In the text we are publishing here, Professor Liselott Diem defends a leading Olympic idea which embraces life in all its forms and which, because it implies a constant will to surpass, constitutes a true pedagogical challenge.
The Olympic Idea — term and content — should be better defined. The term is rather vague and its content has been misinterpreted. The Olympic Idea is not confined to Olympic events or to the Olympic Games; it comprises a sum of moral behavioral patterns to govern one’s life.

I am referring to my paper which I gave here in Olympia in July 1983, when I dealt with a publication of Pierre de Coubertin: “Le respect mutuel”, mutual respect. Coubertin referred this mutual respect to the outlook on life in general not mentioning sport in his publication; but it seems evident that in the behavioral attitudes he postulated, the Olympic Philosophy and the Olympic Idea are outlined. This mutual respect referred to the respect for tradition, but also to the respect for religion, for conventions, for the individual and for the culture of human conscience. He defines the terms faith, tolerance and mutual respect, explaining that one single faith valid for everyone can never be achieved in modern society. And it is therefore that one had taken one’s refuge to “tolerance”. The term tolerance, however, primarily denominates a rather passive attitude and therefore it is not suitable for education: “In between tolerance and faith there is ample space for mutual respect”. This respect, i.e. esteem, is the basis for a well-operating democracy.

And therefore the Olympic Idea requires mutual respect: respect for the political convictions of others, respect for different religious beliefs, for the faith of others, respect for the mode of living of others and for their own culture.

Hereby we learn that the claim “mutual respect” means much more than the “education in fair play” which is generally postulated as the aim and essence of the Olympic Idea. Without jeopardizing this education it must be admitted that it is more or less confined to fair behavior in certain situations, to the adherence to rules and to certain standards which are necessary for common actions on the playing-field and on the track. But “fair play” alone is not enough; it constitutes only one part of human behavior. The pedagogical challenge comprises more: the whole conduct of life which is not confined to one’s behavior in play or competition.

This pedagogical challenge aims at a self-control in the sense of personal competence and social responsibility. Hereby we learn that the “Olympic Idea” seen as a pedagogical challenge, must be understood in the family as well as in the kindergarten, at school, in everyday life, in professional education and at work. It is not confined to sport alone, but it was modelled and shaped by sport. Common sport was only possible after rules and laws had been established which were comprehensible for everyone and for all the nations of this world.

The Olympic Idea is familiar with rivalry, comparison and competition in all phases of life; however, it does not accept hostility. The thriving for better performance, for personal competence going to the limits of one’s ability is not confined to the field of competition in sport. The symbol for the Olympic Idea, once created by Father Didon: “Citius - Altius - Fortius”, i.e. faster - higher - stronger, does not refer to the performance in sport, as has often been claimed erroneously. It refers to the intellectual potentials generating such a performance: to the inner attitude, to the striving for perfection, to higher development and to the increase of human potential to master life. In this respect, the Olympic Idea must be understood as an intellectual challenge.

The challenge of performance generates creative powers in man. It is not imitation, submission to orders, but one’s own personal decision, the understanding of the improvement of performance in the sense of overcoming obstacles and mastering weaknesses, are insights which man can also gain by sport, but not only by sport. The Olympic Idea asks for the headstrong performance, the self-confidence in the sense of an advancement of human personality. In the field of sport, too, we know of such models of the Olympic Idea: the black American Jesse Owens, the Czech Emil Zatopek — who had both given a speech here in Olympia. But also the discus-thrower Al Oerter who achieved his Olympic records without loss of time for his academic education. But we also think of the alpinist Reinhold Messner, who set himself tasks which brought new insights for his fellow-creatures. Such models as these can be found in any sphere of life. It could be contended that the Olympic Idea was rooted in sport; however, it is
transferable to any achievement in life and it requires a certain outlook on life.

This outlook on life is a prior condition for social engagement in a democracy which we often miss nowadays: the respect for one’s neighbour, for different opinions, for political convictions. What Coubertin has criticized in his times we also know today: the power of the parties, the arrogance of the political leaders and alongside these, the lack of democratic demeanor.

Professionalism and commercialization need not contradict the Olympic Idea when they incorporate the laws of mutual respect and of self-development, when they are governed by an inner impulse and are not dependent upon foreign rule. This is the essential difference.

One should always remember what an appropriate term Coubertin chose for people who adhered to “sport for all”. He called them “debrouillards” — in English: slyboots, people who regulate their lives autonomously and at their own decision, who know how to help themselves in any situation of life. From this we learn that “sport for all” does also incorporate the Olympic Idea, when the behavior resorted to here refers to the mastering of life and not when — as it often happens with us — “sport for all” is only related to a special type of sport or to its technique.

The pedagogical challenge means a re-consideration. The narrow-mindedness which is adhered to by most sport organizations and their functionaries contradicts the Olympic Idea which refers to the general mode of living, to one’s demeanor in everyday life, in one’s profession, at work as well as in competition or during one’s leisure-time. All this must be discussed in detail by analyzing all these possibilities. The International Olympic Academy presents a very good basis for such an endeavor.

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