The Spirit of Competition (Agon) in the Olympic Games: From the Ancient to the Modern World

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The purpose of this paper that celebrates the achievements of Ion Ioannides both in sport and in studies of Greek antiquity is to examine various features of the ancient Olympic Games that made them unique, bearing in mind the changes that took place over the thousand years and more of the ancient program. Since this is a mixed audience, as it were, I will include some Pindar and Latin for the Classicists, Coubertin for the historians, and twentieth century famous athletes for the sports fans, and somehow try to make it form a coherent whole, while following the basic theme of the spirit of competition, or agon, in the Olympic Games.

The Ancient Olympics as Contests (Agones), not Games

First of all we should define our terms. The Olympic Games are Games, are they not? It is often assumed (but of course not by Ioannides lecturers) that the ancient Olympics were Games. Even so eminent a scholar as Allen Guttmann, seeking to arrive at a definition to distinguish spontaneous and regulated play, comments: “we do, after all, speak of the Olympic Games, ancient and modern.” He continues: “this much linguistic latitude is not too much to ask.” But is it? Here, I am not singling out Guttmann—for his general point is a good one—but the Olympic Games were not actually the Olympic Games in ancient Greece, as several scholars have pointed out, and they were far from play. Guttmann’s linguistic latitude really makes a difference to our understanding of the ancient Olympics, since they were not diversions or amusements, but the subject of real competition with everything it implies.

Competition (or the agon) permeated the society of the Greeks. According to the distinguished Classicist Bernard Knox, “this competitive spirit had its roots in the disparate nature of their political organization, the cities all vying for territory, for predominance.” Researchers such as the Swiss scholar Jacob Burckhardt in his famous work on the agon, and before him Ernst Curtius the early German excavator at Olympia, have observed that the agon distinguished Greece from other early societies such as Egypt, although this is somewhat of an exaggeration, as Ingomar Weiler has observed. Here, I should explain that the word agon (plural agones) has many connotations in ancient Greek. It is derived from the verb agein to bring or lead, and connected with competition, gatherings, military struggles, legal actions, and other concepts. For our purpose, I will generally discuss the competitive element of the agon.

The ancient Greeks themselves did not call the Olympics “Games,” but olympiakoí agones, or Olympic contests. The mistranslation, or perhaps misinterpretation, of the word “agones” probably
comes through the Latin term “ludi,” meaning games or play, but this adds a new dimension not found in the ancient Olympics. The Romans no doubt referred to the Olympics as “ludi” to fit their own concept of public games as spectacles, shows, or exhibitions that could include chariot racing, gladiators, and Greek athletics. A search of the word Olympics in Latin literature reveals nine examples of the expression ludi Olympici, or similar. The Romans, however, did know the word agon, for it appears ten times in reference to Greek athletic games in general, although only twice in relation to Olympia, and we may add in late sources, namely commentators on the epic poet Vergil.

I have not traced the term “Olympic Games,” or similar, from Roman times, but the first reference to the Olympics in France (in 1574) appears in Robert Garnier’s Cornélie as “jeux olympiens, or so Karl Lennartz informs us.” Thomas Kyd interestingly translates this passage into English as “Olympian sports.” Milton in Paradise Lost written in 1667 speaks of the Olympic Games. The title of the first modern comprehensive monolog on the ancient Olympics in 1732 by the Dutch scholar Theodorus Antonides also refers to the Olympics as “Games,” Olymp-Speelen. Moreover, the seventeen or so festivals that we know used the word “Olympic” or “Olympian” before 1896 (beginning in 1612) were generally known as Games, although they used the epithet largely to add to the importance of their events. These early “Olympic” festivals took place in England, Germany, France, Greece, Sweden, Montréal—Serbia (although at the time this was Hungary), and New York. Of these, the Grand Olympic Festivals in Liverpool in 1862-67 are the closest to the ancient Olympics in name, probably more by accident than design.

Yet having said all this, I must still refer generally to the ancient Olympics as “Games,” bearing in mind the misnomer, since the tradition is so ingrained. Today, the modern Olympics are called the equivalent of “Games” in all seventeen languages I have checked, with one exception. Although more research is needed, only in modern Greek, to my knowledge, are the Olympics called “contests,” olympiakoí agones, the same as in ancient Greek.

Coubertin and the Agon

We should next consider the question of how Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the acknowledged founder of the modern Olympic movement—although of course he was not the only one involved—interpreted the ancient Olympics and competition. Was he simply following tradition in referring to the ancient Olympics and those of 1896 as “Games,” or “les jeux olympiques” in his own language? Was Coubertin aware of the agon and its significance in ancient Greece?

Coubertin certainly knew some ancient Greek and Latin from his Jesuit school training at St. Ignace in Paris, where Father Carron instilled in him a sense of Hellenism, a teacher who may have suggested to him the idea of the Olympic Games. In Jesuit education of the day in France, we know that students read numerous Greek (and Latin) texts including Aesop, Herodotus, Homer, Plato, Plutarch, Xenophon, and the tragedians, enough to give Coubertin an adequate background in the Greek language, although Lucian, Pausanias, Philostratus, Pindar, and others would have given him a more comprehensive background to ancient Olympia. Interestingly, among the four hundred and fifty books discovered in Coubertin’s private library on his death in 1937, the only ancient Greek authors were Aristotle, Homer, and Plato, and these books were not in the original language, but in French translation and published before his famous Congress at the Sorbonne in 1894, where he announced his plans for the modern Olympics. His library contained no Greek authors in editions published after 1894. Yet Coubertin, of
course, may have dispensed with some items over the years,\textsuperscript{19} and may have formed his ideas from works not in his library, for in his writings he quotes from twenty Greek and Latin authors including Pindar and Pausanias, although not always accurately, as we shall see.

Coubertin, therefore, probably knew enough Greek (although he used translations) to understand the concept of the ancient agon and was aware that the modern Greek initials for the Olympics of 1896 were OA, \textit{Olympiako\i Agones}, the same as in ancient Greek.\textsuperscript{20} Coubertin also knew that \textit{ludus} (plural \textit{ludi}) was the Latin term for public games, for in 1890 he designed a symbol for the USFSA, the \textit{Union Sportive Française des Sports Athlétiques}, consisting of two rings and the expression \textit{“Ludus pro Patria” (“Patriotic Games”)}, created for him by Marcadet,\textsuperscript{21} a concept dear to the heart of Coubertin.\textsuperscript{22}

Yet it is not the rings of this symbol that are our focus here, but the motto \textit{“Ludus pro Patria.”} Coubertin and the USFSA did not invent this expression, for a few years earlier in 1882-83 the French artist Pierre Puvis de Chavannes had given the same name to a painting, where he shows young athletes, supposedly representing the ancient Greeks, in a French setting. In 1888, Augusta Holmès had composed a symphonic ode using the same title, and the gymnastic association of France also later adopted the slogan. Coubertin may have been influenced by this expression about patriotic games in forming his own concept of the modern Olympics, but this motto, of course, has nothing to do with the ancient Games.

For his knowledge of ancient Olympia, Coubertin could have consulted several general histories in French, or English, before 1894, although none of these became standard works. The German Krause, however, had written outstanding books on Greek athletics before this time.\textsuperscript{23} It is unknown whether Coubertin actually used them, or was interested in them, although in theory he could have read them, since he knew German.\textsuperscript{24}

Be that as it may, Coubertin shows in his writings that he was familiar with some precise and reasonably accurate details about Olympia and its contests, in some ways idealizing the ancient games less than many other writers in the twentieth century, although he had his moments, as we shall see.\textsuperscript{25} Coubertin was aware, for instance, that the symbolic prizes at Olympia were a façade and that victors could receive a lifetime annuity and exemption from taxation from their home city. He was wrong, however, about the ancient truce, believing that all wars stopped, about the lack of corruption at early Olympia,\textsuperscript{26} and about the gymnasium, which he thought was open to all—although the gymnasium in Beroia in Macedonia, for example, permitted no women, slaves, or others—as we heard from Lindsay Adams in the Ioannides lecture last year.\textsuperscript{27}

According to Weiler, Coubertin also knew of Burckhardt’s fundamental work on the \textit{agon}, even though the printed version of his \textit{Greek Cultural History}, presented as a series of lectures in 1872, appeared only in 1898–1902, after the Congress at the Sorbonne.\textsuperscript{28} Yet although Coubertin may have known of the \textit{agon}, he rarely mentions competition in his writings, and never it seems the \textit{agon} by name, which we have observed was so fundamental a part of ancient Olympia. He certainly did not adopt the concept of the \textit{agon} as part of his own philosophy, being happy to see the Olympics as “Games,” rather than \textit{agones}. In a 1908 article surviving only in English translation, he states, “Unbridled competition entails grave risks to the Spirit of fair play and leads to envy, vanity, and mistrust.” For Coubertin, “athletics for the sake of winning something… is the dangerous canker with which we have to reckon.”\textsuperscript{29} And yet he realized that human society worked by the principle of competition and that it had always been so. He believed, therefore, that one must have recourse to the system of organized competition, but regulate it as the ancient Greeks had done with Olympia. In the same 1908 article, he maintains,
“at Olympia vulgar competition was transformed, and in a sense sanctified, by contact with national sentiment superbly excited. Over-excited, I might even say; for it was excess that in the end ruined and corrupted ancient athleticism.” These are some of the views of Coubertin on competition, but let us return to the ancient Olympics as they really were.

Ancient Olympia: Pindar and the Greatest Agon
With his beliefs in a sporting élite, Coubertin certainly could have related to the Greek lyric poet Pindar, who in the fifth century BC wrote victory poems for ancient aristocratic athletes. In the opening of his first *Olympian Ode* (3-7), Pindar states that there is no greater contest (*agon*) than the one at Olympia and compares it to the sun shining in the sky more warmly than the other stars. Following the concept of the *agon*—he has more than fifty citations to the term in his poems—Pindar sometimes compares himself to an athlete, and his poetry to an athletic event (*Olympian* 13.93-95). It is interesting—although perhaps accidental—for the role of sport in ancient society that Pindar’s victory odes for athletes have survived virtually intact, while we possess only fragments of the *Hymns* to the gods.

Even in the modern world, Pindar is still associated with the Olympics. At the 1984 Games in Los Angeles, for example, a passage from Pindar became part of the closing ceremonies:

> Creatures of a Day! Man is merely a shadow of a dream. But when god-given glory comes upon him in victory, a bright light shines upon us, and our life is sweet.

*Pythian Ode* 8.95-7, translation Young/Nisetich

The organizers added two more lines that are not found in Pindar to coincide with the extinguishing of the Olympic flame:

> When the end comes, the loss of flame brings darkness; but his glory is bright forever.

These Pindaric verses are an interesting statement (from a *Pythian* rather than an *Olympian Ode*) on the ephemeral nature of human beings who are subject to what each day brings.

At the 2004 Olympics in Athens, the victors’ medals bore a quotation in Greek from the opening of Pindar’s *Olympian* 8. I give the Loeb translation:

> O mother of the golden-crowned games, Olympia, mistress of truth (1-2).

At the closing session of the same Games, an Oxford Classicist Armand D’Angour read out a twenty-five line *Ode to Athens* composed in imitation of Pindar in both ancient Greek and English. This is an idealized, modern, and sanitized version of Pindar of old that refers to the *agon*, but not to the defeated opponents that we will see appear in the real poems of Pindar. Similarly, at the closing ceremony of the 1896 Games, George Stuart Robertson, a student from Oxford, recited in Greek an original poem following the *Odes* of Pindar. This same reciter had finished fourth in the discus and lost in the first round in the tennis singles at the Games. One would think that Coubertin would have approved of this poet/athlete.
The Spirit of Competition (Agon) in the Olympic Games

The Agon at Olympia and Its Uniqueness

Coubertin and many modern scholars have equated ancient Greece with Olympia, believing that Olympia was the supreme expression of the best Greek ideals. Indeed, several features of the modern Olympic movement such as excellence, religion, culture, balance of body and mind do appear in Greek life in general, specifically in the Greek gymnasion (training of body and mind) and in major festivals, such as Isthmia and Delphi (where we find competitions in music and drama together with athletics, as we shall see). Yet not all these elements are apparent in the ancient Olympics, which are not necessarily a reflection of Greek society in general.37

Victory and Defeat in the Agon: Officially, No Second Place at Olympia

Olympia was no different from the other three Crown Games in Greece (the Pythian, Isthmian, and Nemean) in rewarding only first-place finishes (be it only with symbolic prizes). Olympia did differ, however, from most of the other five hundred or so known Greek festivals (or local games), which usually gave more than one prize, in some cases as many as five, as at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor. Yet even at Olympia, sometimes note was taken of second and lower places, although they carried no official rewards. People recorded, or remembered, such places when they brought great honour to the city. We know that in 576 BC the first seven in the stade all came from the same city of Croton, as the historian Strabo (6.262) relates more than five hundred years after the event. We can infer that people kept records of some sort over the years, if only through oral tradition. Another literary source (Herodotus 6.122.1) states that the wealthy Athenian Callias, a three-time Olympic victor, came second in the four-horse chariot race at Olympia, also in the sixth century. In the late fifth century, the Athenian politician Alcibiades prided himself on owning not only the winning four-horse chariot at Olympia, but also on entering seven teams (more than anyone else had done before), and finishing second and third (or second and fourth in some accounts).38 Why would Alcibiades make this claim, if second place at Olympia were of no consequence? One may presume that his large number of entries was intended to display his great wealth, further his political ambitions, and honour his city of Athens. In Olympian 5.1-7, the poet [Pindar] relates that not only did Psaumis of Camarina win the mule cart race, but he also honored his home city in the chariot race and horse race, although no records have survived that he won in all three events.39 All these examples brought glory to the city. The expensive equestrian competitions, in particular, became so important to the nobility that even at Olympia they considered participation without victory to be desirable.

For non-equestrian competitors, however, who did not win at the Games, Pindar has harsh words that are far removed from the modern concept of Olympism. I will try not to take these literary passages out of context, but view them together with their nuances within the framework of the whole. Interestingly, these Pindaric sentiments occur in two of the poems that we have seen were recited at the modern Olympics. Olympian 8 contains a passage on a victorious boy wrestler and his four defeated opponents, for whom there is “a most hateful homecoming, words less respectful, and a hidden path” (68-69).40 One older commentator who wishes to see what he wants to see in Pindar, namely “fair play,” calls this passage a blemish on the poem as a whole.41 Scholars vary a little in their interpretation of the tone of these words, as one might expect in a poetic genre, for Pindar is far from being the mere sports reporter that some trendy modern historians seem to believe. Several consider that Pindar here speaks of the contempt for the defeated, assuming that the poet means what he says, equates contests
with war, and is not simply trying to please his patron: athletes win through natural ability, hard work, and the help of the gods; if they are defeated, they must be lacking one or more of these qualities. Another scholar thinks that Pindar emphasizes by exaggeration the joys of victory. Yet others note that both poems are for boy victors with much pathos that is “appropriate to a boyish outlook.” It seems that the greater the pain of defeat, the greater is the glory of victory.

In a second passage, which comes from a Pythian (8.85-87) not an Olympian Ode, Pindar speaks of the victor-to-be thinking evil thoughts (kaka phroneon) about his opponents, and of defeated athletes shrinking down alleyways bitten with failure:

nor upon returning to their mothers did sweet laughter
arouse joy all around; but staying clear of their enemies
they shrink down alleyways, bitten by failure. (Loeb)

How, therefore, can we equate the disgrace that Pindar seems to attach to defeated athletes in some poems and his comments on honoring the city without winning, as in Olympian 5? What of the agony of defeat, to quote Jim McKay and ABC’s Wide World of Sports? The word agony by the way is derived from the Greek word agōn in the sense of struggle.

If we step outside the Olympic and Crown Games for a moment, we may note that warriors in Homer followed the concept of the heroic code in terms of feeling dishonor and shame in defeat. In Greek mythology, Ajax went mad and committed suicide after his loss to Odysseus in the contest over the arms of Achilles. Also from legend, there have survived numerous tales of competitors experiencing death as a punishment for defeat, as the suitors who lost in the footrace with the heroine Atalanta. In historical Athens, the comic poet Aristophanes (Frogs 1089-98) mentions that spectators physically abused the last runner in the torch race at the Panathenaia. There is no sympathy here for the loser.

In reference to Olympia, unfortunately, little ancient literature has survived on defeated athletes, but in the first to second century AD the philosopher Epictetus (3.22.52) expresses similar sentiments to those of Pindar, stating that in the Olympics one cannot simply be beaten and then depart, but the defeated will suffer disgrace with the whole world looking on. Much earlier, in the sixth century BC, the trainer of the pancratiast Arrichion instilled in him a desire for death as he sought a second Olympic victory (Philostratus Gymnastics 21). Arrichion indeed won again at Olympia, but lost his life literally at the hands of his opponent, who strangled him. In the Imperial period, the Alexandrian boxer Agathos Daimon prayed for victory or death before his contest (SEG 22.354). Despite his “Lucky” name, this athlete also died fighting in the stadium. Traditionally, Sparta banned boxers and pancratiasts from competing at the Olympics and other festivals outside Sparta, for fear of risking humiliation (submission) at the hands of non-Spartans.

We must ask, therefore, why so many athletes entered competition, if there was so much disgrace in defeat at Olympia? Why did they risk competing, unless they were sure of winning? Some athletes probably withdrew from contests for fear of humiliation and shame. Yet obviously there was no disgrace in not finishing first at local festivals, at least if one finished in the first five or so. Only at the “majors” was first place alone rewarded. Did an athlete who had won great victories in the past lose face, if he lost in subsequent combats at Olympia? Did the great wrestler Milo suffer overwhelming shame when a younger opponent finally defeated him in wrestling at Olympia? Certainly, Greece in general was a shame culture, but Pindar’s comments about defeated opponents, although based on reality, may be somewhat exagger-
ated to enhance the glory of the victors who paid him to write the odes. Yet even the victor in Pythian 8, Aristomenes, must work hard to maintain his success, for his joy will not last for ever (88-94).

In the ancient world, occasional examples of athletes having done well without actually winning have survived, although none in reference to Olympia. A concept such as “it is more important to participate than to compete” is a modern rather than an ancient belief. Greek city states tended to reward only victors, not aspiring athletes.

**No Judgement Agones at Olympia**

At Olympia, the officials could usually find the best competitors utilizing concrete criteria, such as speed or distance. In most events, therefore, they employed none of the subjective judging (at least in theory) that has plagued the modern Olympics. Some of us can remember the controversial decisions involving the American boxer Roy Jones Jr. in Seoul in 1988, and of course the Canadians Salé and Pelletier in figure skating pairs in Salt Lake City. Yet ancient Olympic combat events, for example, had no points system, but ended with submissions, falls, or knockouts. On the other hand, Olympia did not entirely escape controversial decisions and was by no means free of biased calls on the part of the judges who sometimes were accused of favoring their own Elean athletes.

Two events at Olympia that one may classify as somewhat subjective were the contests for trumpeters and for heralds that took place on the first day of the Olympic program, at least from 396 BC onward. The primary criterion for trumpeters was a shrill, piercing, and loud sound that would be essential to silence the crowd, so that pitch, musicality, or artistic judgment, was not of prime importance. The criteria for heralds were loudness, clarity, and the ability to proclaim at length with a single breath. Yet these competitions were practical necessities at ancient Olympia (and other festivals), where the winners performed as trumpeters and heralds at the sporting contests that followed, quieting the spectators before an event and making announcements. Hence, the purpose of the contests involved more than finding the best trumpeters and heralds in the abstract.

Unlike many other ancient festivals, Olympia had no official competitions in music and drama. Consequently, it avoided here the possible controversies of judgment contests. Philostratus (*Apollonius of Tyre* 6.10) says that Olympia considered such events to be inappropriate and worthless. Pausanias (10.9.2) maintains that the majority of people took little account of winners in musical contests, even at Delphi. And yet we may note that prizes at a local festival, the Panathenaia in Athens, were higher in the fourth century BC for musicians than for athletes.

Although the organizers of the Games, the city of Elis, sanctioned no official musical or artistic events at Olympia, artists, orators, literary figures, philosophers, and others did perform there for the crowds, because they had a large captive, but no doubt appreciative, audience. The poets Pindar, Aeschylus, Simonides, and others visited Olympia. Herodotus gave recitations from his histories. The artist Aëtion successfully displayed a painting there. Yet one must be careful to note that none of these individuals participated in regularly sanctioned Olympic events.

Since no musical or drama competitions took place at Olympia, there have survived no archaeological remains of a theatre, although Xenophon (*Hellenika* 7.4.31) states that one existed. The German archaeologist Sinn believes that there was a natural theatre between the Altar of Zeus and the stadium that was used primarily for viewing processions, although it could have been the site for the contests.
for trumpeters and heralds.\textsuperscript{55} Hence, no official competitions in music and drama occurred at Olympia, and there certainly was never an elaborate theater as at Delphi and many other sites.

\textbf{Body, Mind, and Agones at the Olympics}

Not only did no official contests in music and drama take place at Olympia, but also the concept of equal emphasis on body and mind was not a feature of the ancient Olympic Games. As David Young has argued in his recent book on the Olympics, few if any victors became known for their intellectual prowess.\textsuperscript{56} He rightly believes that to win at Olympia would require a great deal of time, effort, and sacrifice, as Plato (\textit{Laws} 807 C) maintains, that would preclude anyone from having a career in academe. In the ancient world, Young points out that no great intellectual was a great athlete, because the two fields became so specialized. This I think is true also in the modern world. One would not expect an ancient Olympic athlete to be an Einstein any more than today. I do not imagine that Ben Johnson read much in the way of philosophical ethics in his sprinting days, or the wrestler Leontiskos of Sicily, who loved to win at Olympia by breaking his opponents' fingers. Young further comments that the great philosopher Plato and the tragedian Euripides, who some believe to be victorious athletes, were certainly not Olympic champions, and probably not victors in other Games either, as many have argued, since the sources appear to be late and unreliable.\textsuperscript{57} Yet even if not champions, both Plato and Euripides were very much aware of athletics and athletic technique, as we can judge from their writings.\textsuperscript{58}

Did any ancient Olympic victors show an interest in being intellectuals after their careers were over? Both Theogenes and Milo, for instance, seem to have taken part in civic life in their home cities.\textsuperscript{59} Milo is sometimes associated with the philosopher Pythagoras in Croton, although the stories may be suspect, and Pythagoras may be Pythagoras the trainer, not the philosopher. Alcibiades, who became known for the strength and fitness of his body (Isocrates 16.32), was an outstanding Athenian statesman who won a victory at Olympia in chariot racing, as we have mentioned, though he did not actually participate. In addition, we should add one famous athlete whom Young fails to mention, namely M. Aurelius Asclepiades of Alexandria in the second century AD, a \textit{periodonikes}, or victor in all four Crown Games, in the pancration, who was associated with an important literary group in Alexandria as a member of the philosophers in the museum (place of the Muses) famous for its research.\textsuperscript{60} Yet these individuals seem to be exceptions.\textsuperscript{61}

Pierre de Coubertin, however, had his own ideas about the Olympics in terms of body and mind. In 1906, he maintained that the ancient Games were periodic, artistic, and religious.\textsuperscript{62} He was two thirds correct. Two years earlier, he had stated, “the arts and literature harmoniously joined with sports [in ancient Greece] to ensure the greatness of the Olympic Games.”\textsuperscript{63} Here the romantic part of Coubertin comes to the forefront, who believed in the concept of body and mind and sometimes did not allow realities about the ancient Games to stand in his way, if he really was following ancient beliefs.

Coubertin knew and approved of Juvenal’s famous expression \textit{mens sana in corpore sano}, a sound mind in a sound body. In 1897, in a talk in Paris on English education where he was promoting sport and its role in schools he praised the happy balance of mind and body,\textsuperscript{64} although he believed that Juvenal’s phrase was too hackneyed in his own day and unsuitable for modern athletes. He collaborated, therefore, with a Latinist to produce what he thought was a more appropriate motto for athletes to express the idea of an enquiring/ardent/passionate mind in a muscular body, and produced the expression \textit{mens fervida in corpore lacertoso}. He merely changed the two adjectives of Juvenal, keeping the nouns. Coubertin
believed that this motto represented the aims of the Olympic movement. In 1911, he spoke of the origins of the expression. In 1913, the phrase appears on the program of the Lausanne Olympic Congress. In 1919, Coubertin declared that it would make a suitable epitaph for his late friend, the energetic President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1924, he emphasized the first part of the motto, lamenting that the Olympic Games did not have enough intellectualism and that they were too much like a World Championship.

Yet this expression of Coubertin’s was not without its critics: a Latinist and member of the IOC disapproved of his use of the word \textit{lacertosus}. In addition, Pope Pius 11, apparently knowing more Latin than Coubertin and his adviser, objected to the ideal of \textit{fervidus}, which he rightly saw as denoting “excess,” rather than “balance.” Today, this motto is practically unknown, which is perhaps as well, since the expression \textit{mens fervida} does not really mean “enquiring mind” as intended, but rather “hot headed.” The only use in Latin literature of these two words together appears in Seneca’s \textit{Medea} 558, where Jason speaks of the raging mind of the heroine who was plotting to kill her own children. Hardly an ideal of Olympism!

Coubertin was so fond of associating the arts with the Olympics that in the Stockholm Games of 1912 he introduced competitions in architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, and music, which lasted until 1948. Coubertin himself entered in 1912 and won the Olympic gold medal for literature (poetry) at the Games. One cannot help but think of the Elean judges who competed at ancient Olympia until one of them actually won (Pausanias 6.1.4-5), but they competed under their own names, while Coubertin assumed a pseudonym. He maintained that his entry—a poem called \textit{L’Ode au Sport} written in both French and German—was partly in imitation of the poet Pindar, claiming that line one on the pleasure of the gods recalled a verse in Pindar on the gods as the friends of the games, \textit{les dieux sont amis des jeux}. This certainly seems like a sentiment of Pindar, but is not actually found among his surviving poems. The nine stanzas of Coubertin’s poem are addressed to Sport as the delight of the gods, as Beauty, Justice, Daring, Honor, Joy, Fecundy (or eugenics), Progress, and Peace. Generally, critics do not praise the quality of his poem.

\textbf{Training for the Agon at Olympia}

One of the distinguishing features of the ancient Olympics was the training period before the Games, a mandatory preparation for the actual \textit{agon} held at Olympia. Although technically there were no qualifying standards to compete in the Games, several sources speak of the hard training necessary for an Olympic competitor. The process of training for the contest actually started long before the Olympic festival, for adult athletes had to swear an oath beside the image of Zeus at Olympia that for ten months they had trained intensively in all respects (Pausanias 5.24.9). The official Olympic training period of thirty days took place at Elis—about 56 kilometers away from Olympia—the city that controlled the Games for most of their history. Although we have no full account of the procedure during the training period, we can gain some information by piecing together the ancient sources. The officials known as the \textit{Hellanodikai} rigorously organized the training apparently for both men and boys, prescribed exercises, improvised work outs at whim, and flogged athletes and their trainers who disagreed with their views. In some ways, the training period was even more difficult than the actual \textit{agon}, according to Philostratus (\textit{Gymnastics} 11). The officials trained the athletes in an old gymnasium in Elis divided into three parts, one for runners, another for pentathletes, the third for those who participated in combat events. In training for wrestling at least, there seems to have been some form of seeding, for the officials matched athletes different in skill, to encourage the best and discourage inferior athletes. This is
the reading of the original Greek, although most commentators mistranslate this passage of Pausanias, writing what they wish to see, namely that the officials matched those equal in skill. After the training in wrestling, the officials (bizarrely to modern eyes) paired the wrestlers in fights with soft gloves, presumably as boxers. Philostratus (loc. cit.) maintains that training for wrestlers was the most strenuous of all events, since they used the same techniques in both training and competition. By contrast, boxers did only shadow boxing and pancratiasts only some of their moves. The runners and pentathletes practiced their own events, without additional exercises. Equestrians apparently were not obliged to attend the training period, perhaps for logistical reasons. This training period at Elis, especially for wrestlers, was a form of unofficial “competition,” although as far as we know it was not the authorities who eliminated participants, but the athletes themselves who withdrew.

How an athlete performed at this training period could be significant for his hopes of success, for in the third century AD the officials awarded victory to a competitor to some extent because of his fine performance in the training period. In AD 215, the judges awarded victory to Claudius Rufus of Zmyrna in the pancration after they had halted the contest at nightfall, partly on the grounds that he had shown himself to be an outstanding athlete in the training period.73 This we may add was a judgment call, rather than a judgment event.

Why there should be a training period before the Olympics is difficult to answer. It would certainly allow the Eleans to maintain control over athletes from an early stage and enforce high standards in competition. The effect would be to ensure equal facilities for all competitors and encourage withdrawals of athletes, whether or not this was the purpose. It was perhaps an attempt to put all athletes on an equal footing and even monitor their diet, and of course illegal substances. Perhaps the thirty days were connected with taboo, although it was not necessarily a ritual period. At first sight, it would appear to be elitist, for only those with means would be able to afford the thirty days away from home, and forgo possible prize money at local festivals that took place at the same time. Yet there was a bread dole for all athletes, at least in Roman times that must have alleviated the material pain for some.74 Even so, the training period would be hard financially for many athletes, and emotionally for boy athletes who could be as young as twelve. Does such a training period explain, in part at least, why Elis had more victories at the Games than other cities?

This thirty-day training period at Elis was unique to Olympia until the founding of the Sebastian Isolympic Games in Naples in AD 2, where there was a monetary allowance for athletes that increased after fifteen days as athletes withdrew. At Elis, it made an Olympic victory much more difficult to attain than victories at other festivals, and helped to add to the prestige of the festival.75

Victory Without an Agon (akoniti)

A significant effect of this training period was that superior athletes sometimes achieved success at Olympia without an agon. Although such a victory was not unique to Olympia, it happened in greater numbers than at other festivals. This was known as winning akoniti, literally without dust, when an athlete received the olive wreath with a walkover victory if his opponents were unwilling to contend against him, because of his superior fame, strength, or skill. One should note, however, that athletes who had already enrolled for the Games at Olympia were not allowed to withdraw under the punishment of fines. The aim in Greece was to discover the best athlete, but not necessarily to showcase, or watch, him in competition. There is no recorded adverse spectator reaction in the ancient world, when a great
The Spirit of Competition (Agon) in the Olympic Games

hero won without actually competing and the spectators, who had traveled for days if not weeks to the festival, did not get to see him compete. Although the ancient spectators expressed great excitement at sporting contests, to watch and be entertained was more an ideal of the Romans than the Greeks.

One cannot help but think of a case where a victory without competition could—according to some people should—have taken place in the modern Olympics. In 1992, the American basketball “Dream Team” that included Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, and Larry Bird entered the Games in Barcelona, where its average margin of victory was almost 42 points. If ever there was to be a victory akoniti in the modern world, this was the team and the time. And yet these multi-millionaire basketball players would have found the ancient training period unbearable, with floggings and no concession to individual tastes, and of course no luxurious Ambassador Hotel. Yet to have other teams concede to the “Dream Team” would have been a disaster for the NBC television network and a huge disappointment to the American public. Imagine the reaction if the top performers did not appear in the finals in the Vancouver and London Olympics, for which NBC has paid over $2 billion ($2,201) in rights.

Agones in the Modern World and the Ancient Olympics.

What is so Special about the Ancient Games?

Modern Olympic Champions

One way to understand the significance of the ancient Olympics and the importance of its sports to Greek society is to compare ancient champions in sport with modern. All of the modern athletes in the three lists I will present could relate to the ancient agon, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Yet not all these athletes are Olympians. Firstly, the list of the top ten athletes of the twentieth century, according to the American list of SportsCentury—I could have taken other examples, and the results I think would have been similar. The list reads as follows:

|-------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------|

Five of these ten athletes are Olympic gold medalists, quite impressive at first sight. Yet only Owens, Thorpe, and Didrikson gained their greatest fame in the Olympics, and none of them in the last half century. Yet many today would be hard pressed (outside this room, of course) to give any details about Didrikson, who won gold medals in track and field in the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932 and later became a professional golf champion. Of the other Olympians, Jordan became a champion both as a college player and in the prime of his professional career (in a team sport), but of course is best remembered for his achievements in the NBA. In 1960, the Olympic gold medal in the light heavy weight boxing division launched Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) on the road to fame as a professional boxer, but he was not famous because of his gold medal. Does anybody remember the heavyweight gold medalist in boxing in Rome? It was the otherwise unknown Franco De Piccolo, of Italy. Of the other athletes on the list, Gretzky did not win a gold medal in hockey—more on him later. Ruth and Mays (baseball), Brown (football), and Nicklaus (golf) did not take part in the Olympics.

The top ten male Canadian athletes of the century, according to the Canadian Press, are:

|------------------|-------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------|
Here we have just three Olympic gold medalists, Mario Lemieux in a team sport, Donovan Bailey, and Gaétan Boucher. Yet few of the general public outside Québec and speed skating, I think, would name Boucher as one of the top ten outstanding athletes of the century, despite his four Olympic medals. By contrast, eight of the ten Canadian female athletes of the century have Olympic medals, no doubt because of the relative scarcity of professional sports leagues for women.\footnote{76}

If we look at the BBC’s Sports Persons of the Millennium, the British do it differently, the names are:77


This, of course, is a world list, which includes three Olympians that we have seen before – Ali, Jordan, and Owens – and no fewer than seven non-Olympians, including five cricketers (three Indian, one Pakistani, and an Australian) – yes cricket is an \textit{agon} too – or as some may say an \textit{agony} – together with a Brazilian soccer player, and a Brazilian racing car driver.

Overall, we may note the following from the three combined lists. Of the twenty-six athletes (four of whom appear twice), eight are Olympic gold medalists, namely Ali (1 gold medal in boxing), Bailey (2 gold medals in track), Boucher (2 gold medals plus 1 silver and 1 bronze in speed skating), Didrikson (2 gold medals and a silver in track), Jordan (2 gold medals in basketball), Lemieux (1 gold medal in hockey), Owens (4 gold medals in track), and Thorpe (2 gold medals in track), who was disqualified but later reinstated (1981). Five athletes were ineligible for the Olympics in their sports – as professionals – even if they had been interested in competing: Conacher (hockey and other sports), Howe,\footnote{78} Orr, and Richard (hockey), and Pele (soccer). Twelve competed in sports that were not Olympic events at the time: Bradman, Dev, Gavaskar, Khan, and Tendulkar (cricket), Jenkins, Mays, Ruth, and Walker (baseball),\footnote{79} Brown (football), Nicklaus (golf), and Senna (motor racing). There is just one failed Olympian among all these athletes, namely one who competed in the Games without winning a medal. This is none other than Canada’s super sports hero, Wayne Gretzky (hockey).\footnote{80}

### Ancient Olympic Champions and the Agones

So why do I talk about these modern lists? By contrast with sports of today, all major sports in Greece took place at the ancient Olympic \textit{Agones}. The Greek people of old were fully conversant with all their Olympic events, unlike many of their modern counterparts who have to open their morning newspaper to discover what the two-man luge is all about (intriguing though it may have been to the Greeks), or the skeleton. Ancient Olympic events included at various times the five so-called “light” events of running and the pentathlon, the three “heavy” events of boxing, wrestling, and the pancration, and for the more affluent – equestrian events. We have, therefore, just six sports in the ancient Olympics and never more than eighteen events (including boys events, and eight equestrian events, where the owner usually did not actually participate). This contrasts with the twenty-eight official sports and almost three hundred events in Athens in 2004. The ancient Olympics, therefore, unlike the modern Games, included all the most popular sports. Today, one can hardly say that the inaptly named modern pentathlon, one of Coubertin’s favorite sports, is more popular than, say, professional football at least from a North American perspective. Other parts of the world may think of their own popular (but not current Olympic) sports, such as sumo wrestling, cricket, and rugby.

One should note also that for all athletes in ancient Greece there was just a single sports circuit on which to compete, with Olympia the ultimate of all festivals. There were no rivals to the Greek perio-
The Spirit of Competition (Agon) in the Olympic Games

dos, or athletic circuit. If you were a sportsman in Greece, and I say sportsman since women generally did not participate, you aspired to compete in the Olympics. You had no choice. There was no tennis circuit, no golf circuit, no NHL, NBA, NFL, or World Cup of Soccer. All the best athletes also competed, or aspired to compete, at Olympia in individual events, not team events where glory was shared. All the greatest ancient Greek sportsmen, therefore, were Olympic champions. Hence, my list of the top ten ancient Greek athletes includes Milo, Diagoras, and I will let you name the other eight. They almost certainly will be all Olympians.

To conclude, unpopular as the sentiment may be to modern educators and even some sports historians, the ancient concept of sport at the ancient Olympic Games, as represented by the agon, was closer to Churchill’s “Victory at all costs” and Pindar’s disgrace of the defeated—even if exaggerated—than Coubertin’s “joy of participation.” After all, the winner’s table at Olympia held images of the war god, Ares, next to the god of competition, Agon (Pausanias 5.20.3).

You may not agree with everything I have said. You may not agree with anything I have said. But you will all agree that we are much indebted to Ion Ioannides, for his vision and inspiration.

Endnotes


3 Bernard Knox, Always To Be Best: The Competitive Spirit in Ancient Greek Culture (The Professor John C. Rouman Classical Lecture Series At the University of New Hampshire, Durham, October 13, 1999), p. 13.


6 This is especially true in the Imperial era. See Z. Newby, Greek Athletics in the Roman World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). J. Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Bos-
Crowther

ton: Beacon Press, 1950), pp. 71ff., believes that the principle of the agon is found also in the Roman ludi, but this is hardly the kind of agon found in Greek society. For the distinction between agones and ludi in Rome, see J. König, Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 218-19.

7 Cicero, De oratore 3.12.7, De natura 2.6.16; Plautus, Casina 759-60, Stichus 307; Pliny, Natural History 4.14.3, 7.205.6; Servius, ad Vergil Georgics 3.19.9; Varro, De gente fr.32.1; Velleius Paterculus 1.8.1; for ludicum, see Livy 27.35.3, 28.7.14.


11 See the Montreal Gazette of August 29, 1844.


14 Consider, for example, the following: ludi Olympici (Latin), jeux olympiques (French), olimpiaj ludoj (Esperanto), giocchi olimpici (Italian), juegos olímpicos (Spanish), jogos olímpicos (Portuguese), jocurilor olimpice (Romanian), jocs olimpics (Catalan), olimpiai játékok (Hungarian), olimpijske igre (Serbian), igrzyska olimpijskie (Polish), olympiske leker (Norwegian—Northern English laik), olympische lege (Danish), Olymialaiset (Finnish), Olympische Spiele (German), Olympische Spelen (Dutch), Olympiska Spelen (Swedish).

All of these expressions refer to the Olympics as “Games.”


16 See Müller, Olympism, pp. 24, 36.


18 See Müller, Coubertin und der Antike.

19 Müller, Ibid.

20 Müller, Olympism, p. 353.

Incidentally, the USFSA was a union of two older sporting organizations (the Racing Club de France, and the Club Stade Français) both founded in 1882, in which some see the two rings as the forerunners for the modern Olympic rings. See R.K. Barney, “This Great Symbol: The Tricks of History,” *Olympic Review*, 301 (1992), pp. 627-31, 641.


See below.


Coubertin published some of his comments on Olympia in an article written in 1906. We should note by the way that this famous article is unsigned, although Müller, *Olympism*, pp. 251-55 has no hesitation in attributing it to him.


Müller, *Olympism*, p. 543.

Long after the time of Pindar, Olympia was still the most important festival and the symbolic centre of the Greek world. See Newby, *Greek Athletics*, pp. 202-28 on the importance of Olympia to Pausanias in the second century AD.


Young, *A Brief History*, pp. 70-71.

http://www.athensinfoguide.com/olympicmedalssummer.htm


http://www.atleticaleggera.com/olympic%20games.htm

Bill Mallon and Ture Widlund, *The 1896 Olympic Games: Results for All Competitors in All Events, with Commentary* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland), 1998. We may mention two more associations of Pindar and the modern Olympics. At a ballet not officially connected with the 1968 Olympics, there was a recitation of the first few lines of *Olympian* 4 (1-17), on the winner of the chariot race at the “loftiest of Games.” For information on this “Pindaric” ballet, see Betsy Hanley, http://www.ioa.org.gr/books/sessions/1986/1986_216.pdf. In 2001, an opera in Italian called “1896 Pheidippides—run again” by Luca Belcastro—although nothing to do with the actual Olympics—was presented in Athens. Every act of the opera began with passages from Pindar’s *Olympian* odes. Moreover, R. Stanton, *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions*:
Coubertin wrongly believes that ancient Olympia disputed [the merits of] physical education and sports. See Müller, *Olympism*, p. 575 for the text.


See W. Mader, *Pindar. Die Psaumis-Oden Pindars (O.4 und O.5): Ein Kommentar* (Innsbrook: Wagner 1990), who believes that Pindar does not necessarily mean that Psaumis won in all three events, despite the comments of the scholiasts.

See the book review of M. R. Lefkowitz in *Classical Philology* (1983), pp. 247-49 on how some translators seek to modify the intensity of the violence and defeat in the poem and make it more acceptable in the light of modern fair play.


See also Pindar fragment 229 (Maehler (253), possibly in an athletic context, on the defeated competitor. See Crowther, *Athletika*, p. 316.


For more on this, see Crowther, *Athletika*, pp. 115-19.


By contrast, Ferenc Mező (not coincidentally a former IOC member, who won the gold medal for Literature at the 1928 Games for a book on the history of the ancient Olympics) sought with no tangible success to find art contests at Olympia. See http://www.aaf.org/OlympicInformationCenter/OlympicReview/1957/BDCE58/BDCE58p.pdf. One may note, however, that the *agon* in general was very much a part of drama, and philosophy. See Pritchard, *Sport and Festival*, pp. 326-27 for Alcibiades, and pp. 352-353 for Hippias at Olympia.

See Young, *The Olympic Myth*, p. 126, commenting on the inscription IG II² 2311.
One interesting feature at Olympia was that the winner in the aulos, or pipe playing, at the Pythian festival played the music for the pentathlon at the next Olympic Games. Pausanias (5.7.10) says that this is so, because music was sacred to Apollo who won Olympic victories. It is perhaps another example of having the best at Olympia, the winner in the next most famous festival performing at Olympia.


See Kyle, *Athletics*.

Plato, however, was especially interested in sport in connection with war. See Pritchard, *Sport and Festival*, p. 352.

See Poliakoff, *Combat Sport*.

*IGR* 154. See Poliakoff, *Combat Sport*, p. 185.

There are similar exceptions in the modern world. One may consider, for instance, Bill Bradley (NBA player and U.S. Senator), Lord Sebastian Coe (winner of four Olympic medals and Chair of London’s Organizing Committee for the 2012 Olympic Games), and Pete Dawkins (Heisman Trophy winner and Rhodes Scholar).

Müller, *Olympism*, p. 598.

Müller, *Olympism*, p. 613.


Müller, *Olympism*, p. 452.

See Müller, *Olympism*, p. 592, who does not name the IOC member.

Müller, Ibid.

Cf. also the Elder Seneca *Dialogues* (4.19.1,2) for *animus fervidus*, the fiery mind that is quick to anger. Coubertin sometimes quotes from the Younger Seneca (but of course not this passage), although he apparently did not read him in school; see Müller, *Coubertin und die Antike*, pp. 294, 297.


Young, *The Olympic Myth*, p. 10 n.3 traces the expression to Plato (*Cratylus* 406c).

In contradiction to the spirit of the ancient Games, Coubertin believed in the integration of philosophy and *eurythmia*, the reciprocal give and take of athletics and art, using the term over twenty times in his writings. See Müller, *Olympism*, *passim*. Although *eurythmia* is a common ancient Greek word, it does not appear in conjunction with athletes or contests, or the Olympic Games. There are 127 citations in TLG, the electronic data base for Greek literature.

For full references, see Crowther, *Athletika*, pp. 65-70.

See Crowther, *Athletika*, p. 307. The judges also took into consideration the fact that he had advanced without a bye.
According to Artemidorus (*Oneirocritica* 2.30.42-47).


The list of the top ten female athletes of the century tells a different story: 1. Nancy Greene (1 gold, 1 silver medal in skiing); 2. Silken Laumann (1 silver, two bronze medals in rowing); 3. Barbara Ann Scott (1 gold medal in figure skating); 4. Myriam Bedard (2 gold, 1 bronze medal in biathlon); 5. Marnie McBean (3 gold, 1 bronze medal in rowing); 6. Bobbie Rosenfeld (1 gold, 1 silver medal in track); 7. Catriona Le May Doan (2 gold, 1 bronze medal in speed skating); 8. Sandra Post (golf); 9. Marilyn Bell (marathon swimming); 10. Elaine Tanner (2 silver, 1 bronze medal in swimming). With fewer professional sports, eight of the top ten female athletes have Olympic medals, six of them gold. Yet as comparisons with the ancient Greeks, we are here concerned primarily with male athletes.

This was compiled from online votes by internet listeners to the BBC World Service, resulting in a somewhat obscure list in the eyes of some. The popularity of the BBC in the populous subcontinent may account for the names of Indian and Pakistani cricketers.

The closest association that Howe had with the Olympics was perhaps carrying the Olympic torch for a stretch in Michigan before the Salt Lake City Winter Games in 2002.

Walker was not a member of Canada’s baseball team in 2004 (the only Games in which Canada competed when baseball was a medal sport).

Gretzky was a member of the Canadian hockey team that placed fourth at Nagano in 1998. He was, however, Executive Director of the Canadian hockey team that won the gold medal in 2002. At the same Games, the IOC awarded him the Olympic Order for his services to hockey.

See *The Manchester Guardian*, Tuesday May 14, 1940.