French. Georges Bourdon delivered a talk about sport in classical times, praised Greek athletics and the sporting poet Pindar⁴. Jules Jusserand, historian and later ambassador to America, spoke on sport in the middle ages, read passages from Deschamps, Villon, concluding with Rabelais' characterization of Gargantua⁵.

The program also included a presentation of "Dante and Virgil at the Union of Sports"—a spiritual comedy by Coubertin's brother, Paul Fredy. Award laureates were presented to M. Bayeux of St. Etienne lycee, A. Magendie, director of the Ecole normale d'instituteurs de Faix, and to Paul Fredy.

Coubertin's speech described the essential role of physical education in the modern world; he praised Georges St. Clair, USFSA founder, extolled the military, hygienic, liberating, character-building and democratizing benefits of the new French school physical education. Coubertin then began, ever so imperceptibly, to shift the focus to the heart of the matter. He declared that

modern culture is saturated with Hellenism; as in ancient times, he said, athletics are educative, socially ameliorative, and harmonious.⁶ Vaulting the centuries, never forgetting for a moment his veiled Olympic dream, Coubertin concluded with his famous admonition:

"Let us export oarsmen, runners, fencers; there is the free trade of the future—and on the day when it takes place among the customs of Europe, the course of peace will have received a new and powerful support. This thought is sufficient to encourage your humble servant to dream now of the second part of his program; he hopes that you will assist him as you have aided him to this point and that with your assistance he can work for and eventually realize, on a basis properly in tune with the conditions of modern life, the re-establishment of the Olympic Games."⁷

It was all out now. The Baron was convinced that the intellectual and sports conscious audience would consider his plea more than hyperbole, now mere allegory, but a realistic suggestion for international sport. He was met instead, with polite applause and an abysmal lack of understanding. The Baron could hardly believe the reaction of the delegates. As he said: "I was prepared for irony and protest, but not indifference. People applauded, wished me well, but failed absolutely to understand that I was serious."⁸ The audience perceived his bold concept as idealized pageantry; one woman, thinking that Coubertin was describing a play of some sort, told him that she had recently seen the "Olympics" on the San Francisco stage. "Will these games be theatrical reconstructions?", one person asked. "Will the athletes be nude?... and what about the women?... and who will participate? Only French?" Coubertin replied that these new Olympic Games would be world-wide. "Oh, then," came a mocking retort, "we will see Indians,

Negroes, and Chinese.”⁹ The young French dreamer turned and left the Sorbonne—his grandiose first effort a flop.

Coubertin “pitched his tune in a lower key” and worked hard in the next 18 months to educate better key figures in society, government, and sport—both national and international—about his world crusade.¹⁰ His new plan was for another Sorbonne conference—bigger, more cleverly conceived and, ostensibly, to seek solutions to the new but troublesome problem of defining an amateur athlete. It was another attempt at subterfuge—a Coubertin ploy to masquerade his singular hope for an Olympic reincarnation. An abortive junket to a dozen American cities in 1893 proved to Coubertin that much more work needed to be done on both sides of the Atlantic. His visit to London was also singularly unsuccessful. His world-wide circular of January, 1894, outlining the agenda for the international congress on amateurism, probably was more effective. Tucked away at the bottom of the document were supplementary items nine and ten—proposals for the organization and implementation of an Olympic Games.

Things went poorly during the early months of '94; few nations showed interest in a June meeting. Coubertin's difficulties in obtaining speakers was compounded by especially unpacific bickering among French athletic clubs.

They would boycott the Sorbonne Conference if Coubertin's strong efforts at German representation were continued. He redoubled his labours, convincing the French diplomat Baron de Courcel to preside at the conference. Coubertin recalled that Courcel accepted the rebirth of the Olympic movement while it lay in its “baptismal basin. For this I shall remember him affectionately.”¹¹ A famous friend of the Baron, archaeologist Charles Waldstein, convinced the

royal family of Greece to allow their names as honorary members at the Sorbonne affair.¹² In rapid succession, the Duke of Sparta, King of Belgium, the Prince of Wales, Crown Prince of Sweden, Colonel Balck of the Stockholm Royal Gymnastic Institute, and even a somewhat sceptical Sir Arthur Balfour, gave their support to Coubertin. In a gem of an article, first published in the *Revue de Paris* (June 15, 1894), and an English translation in *The Chautauquan*, Coubertin quieted some of his critics with an assurance that “modern, very modern will be these restored Olympic Games.”¹³

The second congress opened June 16, 1894, with seventy-nine delegates from thirteen nations and over fifty sporting societies present. France, Britain, the USA, Greece, Russia, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Bohemia, Holland, and Australia sent official delegates or written sanctions. The always suspect Germans were represented, as well, although unofficially. Frequent bouts of Parisian entertainment, lawn tennis at the Luxembourg Gardens, a nautical celebration, fencing and feasting, all had their soothing effect—*Le Temps* of Paris claimed the purpose of the week-long meeting was “to study and regulate, if possible, the thorny question of amateurism... and to prepare the basis for an international code of rules that will serve in re-establishing the modern Olympic Games on a worldwide scale.”¹⁴ *The Times* of London bluntly declared that “the object was to propose in all seriousness a revival of the Greek Olympic Games.”¹⁵ Two thousand people, including elegantly-dressed women attended the first session in the grand amphitheatre of the Sorbonne dominated by Puvis de Chavannes' magnificent mural “Bois de Sacre.” A speech by Courcel, an oration by the poet Jean Aicard, the singing of the Hymn of Apollo (recently uncovered at Delphi) by Mme Jeanne Remacle, lifted the audience into some

kind of celestial atmosphere. The well-orchestrated meeting was going well; Coubertin was convinced that "Hellenism filtered through the vast enclosure, producing a harmony that transcended the ages."¹⁶ *The Times* correspondent was impressed and told his readers so. Coubertin was gleeful at such a brave beginning; "I knew from that moment, no one would vote against the re-establishment of the Olympic Games."¹⁷

While the majority of delegates amused themselves during the week with a healthy variety of sporting pastimes, Parisian excursions, and "heures de loisir", the two working committees laboured over a definition of amateurism and hammered out details of an inaugural Olympic Games. The festivities continued; five hundred conferees attended a lavish evening affair sponsored by The Racing Club. Horse races and mock battles on horseback (a Coubertin specialty) were held in a Bois de Boulogne meadow lighted by a thousand torches. In the background, an orchestra of trumpets played hunting and military music throughout the night.¹⁸

An encouraging telegram from the King of Greece plus fruitful suggestions by the committees on amateurism and the Olympic Games pleased Coubertin; all that was needed was the blessing of the delegation. Enthusiastic and unanimous affirmation for an Athens and Paris Olympics in 1896 and 1900 followed rapidly. The delegates entrusted the organization and administration of the Athens Olympics to an International Olympic Committee, selected by Coubertin, self-perpetuating, composed of men financially independent who valued internationalism above nationalism.¹⁹ The final dinner took place on Saturday night, June 23 at the Jardin d'Acclimation. The speakers included Courcel, Rabier, new IOC President Bikelas, the classicist Michel

Breal, and Coubertin. "Palmes academiques" were presented to American historian, William Milligan Sloane, to Palissaux, and Jules Morcadet. Breal gave a stirring speech in which he praised the Olympic Games and predicted great benefits to the host city. Coubertin delivered a sentimental and lofty oration, so typical of his outpourings in the next forty-three years. He thanked all for helping in the fulfilment of a personal dream that would benefit mankind.

"In this year 1894 and in this city of Paris... we were able to bring together the representatives of international athletics for the restoration of a two-thousand-year-old idea which today as in the past still quickens the human heart...; I... lift my glass to the Olympic idea, which has traversed the mists of the ages like an all-powerful ray of sunlight and returned to illumine the threshold of the twentieth century with a gleam of joyous hope."²⁰

Bill Henry, American journalist, director of the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, and one of the few Americans who knew the Baron, noted that

"... amid strange scenes in which the practical men of the athletic world found their petty differences dissipated under the mystic spell of the atmosphere of ancient Greece that was cast over the conference through the inspired stage management of its great protagonist, the Olympic dream of Baron de Coubertin took definite shape for the first time."²¹

Though Coubertin's mood seemed modest and gracious at the close of the conference, the great man quite rightly declared, "As for myself, I hereby assert my claims for being sole author of the whole project."²²

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Olympic Genesis (1892-1894)

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¹ Coubertin's two main autobiographical works give good although frequently uncorroborative accounts of pre-convention activities. They are "Une Campagne de Vingt et Un Ans 1887-1908" (Paris: Librairie de l'éducation physique 1908) and "Mémoires Olympiques" (Lausanne: Bureau International de Pédagogie sportive).

² Peter C. Diamond, "Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the Founding of the Modern Olympic Games, 1892-1894" (Unpublished Senior thesis, History 95, Yale University, 1974, pp. 14-17).

³ See primary documentation in Otto Mayer, "Retrospectives Olympiques" (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1961), p. 10.

⁴ Bourdon remembered both conferences and recalls them in "La restauration des Jeux Olympiques", "Les Jeux de la 8e Olympiade Paris 1924" (Paris, 1924), pp. 23-24.

⁵ See Marie Therese Eyquem, "Pierre de Coubertin: L'Épopée Olympique" (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1966), p. 129.

⁶ Bourdon, p. 23.

⁷ Coubertin, "Une Campagne"..., p. 90.

⁸ Coubertin, "Mémoires Olympiques", p. 9.

⁹ See Eyquem, "Pierre de Coubertin"..., p. 131.

¹⁰ See Chapter VII, "The Critical Years" in John Apostol Lucas, "Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the Formative Years of the Modern Olympic Movement, 1883-1896" (unpublished Ed. D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1962).

¹¹ Pierre de Coubertin, "Le sport et la société moderne", "Revue Hebdomadaire" (June 20, 1914). 380-381.

¹² Charles Waldstein, "A Last Word on the Olympian Games", "Harper's Weekly", 40 (May 23, 1896), 515.

¹³ Pierre de Coubertin, "The Re-establishment of the Olympic Games", "The Chautauquan", 19 (September, 1894), 700.

¹⁴ "Le Temps" (Paris), June 17, 1894.

¹⁵ "The Times" (London), June 18, 1894.

¹⁶ Pierre de Coubertin as quoted in J. Dumazedier, "Regards Neufs sur les Jeux Olympiques" (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), p. 76; see also "Mémoires Olympiques", p. 18.

¹⁷ Coubertin, "Mémoires Olympiques", p. 18.

¹⁸ "Le Temps" (Paris), June 21, 1894.

¹⁹ For a fuller explanation of the IOC structure and philosophy, see Otto Mayer "A travers les anneaux olympiques" (Geneva: Pierre Cailler, 1960), p. 18, *passim*.

²⁰ Pierre de Coubertin in "The Olympic Idea - Discourses and Essays of Pierre de Coubertin" (Cologne: Carl Diem Institut, 1966), pp. 6-7.

²¹ Bill Henry, "An Approved History of the Olympic Games" (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1948), p. 34.

²² Coubertin, "The Olympic Games of 1896" "The Olympic Games B.C. 776 A.D. 1896" (New York, 1896), p. 58.