

# Pierre de Coubertin and the Olympic Athlete

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## Abstract

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It is a central objective of the International Pierre de Coubertin Committee (IPCC) to make known the works of Pierre de Coubertin in their entirety, to identify the main lines of his thinking, and to ensure their dissemination. Equally important and hence also mentioned in the mission statements of the IPCC is the need to strengthen a contemporary reading of Coubertin's ideas, thoughts and concepts. By doing this one can analyze that the Olympic Movement and the International Olympic Committee has not become alienated from the fundamental principles of its founder. Only one example for this is the interpretation of Coubertin's vision of the Olympic athlete.

## Keywords

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Ancient Olympic athletes, protection of athletes, athletes as role models, honouring athletes, institutional representations of athletes

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## Introduction

Athletes' commissions of sport organisations and sport federations but also independent athletes' associations are demonstrating increased visibility and power today. As key actors, one can refer, amongst others, to the Athletes' Commissions of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), and on the independent sector to Global Athlete or Athlete Alliance.

At the international level, the IOC's Athletes' Commission is the most established body of its kind. The fact that it was not founded until 1981 should not lead to the misunderstanding that the role and responsibilities of athletes in the Olympic Movement were not considered earlier. Indeed, one can even date back to the ancient Olympic Games. An introduction on this is given in chapter 2. For the modern Olympic Games, it is relevant to stress how its founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, addressed the Olympic athlete in his thoughts on the Olympic Movement and the organisation of the Olympic Games. This is analysed in chapters 3 and 4.

## Athletic Excellence at the Ancient Olympic Games

The so-called Panhellenic competition cycle included the Pythian Games in Delphi, Nemean Games in Nemea, Isthmian Games in Corinth, and the Olympian Games in Olympia. Without doubt, the last were the most important for athletes to display their athletic excellence and to receive awards for their performances. Only one example for this was the boxer Agathos Daimon, who ambitiously wanted to finish his career with

a victory at the Olympic Games. One can deduce the importance he placed on this feat from the inscription on his tombstone where it is written that he promised death or victory to Zeus (Decker 2012, 164).

In Greek agonistic culture, winning was all or nothing. After each competition, the athlete who placed first in the respective competition was awarded a ribbon in public to mark his athletic performance during the ongoing festival. Athletes on the second and following ranks were not distinguished. They were not even invited to the banquet in the *prytanaion*. This event which took place on the last day of the Olympic Games was for the winners only. It was also here at the exclusive banquet that the victorious athletes were crowned with the notorious olive wreath. In addition to this, they were given the opportunity to erect a victory statue in the *altis*. These statues, which contained inscriptions with information on the name of the athletes and their athletic victory(ies), had to be financed either by the athletes themselves or ideally by their respective city-states. If neither was possible, one could agree on commissioning a poet to compose verses about the athletic achievement of the athlete. When returning home in their city-states, the victorious athletes were honored as immortal, ascribed distinguished social statuses, given seats of honor at civic assemblies, received monetary prizes and tax exemptions, and could enjoy a life-time free-access to dining in the town hall (Crowther 2007, 53).

In order to perform at their best and outperform fellow-competitors, athletes spent a large amount of time training. They even had the possibility to consult specialist literature produced by coaches, physicians,

and physical educators since the 5th Century BC. Topics therein dealt, amongst others, with medical treatments for injuries, training concepts such as interval training, advice for coaches to set up training plans, and information on a special diet which was said to strengthen physical fitness (Decker 2012, 118 – 222). It was beneficial for athletes to consult this literature when searching for the most effective plan for their training schedules. This was particularly true for athletes who wanted to compete at the Olympic Games as it was required that they had been in training for 10 months. They had to swear on this in Olympia in front of the statue of Zeus *Horkios* before the start of the competitions.

As the intensive training was highly time-consuming, only wealthy people could afford to become athletes; simply because they did not have to stick to a regular working schedule to earn their daily living. This social advantage made it also possible for athletes to spend a month training in Elis prior to the Olympic Games. This training camp was mandatory for everyone who wanted to participate at the upcoming Olympic Games. During this training month, age groups were classified and qualification events organized in order to secure top-level performances when competing in Olympia. Considering all this, the ancient Greek top-level athlete did not meet the criteria denoted to the concept of amateurism as developed and propagated in English sport of the 19th Century (Young 1984, 7 – 14).

To receive all the honors bestowed upon them as well as the social and financial benefits connected with winning in competition, it was sometimes needed for the athlete to provide evidence for his athletic success. This evidence

came in the form of an official document, with its preparation being the main responsibility of the athletes' association. According to research, these associations of athletes on a local level had been established as early as the 4th Century B.C. By the middle of the 1st Century B.C., further developments saw athletes begin to organize their representations in professional associations in the ecumene (Sinn 2004, 130). The nationwide operating athletes' associations were organized professionally with three high priests acting as, what we would refer to today, as presidents. The priests were supported by an official representative of the respective sport festival (*xystarch*), two assessors (*archons*), a treasurer, and the general secretary of the respective local athletes' association. All officials had to display good character traits and to be former outstanding athletes, which was, above all, true for the three high priests, who often were *periodonikes*. As to the document testifying to the success of the athlete, all of the eight board members of the athletes' association were required to sign it as to validate it (Decker 2012, 145).

### **Pierre de Coubertin's Core Thoughts on the Olympic Athlete**

As to research carried out by, amongst others, J. J. MacAloon (1984), D. Young 1984, N. Müller (1994), S. Wassong (2002), A. Guttmann 2002, and K. Georgiadis (2003), Coubertin had deep insights into the educational mission of the Anglo-American sport world and detailed knowledge on the so-called pre-modern Olympic scene, including the initiatives of the Greek Evangelis Zappas and the Englishman William Penny Brooks. Due to his strong humanistic education and line of thinking,

Coubertin linked his Olympic contemplations with the tradition and reputation of the ancient Olympic Games in a very idealistic way. This is above all true for his perception of the ancient athlete. Like in antiquity, his conceived Olympic Games should be staged every four years. But unlike in the ancient time, he viewed them as being regarded as an institutional element of a broader idea to which Coubertin referred to as Olympism.

Coubertin never tired of explaining this concept in numerous articles and speeches. As to the latter, the radio message *The Philosophic Foundations of Modern Olympism* that Coubertin delivered for the Swiss radio station *Suisse Romande* on 4th August, 1935, has become renowned. Three days after the addressal, a printed version of his speech appeared in *Le Sport Suisse*. A careful reading of this article reveals that it is the athlete who is at the center of Coubertin's Olympic idea, and the focus for most of his educational thinking. This article is fundamental when analyzing his vision of the Olympic athlete.

Coubertin had a particular age group in mind for, which he liked to refer to as, the modern Olympic athlete. In his opinion, the athlete was most probably a young adult who had just finished his vocational training or graduated and thus ready to commence their professional life.

“The human springtime is expressed in the young adult male, who can be compared to a superb machine in which all the gears have been set in place, ready for full operation. That is the person in whose honour the Olympic Games must be celebrated and their rhythm organized and maintained, because it is on him that the near future depends, as well as the

harmonious passage from the past to the future” (Coubertin 2000 (1935), 581).

The Olympic Games were to offer young adults some kind of final education stressing the development of highly social and moral values. It becomes obvious when reading his works that for Coubertin the Olympic Games were regarded as a useful support in the transition of the mature athlete into a respected and responsible person of society.

According to Coubertin, the Olympic athlete has to display outstanding performances and must be motivated by his individual desire to strive for the best possible result, which does not exclude the achievement of absolute records. This is also reflected in the motto *citius – altius – fortius* (Coubertin 2000 [1935], 581). At the closing ceremony of the Olympic Foundation Congress at the Sorbonne on 23rd June 1894, Coubertin already proposed these three words formulated in the Latin comparative, *citius – altius- fortius*, as the motto for the Olympic Movement. The motto itself had been coined by Father Henri Didon, who was headmaster at the Dominican Albertus Magnus College in Arcueil. On the occasion of a school sport event on 7th March 1891, Didon explained the motto, which he regarded as the nature of sport and sportsmanship par excellence, to his students. Coubertin had attended the sport festival and had been impressed by the motto and its significance. Only a few days later, Coubertin quoted this motto in a report on the school sports festival in the journal *Les Sports Athlétiques*. However, the Olympic motto only appeared for the first time, together with the Olympic rings, at the Olympic Congress in Paris in 1914, which marked the 20th anniversary of the Olympic Movement (Müller 2012, 183).

Participation in the Olympic Games, for Coubertin, should be reserved for the best athletes only, whose selection is based predominantly on individual achievement and not social origin. He was clear that not all sportsmen have the capability and muscular superiority needed to become an Olympic athlete, but in his Olympic pyramid Coubertin states that an Olympic athlete has a moral and social responsibility to act as a role model stimulating interest in sport for the masses. By this, the educational value of sport should be disseminated among all age groups and social classes to engage in sport in their leisure time:

“For every hundred who engage in physical culture, fifty must engage in sports. For every fifty who engage in sports, twenty must specialize. For every twenty who specialize, five must be capable of astonishing feats” (Coubertin 2000 [1935], 581).

According to Coubertin, Olympic athletes can only fulfil their responsibility to act as role models if their achievements are based strictly on amateurism. He explained this with the following interlinked arguments: The objective assessment of athletic excellence is only possible when athletes have equal starting conditions. These cannot be guaranteed by opening the Olympic Games to both amateurs and professionals. The latter regard sport as a profession to earn money for their daily living. Therefore, they spend all of their time training to excel in competition. This gives them a clear advantage over amateurs who follow daily educational and professional obligations, leaving only their leisure time available to practice sport. For amateurs, participation or even victory in the competition stands for itself. Coubertin clearly states this in his article

*La Psychologie du Sport*:

“The task that he [the sportsman] accomplishes is one that he has set for himself. Since he does not need to return to this task the very next day to earn his living, there is no reason for him to conserve his energy. In this way he is able to cultivate effort for effort’s sake, to seek out obstacles, to place a few obstacles in his own path, and always to aim a little higher than the level he must achieve” (Coubertin 2000 [1901], 148).

But why was it not appropriate for Coubertin to limit the Olympic Games to professionals only? In his opinion, this strategy would undermine the expectation placed on the Olympic athlete as a role model. The unilateral orientation of professional athletes on victory as a means to make one’s living would too easily lead to manipulation and the disrespect of fair-play in competition. Coubertin generally accused professionalism of promoting unlimited and uncontrolled performance development. The codex of amateurism was thought to prevent athletes from this attitude and would therefore safeguard their acting as role models (Bertling & Wassong 2016, 437). Coubertin highlights the value of amateurism in his article *The Re-establishment of the modern Olympic Games*, which he published in 1894 already:

“Sporting can only produce good moral effects, can, indeed, maintain its existence, only as it [is] founded upon disinterestedness, loyalty, and chivalric sentiment” (Coubertin 1894, 699).

## The Athlete and Early Olympic Ceremonies

As to Coubertin, the Olympics should be

organized for the athletes (Coubertin 2000 [19135], 582). By organizing here, Coubertin meant definitely more than paying attention to the mere conduct of competitions. For athletes, the competition itself should not coin the unique atmosphere of the Olympic Games, but this should be realized by the imbedding of competitions into a festive framework consisting of various elements. Without doubt, one of these can be seen in the idea that the victorious athletes deserved to be honored for their outstanding achievements at the Olympic Games in an appropriate festive way (Müller 2000, 43). Accordingly, Coubertin approved the victory medal ceremonies which have become a tradition at the Olympic Games since its first edition in Athens in 1896 (Coubertin 2000 [1931], 603).

At the 1896 Athens Olympic Games, originally a silver medal was awarded to the athletes who placed first in their respective competitions; a copper medal was given to the athletes who placed second. No medal was awarded to the athletes who came in third place. Further, athletes who won a competition were given a diploma and an olive branch. A laurel branch was presented to the athletes who were ranked second. The special festive element of the ceremony constituted that of the members of the Athens Olympic Organizing Committee and of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) lining up in the Panathenaikon Stadium together with the athletes at the end of all competitions. After a herald's call, one athlete after the other climbed up the stairs to receive their awards. Since the Olympic Games in St. Louis in 1904, gold, silver and bronze medals have been awarded to the athletes.

The winners' podium, often so imposing at the Olympics, was first used in 1932 at the Winter

Olympics in Lake Placid; since then, it has been used in Olympic Winter and Summer Games. It was not Coubertin's idea but that of his successor Count Henri Baillet-Latour. But without a doubt, the idea of the podium proved to be a perfect symbol to honor the achievements of Coubertin's Olympic athlete.

Baillet-Latour learned about this form of award ceremony at the 1930 British Empire Games in Hamilton in Canada. Previously, the honors were traditionally performed by a member of the royal family who stood on a pedestal over the athlete or in the royal lodge. With the introduction of the winning podium, the positions were eventually swapped and the athlete has since received a special symbolic appreciation (Barney 2000, 196). This clearly met Coubertin's expectation to honor the athlete in a very respectful way and to symbolically stress their role as a key actor of the Olympic Movement. The first athlete in Olympic history who was honored on the podium was the American Jack Shea. On 4th February 1932, he received the gold medal for his victory in the 500-metre speed skating event.

As to the responsibility of the Olympic athlete to act as a role model, Coubertin stressed – as contextualized in the previous chapter – that the athletes should feel a firm and honest inner attitude to the value of amateurism to safeguard their sport from the dark sides of professionalism. Moreover, he viewed that they should feel committed to amateurism and that this should be stressed within the Olympic oath.

Coubertin mentioned the Olympic oath for the first time in 1906 in a letter written to Charles Simon, Secretary General of the Fédération Gymnastique et Sportive

des Patronage de France (Coubertin 2000 [1906], 598). However, it was not until the 1914 Paris Olympic Congress that the topic was formally discussed and approved. Due to the cancellation of the 1916 Berlin Olympic Games, the Olympic Oath was only taken for the first time at the opening ceremony of the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games. After advice from the Belgium Olympic Committee (BOC), Coubertin selected Victor Boin as the speaker of the oath. He said the following words at the opening ceremony:

“We swear that we are taking part in the Olympic Games as loyal competitors, observing the rules governing the Games, and anxious to show a spirit of chivalry for the honour of our countries and for the glory of sport” (Coubertin quoted in Renon 1996, 33).

In the research paper *The Olympic Oath and so Much More: A Biographical Interpretative Analysis of the Life of Vicor Boin, 1886 – 1974.*, B. Constandt et al. explained why Coubertin had selected Boin as the first speaker of the Olympic oath. Boin’s personal and athletic profile clearly corresponded with Coubertin’s vision of the Olympic athlete:

“The then 34-years-old Boin represented a logical choice for de Coubertin in terms of conveying this pioneering political message that aimed to spread the symbolic visibility and meaning of the Olympic movement as broadly as possible. Boin was Belgian – as was the 1920 Olympic host city Antwerp – and someone with an extensive and international social network. Moreover, Boin’s athletic career reflected a very diverse track record of excellence, as for instance illustrated by his silver and bronze medal wins as part

of the water polo team during respectively the 1908 Olympics in London and the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm” (Constandt et al. 2021, 1037).

### Missing Institutional Voices of Athletes

Although Coubertin clearly regarded the athletes as key actors of the Olympic Games, he never considered giving them representation in the IOC. Of course, this can be criticized from today’s perspective, but not from one which reflects on Coubertin’s time as president of the IOC, which lasted from 1896 till 1925. In those decades, as well as in the following ones – shaped by Coubertin’s successor in the office as IOC President – the one-dimensional institutional power relationship between athletes and sport officials was considered a given by all actors involved. In addition to this, the IOC itself had not yet had time to fully develop since its foundation in 1894. Its governance structures have only gradually expanded, step by step, over the years together with the growing popularity of the Olympic Games, which consequently led to an increase in responsibility on the side of the IOC.

Coubertin’s first important initiatives taken in the founding of the Olympic Movement included the introduction of the Olympic Charter in 1908 and the foundation of the IOC’s Executive Board in 1921. Whereas Coubertin focused more on the development of the internal structure of the IOC, his successors, including Henri de Baillet-Latour (1925 – 1942), Sigfrid Edström, (1942 – 1952), Avery Brundage (1952 – 1972) and Lord Killanin (1972 – 1980), worked on improving the IOC’s relationship with external institutions such as the National Olympic Committees

(NOCs) and International Sport Federations (IFs). In 1930, a council of delegates was set up to improve the representation of IFs in the IOC. Since 1946, regular meetings between the IFs and the IOC have been organized to strengthen dialogues. The same objective was followed by the introduction of annual meetings between the IOC and the NOCs since 1952 (Müller 1994, 143).

In 1971, the IOC established its Tripartite Commission composed of an equal number of members from the IOC, IFs and NOCs. According to research, this Commission was able to develop an influential role as it came up with recommendations on the Olympic programme, eligibility status of athletes, the planning of Olympic Congresses and early considerations on strengthening voices of athletes in the Olympic Movement (Wassong 2020, 42). Although the latter had already been discussed at the Xth Olympic Congress in Varna 1973, it took another eight years until it was realized. At the XIth Olympic Congress, held in Baden-Baden 1981, the recommendation was put forward to give athletes institutional representation in the IOC. This led to the foundation of the Athletes' Commission of the IOC in December 1981 (Wassong 2021, 48), which became quite active on various fields, including the liberalization of the amateur rule, the anti-doping fight, the promotion of women in Olympic sports and as sport officials, and the foundation of National Athletes' Commissions (Wassong 2021, 54 - 206).

Until the cessation of the IOC 2000 Reform Commission, which produced the recommendations on developing a sustainable profile for the Olympic Movement approved at the Extraordinary IOC Session in

December 1999, the members of the Athletes' Commission had a consultative role only. Since the implementation of the reform process, 15 members of the Athletes' Commission (12 elected among athletes themselves and 3 appointed by the IOC President) have become IOC members and the elected chair of the Commission has been offered a seat on the Executive Board of the IOC (Wassong 2021, 1158). In the minutes of the 11th IOC Session in 2000 in Sydney, one can read the following:

“The new composition of the IOC involving 15 “active athletes” as members marks a completely new chapter in our history where the athletes really stand equal with the other important bodies in the Olympic Movement, the IOC, the NOCs and the IFs. The role of the athletes has been dramatically strengthened (...) and (they) are of course the real spokesmen of all the athletes who cast their votes during the Summer and the Winter Games” (Minutes of the IOC Session, 11th, 12th, 13th and 30th September 2000).

By this, the IOC has recognized the role of athletes in decision-making processes and has given athletes a possibility to address points which are relevant from their perspective to the political agenda of the IOC. These include, amongst others, the ongoing strengthening of the anti-doping fight, the implementation of dual career programs, which aim at supporting athletes in their transition from athletic to post athletic life, and the development of athletes' representation in sport governing bodies beyond the IOC. The IOC reaffirmed its support for athletes as key actors in the Olympic Movement in the Olympic Agenda 2020 and Olympic



Agenda 2020 +5. In recommendation 18 of the original reform document, which was approved unanimously at the 127th IOC Session in December 2014, it is stated that the athletes' experience should be put at the heart of the Olympic Games and that the IOC should further invest in supporting athletes on and off the field of play. Initiatives to target this have been, amongst others, the development of the *Athletes' Declaration* which was approved at the 133rd IOC Session in Buenos Aires in October 2018, the campaign *Athletes 365*, and the ongoing tradition of the *Athletes' Forums*. All of these initiatives have been developed by and for athletes and in collaboration with stakeholders across the Olympic Movement. They are clear initiatives to stress the importance of the athletes as key actors of the Olympic Games and as ambassadors of sport as a vehicle to support individual and social change processes.

In a contemporary context, this is what Coubertin was aiming at when he thought about the role of athletes in the Olympic Movement. This statement is not overly speculative, as to Coubertin the athletes had to be at the center of the Olympic Movement; the Olympic Games were meant to be celebrated on behalf of the athletes (Coubertin 2000 [1935], 582). Indeed, today's initiatives regard the athlete as the key actor of the Olympic Games, respect the ideas of Coubertin, and evidence that today's Olympic Movement has not been alienated from the ideas of its founder.

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