I - Introduction

From 26th July to 3rd August 1975, the Fédération Internationale d’Éducation Physique (FIEP) and the International Olympic Academy (IOA) had organised a joint meeting in the IOA’s magnificent premises at Olympia on the theme of “Olympism and Physical Training”. No. 4-1975 of FIEP’s Bulletin is devoted entirely to an account of this important meeting at which the great problems concerning Olympic ideals, the Olympic Games and their relations with education were discussed.

Unanimity was reached on two main ideas:
1. The unquestionable educational value of the Olympic ideals.
2. The serious dangers threatening these ideals in the present evolution of top level competitive sport in general and the Olympic Games in particular.

Below we summarise a few of the main ideas put forward during these discussions, accompanied by a number of new personal reflections, arising out of the latest Olympic events (Montreal Games) or recent international sports meetings.

II - The Olympic ideals - The Olympic movement

Much has been written on this subject. For the sake of brevity, let us simply quote two short extracts from the excellent speech made at the FIEP-IOA meeting by Mr. Otto Szymiczek, Dean of the IOA:

“The goals of the Olympic movement are mainly educational and are aimed at the harmonious development and the perfection of man...”

“The main purpose of the Olympic movement is to use the activity of the elite to rouse the interest of the general public and the government in various countries with a view to encouraging the whole population’s participation in physical exercise...”

“Coubertin was fully aware of the educational and biological values of competitive sport and wished to use them for the purpose of achieving his final objective, which was to find a system of education for the young... that combined the simultaneous...”
development of the mind and the body through physical exercise..."

To sum up: "education" and "sport for all" are, in the final analysis, the two main aims of what is called the Olympic movement.

The Olympic ideals: the surpassing of oneself ("Citius, Altius, Fortius"), fairplay (respect for the rules and respect for one's opponent), the friendship between participants which helps to pave the way for fraternity between nations, the love of struggle and disinterested effort, etc... are the spiritual and emotional bases of this action as well as the vital factors contributing to the education of the young and the generalised practice of physical, healthful and recreational activities.

Are the Olympic Games of today and international sport in general in accord with these ideals and do they fulfil the mission laid down by the Olympic movement?

Unfortunately, one comes to doubt it more and more!

III - The dangers threatening the Olympic Games and the Olympic movement

The Olympic Games, held every four years, were to be the highest concretisation of the Olympic ideals and the most effective setting for propaganda in favour of the practice of sport: this was in fact Pierre de Coubertin's fundamental idea.

How is it then that very many teachers and sportsmen—of whom I am one—are so seriously concerned about the future of the Olympic Games and the Olympic movement?

It is obviously because the Olympic Games are threatened by very serious dangers, of which the following are the two main ones:

1. Politisation of the Games and top level competitive sport

The interference of politics in Olympic sport burst into the open with the events in Munich, followed by those in Montreal.

Recent incidents have only served to confirm this interference.

It could not possibly be otherwise under present circumstances.

a) First of all because politics are necessarily bound up, on the national level, with sports activities. In many countries, government policy determines "sports policy", that is to say the trends and development of sport.

Sport is more or less dependent on the State, i.e. on politics.

But as soon as one steps outside the national framework, it becomes clear that it is often in the field of sport that the differences and conflicts between the political conceptions of different countries are expressed—and frequently clash.

There are many instances of international sports meetings at which these conflicts, these displays of national pride, and sometimes even hatreds, have been visible for all to see.

b) Then, the mere fact that the Olympic Games and other big international sports meetings—by the gathering together of very large crowds and by the very wide audience reached by television and the press also assembled for the occasion—offer an exceptional international platform for political groups or "active minorities"... encourages these groups to take spectacular action. Munich is a tragic example of this!

By its courageous and at the same time flexible attitude, the International Olympic Committee can only reduce—but not eliminate altogether—the occurrence of such acts of political interference in sport; how far away we are then from the ideals of fraternity and peace advocated by Olympism!

2. The search for the exceptional individual

The desire for victory "at all costs", which prevails in sport today, inevitably leads to the search for and exploitation of exceptional individuals, i.e. those exceptionally gifted for one very specific activity.

It is a move towards biological specialisation, which tomorrow may well become psycho-biological specialisation in view of the increasing importance of the mind in winning victories, compared with the other phenomenon of equal biological value.

In a recent article "Reflections on the Olympic Games" (FIEP Bulletin No. 1-1977) we called attention to the two extremes
represented first by the child prodigy selected at a very early age, such as Nadia Comaneci (gymnastics), and second by the “monsters” of muscle and weight that one tends to see more and more in weightlifting, throwing the discus and javelin, and even judo, etc...

The tendency to select giants has for a long time been apparent in basketball, but it is now also starting in other sports.

This trend is justified logically by the desire for international victories and there is even an element of good in it after all, as it gives the “biological sport” (in the sense of an individual differing markedly from the normal) a chance to become integrated in society and may even bring him a little more happiness.

There is no harm in it except that the average individual finds himself increasingly “left out”: what hope have I, he thinks, against these exceptionally gifted individuals systematically aided by the generosity of their government or federation?
Many of them quite simply give up!

We wish to call attention here to a tendency that appears to us particularly worrying: the growing exploitation of children at Olympic level.

This is particularly obvious today in women’s gymnastics and in swimming, both sports in which the average age of champions is becoming younger and younger.

Let us attempt first of all to explain the surprising fact that, in these sports, the child is superior to the adult he will become.

This is obviously an anomaly... and a shocking one in the usual concept of the evolution of human beings!

The reasons, in so far as gymnastics are concerned, may be as follows:

a) Muscular strength - body weight ratio

There are many gymnasts weighing from 35 to 40 kg, between the ages of 13 and 16, a time of life when the ratio of body weight to the strength that can be acquired by the muscles is very favourable to the mobilisation of the body by the arms (apparatus) or the legs (floor exercises, vaults).

It seems that this ratio is much less favourable among young boys than young girls. And, in addition, men’s gymnastics require comparatively greater muscular force (exercises on the rings, in particular) than women’s gymnastics, which would explain why no boys of 14 to 16 have ever become Olympic champions.

b) Height

Although bio-mechanical studies are needed to verify this assertion, it is thought that smallness of height (Nadia Comaneci was only 1.53 m (5 ft) tall at the Montreal Olympics: and a number of Russian champions are even smaller) is an advantage for gymnastics work on the apparatus.

b) High qualities of motor adaptation

A child is the extremely malleable “virgin soil” where the most complex automatism is the most easily implanted. The circus has always exploited and still exploits this biological proclivity of earliest youth.

d) Mind

Childhood is also the period of psychic availability. On the one hand, for a child champion, mental and affective concentration on the sports specialised he has chosen (or that has been more or less imposed on him) comes much more easily than for an adult. There are no family worries, personal or social problems, no professional obligations (except those of studies, which are often considerably simplified for him by the people in charge of his sports preparation). He places himself more completely in the hands of the adult, the trainer who guides him. He also has that strong need (typically human, and therefore highly praiseworthy!) to assert himself, to try and become “bigger, stronger”, a need characteristic mainly of adolescence, but already very visible in the child, with a tendency to diminish in the adult.

There is, finally, a certain unawareness of danger or of the consequences of an accident which, combined with the confidence that he has, during training, in the efficaciousness of the trainer’s helping hand always there to catch him if necessary (all the easier too, the lighter the gymnast)
means that he will try the most difficult exercises without any fear at all.

In swimming, factors c) and d) also play a role. They are completed by the qualities of functional adaptability to the liquid environment which, owing to the very great organic malleability of the child, are superior to those of an adult.

This exploitation of the qualities peculiar to children and at the beginning of adolescence raises—or should raise—moral and social problems, in addition to those of sporting success-or failure.

As educationalists or welfare officers, we can only ask questions, leaving it to specialised scientists—physiologists, psychologists, sociologists... and undoubtedly psychiatrists—to carry out a serious study of these difficult problems.

— What happens, once they reach maturity, to these young organisms, prematurely subjected to apparently excessive efforts?

— By several hours’ training a day and a continual striving after limited goals and specialised achievement, are we not in danger of depriving the child of this wonderful period of childish freedom and freedom from care, of improvisation, dreams, creative imagination and finally play, which constitutes the most important educational contribution to this decisive period in the evolution of a human being?

— What are the reactions of the vast majority of these young people—and not only of a rare minority of brilliant, highly successful individuals—when at 18 or 20, they find their sporting career already behind them? Especially those, by far the most numerous, who have sacrificed their youth to an often irksome training... without ever obtaining the hoped for results?

— What is one to think, finally, of this absolute concentration of a young person—and even of an adult—on a goal which is after all of very limited human interest and, in any case, very egotistical and, as a general rule, deceptive with regard to the best chances for a successful family and social life?

To these remarks on the dangers represented by the politisation of sport, the search for exceptional individuals and what some people have called “the massacre of the innocents” (the exploitation of children), we could add other observations concerning the increasing hold gained by money, the commercialisation of sport, the desire for victory at all costs, cheating, doping, etc...

These are all facts familiar to those in charge of Olympic sport, who do everything they can to combat them.

Let us simply bear in mind the most fundamental, most characteristic fact which explains all the others: today, top level competitive sport, Olympic sport is dominated by the concept of champion.

We must have champions; at all costs; and we must keep on having them; to satisfy the public, the sports officials and the politicians!

It is this idea of sport—this deplorable mentality—that is criticised by Javier Ostos, President of the Fédération Internationale de Natation Amateur, in an excellent article entitled “Olympic Standard”, published in No. 111 (January 1977) of the “Olympic Review”.

“Everyone asks and requires that those who participate succeed in winning prizes... The error we have made when looking at the yield of the Olympic Games is precisely not to consider the participation a success unless the teams return loaded with medals.”

This demand for champions which leads to veritable “schools for champions”, towards a more or less openly admitted professionalism, towards bitter rivalries between men and countries, is the great evil threatening the Olympic Games. This is what we have to fight against!

IV - Saving educational sport and the Olympic Games

The task is not an easy one!
For it demands a revolutionary change in the current attitude to sport of most people, sports officials and the athletes themselves.
A profound change of mentality has to be brought about—involving to a large extent a veritable “return to the source”, that is to say, to the Olympic ideals.
Some people consider this “return” impossible; the world is no longer the same as in Pierre de Coubertin’s day, and one must try to fit in with the social and economic environment of man prevailing today.

They forget that this so-called “fitting in” will inevitably lead to the death of the Olympic Games. Premonitory signs can already be seen.

On the other hand, we are convinced that it is possible to change people’s attitudes, that is to save the Olympic Games and the educational value of sport.

We have to believe in the force of ideas. It is after all Pierre de Coubertin’s ideas—and ideas alone—that in spite of many very serious obstacles, have ensured the triumph of Olympism.

Another conception of sport must be created among the public and officials, different from that which today attracts the crowds into the stadia but, at the same time, keeps the vast majority from the actual practice of sport, that is to say, from what really counts.

In the first place, we must show that man is “sporting” by nature, that is to say a being who always feels the need to surpass himself, to beat his own past performances. This is where man differs from an animal.

This typically human determination to surpass oneself can be seen in all sorts of fields—even in delinquency.

Our duty is to make the best possible use of it for educational purposes.

And, in this field, sport is one of the best, the most healthy and the most powerful means at our disposal.

If this sporting impulse really has some universal value—and we are quite sure it has—we must do everything we can to ensure that the maximum of individuals benefit from it. Such “riches” cannot be reserved for only a minority of highly gifted individuals. It is necessary therefore first of all to create the right conditions—economic (leisure and standard of living), material (facilities) and psycho-social (interest)—for the fulfilment of sport for all, in which young and old, the strong and the weak and even the handicapped, can experience the great joy of “asserting themselves, of competing and winning”.

We must also destroy the myths which at present maintain top level competitive sport in a direction which we consider detrimental to education.

Here are a few rather “brutal assertions” which should obviously be mitigated, in some cases commented on and explained in detail, but which we have decided to keep as they are, in order to draw attention to them and make people really think about them:

— It is wrong to state that champions are absolutely necessary for the practice of sport by the vast majority.

The relationship between “sport for the elite” and “sport for all” is the subject of much discussion today, particularly among sociologists.

— It is wrong to state that Olympic victories show the superiority of a political system.

— It is wrong to establish a strict relationship between Olympic successes and the economic strength or social standards of a country.

— It is wrong to imagine that any significant relationship exists between sports victories and the state of health of a country.

— It is pointless, finally, for a country to set out on the hard—and often illusive—hunt for medals.

Apart from the fleeting proud satisfaction that such victories give to a few individuals, what do they change in the life of the average citizen, in the living standard and the international influence of a nation?

If we want to alter present attitudes to sport, to destroy the myths, we must act.

And act first of all through the schools, which will mould the sportsmen of tomorrow.

The work of renovation to be accomplished is tremendous and very difficult. Schools are in fact strongly influenced by the social and family environment and by official attitudes to sport... all influences that can in fact only be fundamentally modified for the future in the schools themselves or, more generally,
by acting on the children and adolescents. A difficult vicious circle to break!

But let us remember with Bergson that “action breaks the circle”.

Sometimes a simple and energetic action, undertaken at the right moment, has been enough to bring about great social changes.

The movement in favour of “sport for all” and against the excesses of top level competitive sport seems to us sufficiently large today among many teachers and welfare officers in many countries, for us to hope that something will soon be done to pave the way for a healthier conception of sport in the service of man’s progress.

The work of physical training instructors seems vital to us here.

They can act, along the lines we consider advisable, only if they themselves have the right attitude to sport, if they themselves are fully aware of the advantages and dangers represented for the education of their pupils by the practice of sport or spectator sport.

In too many countries, schools and the actual training of P.T. instructors are still strongly influenced by attitudes to top level competitive sport.

A regrettable confusion between “sport” and “physical education” is often made. People have a tendency to attribute indiscriminately to all forms of sport educational values which they do not possess—or no longer possess in the present context.

School and university sport, the true way to the discovery of sport and sports training, must inculcate the ideas of sport as a fair, disinterested game, and sport as a means of testing oneself in friendly rivalry.

It ought to guide the competitive sport of specialised federations in the right direction and not be marked, as happens only too often, by a tendency to stray from the straight and narrow path (by cheating, chauvinism, etc.).

We cannot go fully here into our ideas on the role of schools, the help to be given to school sport and P.T. in order to enable them to be effective, or on the training of P.T. instructors and the part to be played by them; it would take too long and these are complex problems that have already been widely studied. We wish simply to make people aware of their fundamental importance in the task of saving sport.

Act, next, through the social environment (the two actions obviously being linked). This is the work of the sports officials, welfare departments (governments, various associations) and the mass media.

Unfortunately the same vicious circle exists: the public is only interested in top level competitive sport because the mass media (TV and newspapers above all) encourage it in this direction and because politicians “follow the general trend”. But the mass media and politics are themselves guided by the “interests” of the public!

Here too, to break the circle requires the courageous and disinterested action of a few militants, determined to fight for a “purer, calmer, more generous sport” such as Pierre de Coubertin dreamed of.

We think that, among educationalists and sportsmen themselves, these militants are more numerous than is commonly thought.

They are found among international organisations, like FIEP, CIEPS and AIESEP, which fight for the integration of sport in general into the educational system by including physical activities in the regular timetable, and among those that are more directly concerned with top level competitive sport and the Olympic Games, such as the IOC, the IOA, the National Olympic Committees and the Sports Federations!

The problem is to gather together all these men of good will and combine their efforts.

But we have confidence: one must, and one can, save the Olympic movement!

P.S.