

Nothing New under the Olympic Sun?

The Swearing of Oaths at the Ancient and Modern Games

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Ancient Greek athletes swore a solemn oath before almighty Zeus that they would not sin against the Olympic Games. So too did their fathers, brothers, trainers, and judges. Did such individual oaths at Olympia performed in a ritual setting before a superior being deter athletes from attempting to win at all costs? Do we find substantial differences between modern oaths based largely on elite ideals of Western society and those sworn in antiquity that Coubertin imagined to be an age of innocence, at least in its early days? This article will attempt to discuss some of the problems of oaths at the ancient and modern Olympics in relation to rogue athletes, different attitudes to cheating, multiculturalism, national pride, the desire of spectators and others to witness extraordinary feats by extraordinary human beings, and other relevant issues.



There is nothing new under the sun but there are lots of old things we don't know.¹

T rue though this quotation may be, there are nevertheless many “old things” that one can still discover with the right tools and use to elucidate problems in the modern world. Such is the case with the oaths sworn by athletes, judges, and others at ancient Olympia. Since oaths can perform important functions in maintaining law and order especially in societies that have weak authority and power,² like ancient Olympia that was not a self-governing community, it is worthwhile to discuss to what extent Olympic oaths are deterrents, or mere relics, at both the ancient and modern Games. Modern oaths will be examined in a broader setting than the ancient as part of a more complex and multicultural world.

Several key words relating to oaths of different kinds—such as promise, superior being, truth, solemnity, and ceremony—will form much of the basis for this study:

An oath (from Old Saxon eoth) is either a promise or a statement of fact calling upon something or someone that the oath maker considers sacred, usually a god, as a witness to the binding nature of the promise or the truth.³

[An oath is] a solemn or formal declaration invoking God (or a god, or other object of reverence) as witness to the truth of a statement, or to the binding nature of a promise or undertaking; an act of making such a declaration.⁴

The oath may be seen as operating at two levels. First, it is normally attended by elements of solemnity and ceremony. This is thought to impress upon the person taking the oath that the occasion is one of importance involving a special duty to tell the truth.

A statement made in a context of solemnity and ceremony is less likely to be made thoughtlessly or carelessly. Second, where an oath truly binds the conscience of the person making the statement, the religious or moral implications of violating the oath makes it less likely that the person will tell an untruth.⁵

Ancient Olympic Oaths

Before the feet of the Oath-god is a bronze plate, with elegiac verses inscribed upon it, the object of which is to strike fear into those who forswear themselves.⁶

Pausanias (5.24.9-11) is our main source of information on ancient Olympic oaths. Writing in the second century A.D., about 900 years after the first recorded Games had begun, he informs us that different groups swore oaths at Olympia beside the statue of Zeus Horkios (the Oath-god), who could terrify those who had perjured themselves:

But the Zeus in the Council Chamber (Bouleuterion) is of all the images of Zeus the one most likely to strike terror into the hearts of sinners. He is surnamed Oath-god, and in each hand he holds a thunderbolt. Beside this image it is the custom for athletes, their fathers and their brothers, as well as their trainers, to swear an oath upon slices of boar's flesh that in nothing will they sin against the Olympic games. The athletes take this further oath also, that for ten successive months they have strictly followed the regulations for training. An oath is also taken by those who examine the boys, or the foals entering for races, that they will decide fairly and without taking bribes, and that they will keep secret what they learn about a candidate, whether accepted or not. I forgot to inquire what it is customary to do with the boar after the oath of the athletes, though the ancient custom about victims was that no human being might eat of that on which an oath had been sworn... Before the feet of the Oath-god is a bronze plate, with elegiac verses inscribed upon it, the object of which is to strike fear into those who forswear themselves. (Loeb translation)

Here we can see that athletes swore both a promissory oath that they would not violate the rules of the Olympic Games and a confirmatory oath that they had already followed a strict training regimen for ten months before the festival. This latter oath no doubt guaranteed, or attempted to guarantee, high athletic standards at Olympia, by ensuring that only serious competitors entered the Games, as the time-consuming training schedule would have excluded dilettante contestants.⁷ Athletes at the ancient Games sought after victory that brought glory, not mere participation that could bring shame. The Olympic officials doubtless introduced these oaths not only to safeguard against what might happen in the future, but also against what had already occurred.⁸ Like modern Olympic oaths, they probably changed over the years to counteract possible transgressions at the Games.⁹

Fathers and brothers of athletes also took an oath at Olympia, possibly as witnesses to the oaths of the athletes—unfortunately the evidence is not clear. They probably substantiated what the contestants had declared and made themselves responsible for the behavior of their kindred athletes,¹⁰ for witnesses customarily participated in oath taking in Greece. Today, one may compare this kind of oath and its family involvement with the oath sworn on the Koran by certain Muslim sects where, in the case of falsehoods, relatives pursue the perjurer and administer justice.¹¹ Perhaps these Greek relatives also took an oath that they themselves would not sin against the Games by interfering in the contests.¹² Ancient trainers too had to take an oath at Olympia that presumably resembled those of the athletes and their kin, although Pausanias gives us merely the gist of the promises. Moreover, judges swore an oath not to receive gifts, to judge fairly, and to keep secret what they had learnt about competitors.

The Greeks swore these oaths in the *Bouleuterion*, or Council Chamber, situated just outside the sacred enclosure at Olympia.¹³ They apparently all swore the oath (either individually, or in small groups), directly in front of Zeus Horkios, the Oath-god.¹⁴ Rather than standing on podiums before masses of spectators, they took the oaths at the foot of a statue, as was customary in Greece, showing their humility as mortals before a god. After completing this formal ceremony, athletes were officially enrolled in the Games at Olympia.

Ancient Olympic Oaths and their Problems

*A boy swore an oath that he had won the wrestling competition at Olympia by paying a bribe to his opponent.*¹⁵

This is an ironic statement indeed if boy athletes swore the Olympic oath together with the adults. In ancient Greece, oaths depended on the belief that supernatural powers would punish transgressors and usually contained mention of some kind of punishment that would befall those who had sworn falsely, as is apparent in three early examples of non-Olympic oaths: a seventh-century B.C. oath from Thera declares that perjurers “will melt away like waxen images.”¹⁶ In Homer, the brains of false swearers will “flow upon the ground like wine” (*Iliad* 3. 295-301). Physicians who swore the ancient Hippocratic oath also expected to suffer the consequences if they perjured themselves.¹⁷ At Olympia, Pausanias records no penalties for wrongdoers, although he does allude to a bronze plaque inscribed with elegiac verses placed before the statue of Zeus, which was meant to strike dread into those who swore falsely. Perhaps, these verses threatened heavy fines, public whippings, exclusion from the Games, and the erection of expensive statues of Zeus (the Zanes)—all of which are known penalties for athletes at Olympia.¹⁸

Even with such apparent safeguards as the swearing of oaths alongside family members in a solemn ceremony before the statue of a superior being, with possible threats of punishment, we have not a few examples of corruption at ancient Olympia.¹⁹ As is the case in the modern Olympics,²⁰ we find that athletes suffered no direct legal consequences for perjury at the Games in the ancient world. Moreover, changing beliefs over the millennium that the Games lasted in Greece seem to have made athletes and others more cynical toward oaths and the gods. The appearance of the sophists in the mid to late fifth century B.C. and the rise of new philosophies, such as neopythagoreanism and neoplatonism (with their belief in an afterlife), conflicted with the worship of Zeus and the other gods of Olympia.

In one of the founding myths of Olympia, corruption occurred at an equestrian contest when Pelops used a binding curse against Oenomeus and bribed his opponent’s charioteer, Myrtilus, to remove the linchpins from his chariot (Pindar Olympian Ode 1.75-78).²¹ The earliest written material to have survived from the historical Games at Olympia, the inscriptions known as the *Sacred Laws* (*Leges Sacrae*) dated to the late sixth century B.C., shows that competitors tried to gain an edge by cheating: fragments of one law have survived forbidding wrestlers from breaking fingers, the first five lines of which read as follows:

*The wrestler shall not break any finger...
the judge shall punish by striking except on the head...
the wrong-doers shall bring and promise to him...
(he shall compete again at) the Olympic Games
and start as being worthy of the victory. (B 6075 and B 6116)*²²

Whatever the wrong-doers had promised, or taken upon themselves to do, we can assume that they sealed it with an oath and that athletes in the past had broken oaths. It seems—although the text is by no means clear—that the transgressor was allowed to compete again at future Olympics.

A century and a half after the *Sacred Laws*, the Zanes (first erected at the entrance to the Olympic stadium in 388 B.C.) bore witness to the fact that athletes had cheated at the Games and broken their oaths.²³ Some of the surviving epigraphy on the statue bases alludes to contestants who had won an Olympic victory by bribery and not through excellence (*arete*) of speed or strength. The wording of these inscriptions may well mirror to some degree the ritual language of the oath sworn by athletes, which we have seen Pausanias did not record in detail.²⁴ To judge from the primary sources, bribing opponents or judges appears to have been the major problem for ancient officials, despite the swearing of oaths; perhaps this form of cheating became as large an issue as performance-enhancing drugs in the modern Olympics.²⁵ It is not without relevance that ancient athletes did not take an oath to participate in the Games in a spirit of “sportsmanship,” which is so much a part of today's concept of Olympism. So much for fair play at Olympia!

The Modern Athletes' Olympic Oath

*Sport, you are Honour!*²⁶

In the Spring of 1906, Baron Pierre de Coubertin acting as President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) suggested the idea of an Olympic oath for athletes. Or so he claimed in a letter to Charles Simon, Secretary General of the *Fédération Gymnastique et Sportive des Patronages de France*, where he recommended that athletes should swear an oath at the Olympic Games: “The Olympic oath ... would be the occasion for a moving ceremony and would put the competitor on his honor while simplifying research into his status.”²⁷ If Coubertin was thinking of incidents that had occurred at the St. Louis Olympics held two years before (below), he probably proposed the introduction of the oath to redress problems that already existed, as we have seen was probably the case more than two millennia earlier at Olympia. Like the ancient oaths, the modern athletes' oath was to follow a solemn procedure, although Coubertin intended his “moving ceremony” not to be an intimate affair between athlete and god on an individual (or group) basis, but a public declaration recited in a large stadium before crowds of spectators. Today, the ceremony has become even more visible as television employs “long, ponderous shots and the fade-out of images” to emphasize the solemnity and ritual of the occasion before a global audience.²⁸ By “research into [an athlete's] status,” Coubertin was attempting to place a competitor on his honor regarding eligibility for the Games. Although he denies that he wrote the oath with any reference to amateurism—a concept, of course, that was unknown at the ancient Games—one cannot help but think that Coubertin was using the oath to keep professionalism out of the Olympics.²⁹

Yet it was another fourteen years before Coubertin actually introduced the oath into the Olympic Games.³⁰ Although there had been several examples of cheating at the early modern Olympics,³¹ the “professionalism” of Jim Thorpe in the Stockholm Olympics of 1912—the last Games to be held before 1920—may have been the catalyst, at least in part, that induced the President of the IOC to make competitors swear an oath. Even though there is no specific reference to eligibility or status in the early oath, the term “chevaleresque” or “chivalry” may contain a hint of the “amateur gentleman.”³² Moreover, one will remember that Coubertin had presented his own ideas about sport in his *Ode to Sport* at the 1912 Games, albeit under a pseudonym, where he praised the values of sport and warned the athlete who cheated that he would suffer shame if his deceit came to light. The fifth stanza of the English version of his poem relates to honor that has become a basis of modern Olympism:

O Sport, you are Honour! The laurels you bestow have no value unless they have been won in absolute fairness and with perfect impartiality. He who, with some shameful trick, manages to deceive his fellow competitors feels guilt to his very core and lives in

*fear of the ignominious epithet which shall forever be attached to his name should his trickery be discovered.*³³

On the opening day of ceremonies at the seventh Olympic Games in Antwerp on August 14, 1920, the Belgian fencer and water polo player Victor Boin stood in a formal pose on a specially-designed white platform, holding the flag of his country in his left hand, with his right hand raised. On behalf of 2,626 fellow athletes, he read out in French the first modern Olympic oath:³⁴

*Nous jurons de prendre part aux Jeux olympiques en comp?titeurs loyaux, d'observer scrupuleusement les re?glements et de faire preuve d'un esprit chevaleresque pour l'honneur de nos pays et pour la gloire du Sport.*³⁵

The words “d'observer scrupuleusement les r?glements” resemble the ancient expression “in nothing to sin against the Games,” although “l'honneur de nos pays,” “la gloire du Sport,” “comp?titeurs loyaux,” and “un esprit chevaleresque,” relate more to the values of the Olympic Movement as interpreted by Coubertin after World War I than to any Greek concepts.

The wording of the modern oath has been revised somewhat since 1920, as it has adapted to the changing concepts of Olympism, the varying problems that have arisen in the Games, and to some extent political correctness, although at the opening ceremonies of each Olympics a single athlete from the host nation still recites the oath, usually in the language of his (or her) country.³⁶ In 1961—I now quote the English version of the oath—the word “teams” replaced “countries,” as the IOC attempted to reduce nationalism at the Games.³⁷ In 1999, shortly before the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, the IOC sought to address one of its biggest problems by adding to the oath a section on performance-enhancing drugs:³⁸

In the name of all the competitors I promise that we shall take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, committing ourselves to a sport without doping and without drugs, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honour of our teams.

It is possible, as we have seen, that the ancient oath also changed over the centuries as it tried to counteract common offences such as bribery.³⁹

Since 1972 in Sapporo, Japan, the modern Olympics have also included an oath for judges, which is not dissimilar to that sworn by officials at ancient Olympia, except for the reference to “sportsmanship.” The By-law to Rule 69.1.13 of the 2003 *Olympic Charter* describes the procedure to be followed:

Immediately afterwards [after the athletes' oath], a judge from the host country mounts the rostrum and, in the same manner, takes the following oath: In the name of all the judges and officials, I promise that we shall officiate in these Olympic Games with complete impartiality, respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, in the true spirit of sportsmanship.

Some Preliminary Comments on the Modern Olympic Oath

*...the medals and diplomas won by him or it [team] shall be returned to the IOC.*⁴⁰

The athletes' Olympic oath is binding only between the competitors and the IOC, which has no real authority outside its jurisdiction.⁴¹ In the case of falsehoods, an athlete who commits perjury is not subject to criminal punishment, although the IOC can disqualify any contestant, or team, at fault and demand the return of medals and diplomas (*Olympic Charter*, Rule 53.2.1). The IOC exerts more control, however, over its own members, who can be expelled without appeal (see below). Some scholars have pointed out that the Olympic oath has little power because it is not sworn before a superior being. Yet even if athletes took their oath before a sacred witness, we have observed that the sanctity

of Zeus at Olympia did not prevent some ancient competitors from breaking their pledge, even though they swore in a more personal and intimate way than their modern counterparts.

A major difficulty of the Olympic oath is that it is still set largely in nineteenth century “gentlemanly” terms based on Western culture, even though the Olympic umbrella now embraces so many different nations and faiths. The IOC has not yet fully addressed multiculturalism and appears blind to the fact (deliberately or not) that different cultures have different ideas about cheating. Even within Europe itself, the cradle of the Olympics, attitudes of both spectators and players can vary in sport: for some it can be a “game” to try to break the rules without getting caught, for others quite the opposite.⁴² The modern Olympics (including the oaths) depend so much on honor, one of the very foundations of the Olympic Movement, but the concept of honor can vary from one society to another and can soon evaporate under intense competition when huge endorsements and national pride are at stake.⁴³

Another potential danger of the Olympic oath, although an indirect one, is that its high visibility before spectators and the media can provide an opportunity for the opposite effect of a moving ceremony that Coubertin intended. During the oath-swearing ceremony at the Helsinki Olympic Summer Games of 1952, there took place a memorable incident when a peace activist, Barbara Rotbraut-Pleyer, later known as the “Peace Angel,” tried to deliver a statement at the oath-taker’s podium. Moreover, the irony of Fabio Bianchetti, a member of the International Skating Union Technical Committee (ISU), taking the judges’ oath in Torino in 2006—four years after the judging debacle in Salt Lake City—was not lost on many of the millions who watched the ceremony. For the power that a podium can hold in the television age, one can consider the protest of Carlos and Smith in Mexico City in 1968, albeit on the athletes’ podium. At the Olympic Winter Games in Torino in 2006, a publicity seeker had his few seconds of glory at the closing ceremonies.⁴⁴ Everybody remembers protesters using for their own cause the Olympic torch relay leading up to the Beijing Games.

Yet despite these problems, no athlete who has recited the modern Olympic oath in the stadium has ever been caught for cheating, although skeptics may remark that there are fewer than fifty contestants who have taken the oath out of the tens of thousands of athletes.⁴⁵

Beyond Olympic Oaths

The Athletes’ written declaration and IOC priorities

*I also agree to comply with the World Anti-Doping Code and with the IOC Code of Ethics.*⁴⁶

In order to understand more completely the implications of the oath sworn on behalf of athletes, one must also consider the entry form that would-be contestants must sign, whereby they agree to comply with the 2007 *Olympic Charter*.⁴⁷ The lengthy By-law to Rule 45.6 reads as follows:

Any participant in the Olympic Games in whatever capacity must sign the following declaration: “Understanding that, as a participant in the Olympic Games, I am participating in an exceptional event which has ongoing international and historical significance, and in consideration of the acceptance of my participation therein, I agree to be filmed, televised, photographed, identified and otherwise recorded during the Olympic Games under the conditions and for the purposes now or hereafter authorised by the International Olympic Committee (“IOC”) in relation to the promotion of the Olympic Games and Olympic Movement. I also agree to comply with the Olympic Charter currently in force, in particular, with the provisions of the Olympic Charter regarding eligibility for the Olympic Games (including Rule 41 and its Bye-law), the mass media (Rule 49), and the allowable trademark identification on clothing and equipment worn or used at the Olympic Games (Bye-law to Rule 51). I also agree that any dispute arising

on the occasion of or in connection with my participation in the Olympic Games shall be submitted exclusively to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, in accordance with the Code of Sports-Related Arbitration (Rule 59). I also agree to comply with the World Anti-Doping Code and with the IOC Code of Ethics. All relevant and applicable provisions and rules have been brought to my attention by my National Olympic Committee and/or my National Sports Federation or International Sports Federation.

I quote this passage in full because the reference to complying with the *World Anti-Doping Code* becomes almost lost among the numerous regulations relating to such things as filming, television, photography, the promotion of the Olympic Movement, and trademark clothing and equipment. In other words, performance-enhancing drugs are just one of many aspects that this declaration seeks to address. Only the IOC knows which really has the highest priority.⁴⁸

Although the appropriate National Olympic Committee (NOC) must also sign a statement to confirm and guarantee that all the relevant rules have been brought to the attention of the competitor, the signed declaration as now exists seems to be no greater a deterrent than the athletes' oath. One wonders how many athletes have read the *Olympic Charter*, or care deeply about the Olympic Movement. Cheating seems as rife among Olympic athletes as among competitors in other sports that have no philosophies such as Olympism.⁴⁹

We may add that the United States Anti-Doping Agency requires every potential Olympian to sign a declaration that is based largely on the Olympic athletes' oath, namely the *Athlete's Pledge for Clean Sport & Fair Competition*.⁵⁰ Yet however good its intentions, this declaration, while mentioning doping rules, is replete with such "Olympic" and judgmental terms as "honor," "true spirit of sport," and "fair play." However many pledges or oaths athletes take, the problem remains the same. Even when the laws of the country are broken, perjury still takes place on occasion. Although U.S. track coach Trevor Graham stated recently that since 2002 he has made it obligatory for his athletes to sign contracts stating that they would not accept drugs or any supplements from him or from anyone associated with his track group, this agreement appears to have had no effect on one of his star Olympic athletes, Justin Gatlin, who tested positive for a banned substance.⁵¹

Rogue athletes and cheating surveys

*I don't call it cheating. My definition of cheating is doing something nobody else is doing.*⁵²

This section is comparatively lengthy because it considers the problem that the IOC faces in regard to rogue athletes, a major issue indeed if one accepts the comments of athletes (and others) in the findings of the surveys discussed here. This is not entirely new information, but one that deserves more consideration than it has hitherto received.

As early as 1973, Harold Connolly, the 1956 Olympic hammer-throw champion, is reported to have made the following statement to a United States Senate Committee (doubtless under oath): "*The overwhelming majority of athletes I know would do anything, and take anything, short of killing themselves, to improve athletic performance.*"⁵³ Connolly also stated: "I knew any number of athletes in the 1968 Olympic team who had so much scar tissue and so many puncture holes on their backsides that it was difficult to find a fresh spot to give them a new shot."⁵⁴

In 1988, Charlie Francis, the coach of Ben Johnson, testified under oath at the *Dubin Inquiry* that essentially all elite Olympic athletes were cheaters. These are chilling statement indeed, if true.⁵⁵

Several surveys taken over the last few years seem to show that cheating, or the desire to cheat, in sports and other aspects of life is common and may be increasing, at least in the countries in which

they were conducted.⁵⁶ In 1995, a Chicago doctor Bob Goldman carried out a survey in which only two out of 198 American elite athletes (including sprinters, swimmers, powerlifters, and others) said that they would not take a performance-enhancing drug if it guaranteed victory and remained undetectable. In a later survey, more than half said that would take a drug that guaranteed them success for five years, even if they died from side effects within that period.⁵⁷ According to a survey conducted in 2005-06, 46 per cent of the respondents believed that Diego Maradona's "Hand of God" goal in Mexico in 1986 (where the Argentine scored an "illegal" goal with his hand in a soccer match against England) should be considered the greatest World Cup (FIFA) moment ever. One may note that more than 4,500 respondents took part in this study not only from Argentina, but also from Brazil, Mexico, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and even the United Kingdom.⁵⁸ The Josephson Institute concluded from a 2004 survey of over 4,000 high school athletes that many contestants were ignoring concepts such as "fair play, good sportsmanship, and honorable competition." Many coaches and parents thought it more important to win by "evading or breaking rules."⁵⁹ A 2006 survey on the values and ethics of American High School athletes concluded that athletes in school cheated more than students who did not participate in sports.⁶⁰

The nature of these surveys raises some problems. One may question, for instance, to what extent they have been undertaken in strict conditions without posing leading questions, why more of them have not appeared in refereed publications, whether they could be replicated in different societies around the world, and to what degree the respondents are telling the truth.⁶¹ Even so, they all seem to point in the same direction, so that if cheating is so rampant in society, one wonders what hope there is for a mere oath that has no force of law. No cheating surveys or relevant comments have survived from the ancient Greek athletes themselves, of course, but one doubts whether they would have been very different from those cited above, based on what we know. Ancient Greek society was even more competitive than our own where the emphasis was on winning, with no second or third places in major competitions, but shame for the losers on returning home.⁶²

Some Conclusions

*In the Caribbean, especially in the nineteenth century few broke the Obeah oath that had the penalty of an agonizing death.*⁶³

The purpose of this section is to invite the reader to think about a problem that is much more complex than many (including some of those within the Olympic Movement) would have us believe. Even when sworn before a sacred witness with possible threat of punishment the ancient athletes' oath did not work in regard to all competitors. One should not expect an oath in the modern world to be binding on all contestants either, particularly when it is far removed from an intimate and personal setting. Athletes who want to win at any cost may have no conscience about breaking the Olympic oath, may be unfazed by the solemnity or ceremony of the occasion, by the glory of sport, and by the honor of competing for their country. Competitors with no moral or religious scruples are not likely to be deterred by a two-year penalty for taking drugs (for first offenders). For them, the oath will remain little more than an archaic relic that has no relevance, a symbol without "teeth" entirely under the jurisdiction of the IOC. If some athletes are really prepared to sacrifice their lives, as some surveys purport to show, what hope does an archaic symbol have?

If the Olympic Movement had the power of an international court, it would reduce the number of cheaters at the Games, but not eliminate them, for perjury does not seem to be a real deterrent for some athletes who lie under oath even when facing legal consequences.⁶⁴ Certainly, some oaths are more effective than others, such as the Obeah oath from the Caribbean that threatens an agonizing

death as a punishment for wrongdoing (above). Although the IOC could hardly introduce a draconian oath of this kind, even it wanted to, it could enforce zero tolerance for cheaters and a lifetime ban from the Olympic Movement for first offenders, with no right of appeal.

Yet no less a critic of performance-enhancing drugs than Richard Pound, the founder and chair of WADA, has stated that a lifetime ban for a first infraction is too severe, that a two-year ban from the Olympic Games is a sufficient penalty, and that anything more would violate human rights.⁶⁵ Instead of a lifetime ban, Pound has proposed a ten-step program to rid sport of drugs, but has no mention that I have seen of any legal document (even though he is a lawyer) in terms of athletes or their oath. Among other things, he believes in education and an international solution, an admirable proposal, although he appears to underestimate the cultural differences of nations by largely ignoring societies where some forms of cheating, as we have illustrated, are all “part of the game.”⁶⁶ We have seen that diversity of cultures is an issue that the IOC could better address, an ironic situation as Coubertin introduced internationalism to the Olympics but only on his own terms. Should we really educate all societies to think like the Olympic Movement that largely follows a Westernized culture, noting that even the Olympic rings have received only limited protection around the world?⁶⁷ In addition, Pound has suggested that coaches and officials should face stiffer penalties than athletes⁶⁸—the ancients had already anticipated this problem by making trainers and judges swear an oath at Olympia. Pound has also stated that physicians who assist athletes in cheating have contravened their Hippocratic oath, presumably considering the oath of physicians to be more binding than that of athletes.⁶⁹ If the athletes’ oath has little power, should we expect the Hippocratic oath to have more force?

Will we ever have a level playing field for all athletes in all sports? Even if it were possible to ban or even legalize performance-enhancing drugs throughout the world, some athletes would still have the edge in some events. It may seem naïve to state, but even apart from drugs, some competitors have obvious (legal) advantages over others, such as two-meter-tall high jumpers, long-distance runners who are born at altitude, and cricketers born with a crooked arm that produces a bowling action that otherwise would be illegal.⁷⁰ The reader can decide whether the carbon fiber prosthetics of the South African runner Oscar Pistorius (a double amputee known as the “Blade Runner” or “the fastest man with no legs”) afford an unfair advantage or not. One should note that the sport of bodybuilding has attempted to address the drug problem by splitting into “open” and “natural” competitions, with drugs (theoretically) taboo in the latter. One branch, the North American Natural Bodybuilding Federation Inc., uses a method to ferret out cheats not currently employed by the IOC, namely polygraph testing.⁷¹ There are potential problems, of course, with polygraph tests that like brain fingerprinting, thermal imaging, and voice stress analysis need further research to supplement drug testing, declarations, and oaths.⁷²

Some Olympic athletes may cheat because of the pressure of nations to perform, the burden of expectation placed upon them especially by countries hosting the Games. We may consider Canada’s program to produce more medalists, “Own the Podium,” which is aimed at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver and partly funded by the Federal Government.⁷³ As long as people want to watch extraordinary feats by extraordinary people, some athletes will seek ways to cheat.⁷⁴ The allegedly enhanced Mark McGuire and Sammy Sosa invigorated American baseball with their home-run chase in 1998. Ten years earlier at the Seoul Olympics Ben Johnson won what some commentators have called the greatest race ever, until more than one competitor (at some time in his career) tested positive for steroids. Larger-than-life wrestlers in the WWE perform to enthusiastic capacity crowds in North America. Do we, or the IOC, really want to see “normal” performances by “normal” athletes? Do we crave to witness another Olmeus Charles, a runner determined to have his day in the Olympic

sun and finish the 10,000 meters in Montreal in 1976, at the slowest pace ever recorded, to the derision of the crowd and annoyance of the officials?⁷⁵ Such “incompetence” would not have been tolerated at ancient Olympia where spectators were interested only in the best and where the mediocre were weeded out. Even with an oath sworn before a superior being in a virtual unicultural society, the Greeks could not stop athletes from cheating at the ancient Olympics that lasted for more than a thousand years. Can we hope for innocence in a much more complex multicultural world?

Endnotes

- 1 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958). This American author and satirist (1842–1914?) is elaborating on *Ecclesiastes* (1:9-14 New International Version).
- 2 Christopher A. Faraone, “Curses and Social Control in the Law Courts of Classical Athens,” *Dike* 2 (1999), 99-121, especially 108. See also John M. Roberts, “Oaths, Automatic Appeals and Power,” *American Anthropologist* 67, no. 6.2 (1965), 186-212 and his study of different cultures.
- 3 *The Language of Philosophy. Dictionary and Research Guide (Oath)*; <http://www.123exp-beliefs.com/t/00804149138/>.
- 4 *Oxford English Dictionary* [electronic resource] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 5 *The Law Reform Commission of British Columbia, Canada, (Minor Report, November 1990)*; [http://www.bcli.org/pages/publications/lrcreports/reports\(html\)/Lrc115text.html#A.%20Oaths%20Generally](http://www.bcli.org/pages/publications/lrcreports/reports(html)/Lrc115text.html#A.%20Oaths%20Generally).
- 6 Pausanias (5.24.11 below).
- 7 See also on the ancient oath, Nigel B. Crowther, “Olympic Rules and Regulations: Some Observations on the Swearing of Olympic Oaths in Ancient and Modern Times,” *Nikephoros* (forthcoming). Ludwig Drees, *Olympia: Gods, Artists, and Athletes* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 68 suggests that the oath was probably taken at Elis, although Pausanias does not say so.
- 8 Ingomar Weiler, “Regel und Regelbruch bei den antiken Olympischen Spielen,” in *The Olympic Games Through the Ages: Greek Antiquity and its Impact on Modern Sport*, 13th. HISPA Congress, Olympia May 22-28, 1989, eds. Roland Renson et al. (Athens: Hellenic Sports Research Institute, 1991), 55-64. Weiler has already shown that ancient Olympic oaths aimed at preventing corruption at Olympia and the breaking of rules.
- 9 In addition to Olympia, we know that similar oaths were sworn at other festivals in ancient Greece: at Isthmia, for example, Pausanias (2.2.1) states that nobody who swore falsely could escape [the consequences of] his oath by any means. The oath did not always work here either, for Philostratus (*Gymnastics* 45 below) informs us that a boy competitor won wrestling at Isthmia by promising an enormous bribe to his opponent.
- 10 So thinks Manfred Lämmer, “The Nature and Significance of the Olympic Oath in Greek Antiquity,” in *The Institution of the Olympic Games. A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Proceedings of the International H.C.R.S.L. Congress, Olympia, Greece, September 3-7, 1991, ed. D. P. Panagiotopoulos (Athens: Hellenic Center of Research on Sports Law, 1993), 145.
- 11 Faraone, Curses and Social Control, 109.
- 12 Although we cannot use Homer as direct evidence for Olympia, we may note that spectators swore in the *Odyssey* (18.55-58) that they would not physically assist Odysseus' opponent in the boxing contest.
- 13 The north part of the building dates to the second half of the sixth century B.C., the south part to the beginning of the fifth B.C., according to Alfred Mallwitz, *Olympia und seine Bauten* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1972), 238. Perhaps before the building of the *Bouleuterion* the oaths were held in the Altis, by the altar or temple of Zeus.
- 14 See Crowther, “Olympic Rules and Regulations,” for the evidence.
- 15 Philostratus (*Gymnastics* 45 above).
- 16 *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 9.4, Faraone, Curses and Social Control.
- 17 “If I fulfill this oath and do not violate it, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and art, being honored with fame among all men for all time to come; if I transgress it and swear falsely, may the opposite of all this be my lot.” (Translation Edelstein)
- 18 Crowther, *Athletika. Studies on the Olympic Games and Greek Athletics, Nikephoros Beihefte* 11 (Hildesheim: Weidmann, 2004), 141-68.

- 19 See among others on bribery, Crowther, *Athletika*, 426-28, Crowther, "The Salt Lake City Scandals and the Ancient Olympic Games," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 19.4 (Dec. 2002), 169-78, and Karl-Wilhelm Weeber, *Die unheimlichen Spiele: Das antike Olympia zwischen Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Zurich/Munich: Artemis & Winkler 1991).
- 20 See n.41 (below) on the legal status of the modern Olympics.
- 21 On the relation of Pelops and the myth to Olympia, see Mark Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13-14. For full references, see John Davidson, "Olympia and the Chariot-Race of Pelops," in *Sport and Festival in the Ancient Greek World*, eds. David J. Phillips and David Pritchard (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2003), 101-122.
- 22 This is the translation of Joachim Ebert: see Peter Siewert, "The Olympic Rules," in *Proceedings of an International Symposium on the Olympic Games 5-9 September 1988*, eds. William Coulson and Helmut Kyrieleis (Athens: Archäologisches Institut Athen, 1992), 114. For further discussion, see Joachim Ebert and Peter Siewert, "Eine archaische Bronzeurkunde aus Olympia mit Vorschriften für Ringkämpfer und Kampfrichter," in *Agonismata*, eds. M. Hillgruber, R. Jakobi, and W. Luppe (Stuttgart/Leipzig: Teubner, 1997), 200-36.
- 23 Crowther, *Athletika*, 149, on the Zanes. See also Jonathan S. Perry, "An Olympic Victory Must Not Be Bought: Oath-Taking, Cheating and Women in Greek Athletics," in *Horkos: The Oath in Greek Society*, eds. Alan Sommerstein and Judith Fletcher (Bristol: Phoenix Press, 2007), 81-88.
- 24 See Perry, "An Olympic Victory," who further notes that there are similarities between the surviving accounts about Kyniska and her Olympic victory and Pausanias' description of the Zanes and the possible wording of the Olympic oaths. This may be evident in Plutarch's comment (*Agesilaus* 20.1) that Agesilaus persuaded his sister to enter the Games, maintaining that he wanted to demonstrate to the Greeks that an equestrian victory resulted from wealth and expense, not *arete*.
- 25 For bribery in the modern Olympic world, we may compare the IOC members guilty of accepting gifts in the Salt Lake City bidding scandal of 1999. See Larry R. Gerlach, ed., *The Winter Games: From Chamonix to Salt Lake City* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2004), 3-4.
- 26 Coubertin, *Ode to Sport* (below).
- 27 See his *Olympic Memoirs* (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 1997), 88-93, The Oath of the Athletes: Letter to Charles Simon, *The Olympic Idea* (Schorndorf: Hofmann, 1967), 15, Norbert Müller, *Olympism: Selected Writings / Pierre de Coubertin* (anne: International Olympic Committee, 2000), 622. See also Müller, *Olympism*, 653-57.
- 28 Miguel de Morages et al., "Opening Ceremony Narratives," in *The Olympic Games Ancient and Modern*, eds. W. Lindsay Adams and Larry R. Gerlach (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2002), 203.
- 29 Coubertin was aware of much of the procedure at the ancient Games, but interpreted it to suit his own ideals, sometimes deliberately, sometimes out of ignorance. See Crowther, "The Spirit of Competition (*Agon*) in the Olympic Games, from Ancient to Modern Times," in *Cultural imperialism in Action: Critiques in the Global Olympic Trust, Eighth International Symposium for Olympic Research*, eds. N.B. Crowther, R.K. Barney, and M.K. Heine (London, Ontario, 2006), 1-18.
- 30 One anonymous author claims that an oath had been read during the intercalated Games in Athens in 1906, but gives no references. See VII (7th) Olympiad Antwerp, Belgium, Apr 20th - Sep 12th, 1920; <http://www.kiat.net/olympics/history/07antwerp.html>.
- 31 In 1904, the American Fred Lorz was declared victor in the marathon although he had retired from the race after only nine miles. There is also the case of Thomas Hicks and the 1908 controversy between British officials and American athletes. Some may think Coubertin himself "cheated" by not entering his *Ode to Sport* under his own name. See Richard Stanton, *The Forgotten Olympic Art Competitions* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford Publishing, 2000), 45.
- 32 See below for the oath and later variations.
- 33 The poem is readily accessible at; http://72.14.205.104/search?q=cache:-VWF9phLI-UJ:www.olympic.org/upload/news/olympic_review/review_20021913257_UK.pdf+ode+to+sport+you+are+honour+coubertin&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=ca.
- 34 *Olympic Games 1920 Antwerp Official Report*, 53.
- 35 For the wording in English, see Roland Renson, *The Games Reborn. The VI11th Olympiad: Antwerp 1920* (Antwerp: Pandora, 1996), 32, following Pierre de Coubertin, "The Seventh Olympic Games," in *Report of the American Olympic Committee* (Greenwich, CT, [no date]), 54.
- 36 See endnote 40 (below) for political correctness. Interestingly, Romney unsuccessfully attempted to have all participants recite the athletes' oath in unison at the opening ceremony of the Salt Lake City Olympic Winter Games. See "': Notebook; I.O.C. to Salt Lake City: Just Stick to Tradition," *New York Times*, February 8, 2001. According to Bill Mallon, The History of the Opening Ceremonies, all the athletes joined in unison with the oath-taker (Jimmy Shea); <http://www.la84foundation.org/OlympicInformationCenter/OlympicReview/1984/ore199/ORE199v.pdf>.
- 37 Renson, *The Games Reborn*, 57.
- 38 *Olympic Charter 2003* (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2003), Bye-law to Rule 69.1.12. Neither the athletes' oath nor the judges' oath (below) is found in the online version of the *Charter*, in force as from July 7, 2007. The

IOC established the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) on November 10, 1999 to fight against the illegal use of drugs in sport internationally.

- 39 We should remember that we have only a synopsis of the ancient oath in Pausanias, which is written in the third person, not the first person of the athlete. There are no recorded examples of drug taking at Olympia, although some ancient athletes, like modern, no doubt attempted to “win at all costs.” The reference to no “gifts” is interesting in the light of the problems of the modern Olympics (especially in relation to the International Olympic Committee and the Salt Lake City bidding scandal), as we have seen (n.25 above).
- 40 *Olympic Charter*, Rule 53.2.1 (below). The use of the masculine pronoun alone here (in both the English and French versions of the *Olympic Charter 2003*) shows some insensitivity to gender on the part of the IOC, even though an introductory note states that it is understood that the masculine gender also includes the feminine gender throughout. The 2007 online version of the *Charter* avoids this problem (Rule 25, 2.2.1). Consider also the word “sportsmanship” in the Olympic athletes’ oath.
- 41 John A. Lucas, *The Modern Olympic Games* (Brunswick, N.J.: A. S. Barnes, 1980), 136 states that “the [IOC] is one of the world’s most unusual organizations. It has no legal status and is accountable to no higher authority.” David J. Ettinger, “The Legal Status of the International Olympic Committee,” *Pace Yearbook of International Law*, 4 (1992), 109 maintains that the IOC’s status as an international person is dependent upon global acceptance of the *Olympic Charter*. See also the brief article of Alexandre Mestre, “The legal basis of the Olympic Charter,” *World Sports Law Report* (November 2007), 6-7 who believes that it has the power of an “international treaty.”
- 42 One can cite as an obvious example the different attitudes to diving or simulation in soccer. See also the comments on Maradona in the section on “cheating surveys” (below). The purpose here is to raise this point rather than discuss it in depth.
- 43 The 2007 *Olympic Charter* (Rule 36.3) still speaks of the honor (honour) of hosting the Olympic Games. But how many bidding cities consider honor a major criterion? See above for honor in connection with the oath and Coubertin.
- 44 BBC Sport, “Colourful Finale for Turin Games” (February 26, 2006); http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/other_sports/winter_sports/winter_olympics/4750906.stm.
- 45 Notable athletes who have sworn the oath include John Landy in Melbourne (1956) and Edwin Moses in Los Angeles (1984). The first female to read the oath was Guiliana Chenal-Minuzzo, an Alpine skier, at Cortina d’Ampezzo, Italy, in 1956.
- 46 2007 *Olympic Charter*, Rule 45 Bye-law 6 (below).
- 47 Also coaches, trainers, and officials sign the same kind of declaration.
- 48 The reader should be aware that the order of items has changed in this 2007 version of the *Charter* from the 2003 *Charter*, where the reference to drugs was not placed at the end.
- 49 For examples, see Richard W. Pound, *Inside Dope* (Mississauga: John Wiley and Sons), 2006. Doping and other scandals have extended into the Paralympic Games: see; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheating_at_the_Paralympic_Games. There is even cheating at the Special Olympics where there is also an oath: “Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.”
- 50 Pal Schmitt, European Parliament Hearing on Doping 29/11/2004. The Athlete’s Commitment; <http://72.14.205.104/search?q=cache:aY6BaKf4-uwj:www.europarl.europa.eu/hearings/20041129/cult/schmitt.pdf+olympics+oath+cheating&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=19&gl=ca>.
- 51 Amy Shipley, “Coach Says Gatlin Signed Anti-Doping Pledge,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 2006. For Gatlin, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justin_Gatlin. For the 2004 USOC pledge see; http://72.14.205.104/search?q=cache:MLPZuyCB3io:usabasketball.com/news/08_woly_code-of-conduct.pdf+olympic+usoc+pledge+athletes+new&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=4&gl=ca.
- 52 So said Charlie Francis, the former coach of the disgraced Canadian sprinter, Ben Johnson. See Crowther, “State of the Modern Olympics: , Altius, Fortius?” *European Review* 12, no. 3 (2004), 445-56.
- 53 William Rudge and Fabrizio Schifano, “The Abuse of Stimulants in Sport,” *Boll. Farmacodip. e Alcoolis*, XXIV, no. 4 (2001), 65; http://www.unicri.it/min.san.bollettino/bulletin_it/2001-4/pag65.pdf. William O. Johnson, “Olympics. 100 Years of Change,” *Time International*, May 27, 1996, Volume 147, No. 22, quotes Jack Kelly, a former Olympic skuller, as saying, “As many as two-thirds of the athletes signing the Olympic oath are committing perjury;” <http://www.time.com/time/international/1996/960527/olympics.history.html>. I give a website as reference here and elsewhere as perhaps the easiest way for the reader to access the surveys.
- 54 R. Stokvis, “Moral Entrepreneurship and Doping Cultures in Sport,” *Amsterdam School for Social Research*, November 2003; <http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/assr/workingpapers/documents/ASSR-WP0304.pdf>.
- 55 Mark Fainaru-Wada, “Steroids’ Powerful, Troubling Attraction. Track Trials Raise Question: Must Athletes Cheat to Win?” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8, 2004.
- 56 R. Morgan Griffin, “What Makes People Cheat?” <http://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/features/what-makes-people-cheat?page=1>.
- 57 Bob Hofman, “Easily Obtained Steroids Focus of Debate,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 26, 2003.

- 58 "Yahoo Survey Reveals the Passion of Soccer Fans," June 14, 2006; <http://us.indiantelevision.com/headlines/y2k6/june/june188.htm>.
- 59 *Josephson Institute. Center for Sports Ethics*, "Survey of High School Athletes: 2004," <http://josephsoninstitute.org/sports/programs/survey/2004/index.html>
- 60 Anthony G. Copeland, "Academic Dishonesty in Athletes and Non-Athletes, Male and Female," <http://clearing-house.missouriwestern.edu/manuscripts/44.asp>.
- 61 Kjetil K. Haugen, "The Performance-Enhancing Drug Game," *Journal of Sports Economics* 5.1 (2004), 67-86 expresses doubts about the accuracy of the Goldman and other surveys. One would like to see more scientific surveys with stronger criteria and more objective questions so that respondents do not reply what the researchers want to hear.
- 62 Crowther, "The Spirit of Competition," 5-7.
- 63 Alexander Giraldo, "Religion and Resistance, Obeah: The Ultimate Resistance," <http://scholar.library.miami.edu/slaves/Religion/religion.html>.
- 64 One may cite as an example Major League Baseball player Rafael Palmeiro who denied under oath before the U.S. Congress that he had taken steroids.
- 65 Pound, *Inside Dope*, 111-12.
- 66 Pound, *Inside Dope*, 213-28. See on Maradona (above).
- 67 Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn, and Scott G. Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings. The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2004), 159-63.
- 68 Pound, *Inside Dope*, 114-20.
- 69 Pound, *Inside Dope*, 207. Examples of physicians breaking the Hippocratic oath are certainly not unknown. Lawrence K. Altman, "The Doctor's World; Despite Many Shifts, Oath as Old as Apollo Endures in Medicine," *New York Times*, May 15, 1990 (pointing out that doctors are not required to take the oath) states that recent surveys have found that "about 5 percent of physicians have admitted to sexual intercourse with their patients."
- 70 As in the case of the Sri Lankan bowler Muttiah Muralitharan.
- 71 One "natural" bodybuilding branch, INBA, claims to be accepted by the IOC, North American Natural Bodybuilding Federation, Inc.; http://72.14.205.104/search?q=cache:BtTBbO7pKiYJ:www.nanbf.org/BannedSubstances/2007_NANBF_Banned_Substances_List.pdf+natural+bodybuilding+fail+test&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=4&gl=ca.
- 72 Denise Culver, "New Report Questions Validity of Polygraph Testing," *Focus* 32.3 (2003), states that 95% of polygraph testing is reliable and considers its value as a deterrent; http://72.14.205.104/search?q=cache:Ziaot8sN3SIJ:www.cmu.edu/focus/archive/FOCUS_2003_01.pdf+polygraph+athlete&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=21&client=safari.
- 73 There were subsidies in ancient Greece for victorious, rather than aspiring, athletes.
- 74 See Shaun Assael, *Steroid Nation* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2007).
- 75 See Crowther, "The State of the Modern Olympics," 149-50.