

Olympic education and sports role models

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Abstract

Olympism occupies an important place in our society through the Olympic Games (OG) and the Youth Olympic Games (YOG). This neologism created by Pierre de Coubertin may appear as the preferred path for an education based on the harmonious development of body and mind. For all that, is the Olympism that Coubertin wanted to remain, at the dawn of the 21st century, an educational model? Can we imagine proposing and providing an Olympic education in the school system, university or sports? Can Olympic champions and should they serve as role models for the new generation?

Key words: Olympism, Olympic education, Sports role models, Boundary object, Culture, Sport

Introduction

More than 1500 years separated the Ancient and modern Games. Pierre de Coubertin was the instigator behind the revival of the Games and after many unsuccessful attempts finally managed to accomplish his goal, re-establishing the Games in 1894 and founding the International Olympic committee (IOC).

Pierre de Coubertin believed that the Olympic games (OG) were the means to internationalise sports for youth. Sport constitutes a showcase that enables a change in mindset and leads to a deep-seated reform of the educational system (Monnin, 2008).

If Olympism occupies an important place in modern society through the Olympic Games, it is above all “[...] *a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport*

with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles” (Comité international olympique, 2017).

In this manner Olympism may appear as the best option for an education based on the harmonious development of body and mind. However, should Olympism, as conceived by Pierre de Coubertin, remain an educational model in the beginning of the 21st century? Can we imagine proposing or providing such an Olympic education within schools, universities or to athletes? In order to promote such an Olympic education for the young, must athletes serve as role models?

In order to respond to these questions, my presentation shall address first and foremost the fundamental concepts that characterize Olympism and Olympic education. Then I will consider the concept of the boundary object. And finally, I will analyse the Athlete Role Models program as adopted by the Youth Olympic games (YOG).

Discussion of the Fundamental concepts that characterise olympism and Olympic education

The concept of Olympism

Pierre de Coubertin coined the neologism “*olympism*”. when asked the question “*so what is Olympism?*”, Coubertin responded with the following definition: “*Olympism is the religion of energy; the cult of intensive willpower; developed through the practice of virile sports supported by hygiene and civism and surrounded with arts and thoughts*” (Müller & Schantz, 1986). Coubertin believed that olympism was a tool that could serve to educate young people, employing a twofold approach: sporting and intellectual. The ancient Greek city was one of the foundations of Coubertin’s thinking. In his Olympic Memoirs (Coubertin, 1918) a he wrote: “*In the heart of destinies where the next society is being prepared, there is an eliminating conflict between the principle of the Roman State and the Greek city. We are destined to reconstruct on one of the two foundations. Appearances are in favour of the Roman state. However, I believe in the Greek City*” (Coubertin, 1931).

According to Coubertin the second reference draws on the initiatives developed in the English school system through games and sports. In the 1860s, this innovative work through sports was taken up by all the public Schools such as Eton, Oxford... It was after “Thomas Hughes’s novel ‘*Tom Brown’s School Days*’ appeared in 1857, that it become apparent that the way to the victories on the battlefields was paved on the fields of Eton” (Zoro, 1986). This ambitious program involved a balance between mind and body, as attested by the Coubertin’s famous statement, *Mens fervida in corpore lacertoso* (a passionate mind in a well-trained body) (Zoro, 1986).

For the pioneer who revived the Modern games, Olympism depends on the combination of two ideals: that of the English school system and that of Ancient Greece.

The concept of an Olympic education (Monnin, 2012)

Many authors have tried to give a description or a definition of an Olympic education (Monnin, Loudcher & Ferréol, 2012). The discussions held during the 5th Session of the International olympic academy (IOA) for Directors and Presidents of National olympic academies (NOAs), in 2000, gave rise to a definition of Olympic education that we adopted: “*Olympic education [pertains to] social, mental, cultural, ethical and physical development. Sport is at the core of this education whose aim is to elevate young people so that they can become citizens who are mentally and physically balanced, who are able to work together; are tolerant and respect peace [...]. Olympic education should permit individuals to acquire a philosophy of life through which they will make a positive contribution to their family, their community, their country and the world*” (Georgiadis, 2007a).

Many experiences and initiatives had been undertaken in order to properly complete such an educational program. The first Olympic education programmes at primary and secondary schools were implemented during the Munich Olympic games in 1972 (Georgiadis, 2008). As an extension thereof and in view of the Montreal Olympic games in 1976, schools in Quebec introduced the Olympic program entitled Promotion of Olympism in the school environment for three years (1973-1976).

According to Konstantinos Georgiadis, these two programs on Olympic education “[...] were considered as models for their era and thus contributed to the development of Olympic education on a global scale. Presently, Olympic education programs are being carried out in many countries, chiefly during the Olympic games” (Georgiadis, 2008).

However, Otto Schantz questions how well-founded such an approach is: “*Do we need an Olympic education to transmit values to young people, to foster a sports ethic? Do we need sports education that risks becoming a doctrine, a secular religion? Is it not enough to attempt to transmit a sports ethic, without looking to the Olympic*

movement and its symbols” (Schantz, 1998)?

According to Nat Indrapana, an educational program based on Olympism should be integrated without interfering with existing school or university programs (Indrapana, 2007). There are two possible entry points. The first is linked to university research on Olympism by academics. In the summer of 2005, the olympic museum based in Lausanne (Switzerland) initiated a project to define an international educational program based on olympic values. The project was entitled *Olympic values education programme* (OVEP). The program contemplated two thrusts. Firstly, to foster the application of Olympic values in the context of sports and education. And secondly to encourage the creation and the implementation of practical projects founded on Olympic values. The second involves what the students and athletes are taught in academic or youth programs. Youth camps organised in parallel with the Olympic games are an example of such youth programs.

It was in this spirit that the French ministry of education, in the context of its bid for Paris 2024, officially declared the school year 2016-2017, Year of Olympism, at school and at university, with the purpose of “*connecting sports practice with an educational, cultural or civic aspiration based on Olympism and its values*” (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de l’Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2018). Five major events marked that Olympic year (Monnin, 2017):

- National school sports day, 14 September 2016;
- International university sports day, 20 September 2016;
- “*Sport campus*” day; 6 October 2016;
- First “Olympic and Paralympic week”, from 21 to 29 January 2017;
- “*Olympic Day*”, 23 June 2017.

Thus an Olympic education program constitutes an opportunity for students and athletes: “*[To understand] the fundamental principles of Olympic philosophy [defined in the Olympic Charter]; [To] showcase Olympism and the idea of the Olympic games; [to] promote and disseminate*

the ethical and educational values of the Olympic movement; [To] explain Olympism and the universal ideal in the sense of ‘Kalokagathia’; [To] shape the body and spirit harmoniously in accordance with Olympic philosophy; [and to] forge the personality of each individual according to Coubertin’s theories, thus laying the foundations for international understanding” (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de l’Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche, 2018). According to Konstantinos Georgiadis, an Olympic education project comprises three key points: the first is to comprehend the Olympic principles enshrined in the Olympic charter; the second, to grasp the historical and pedagogical foundations of the Olympic ideal; and, finally, the third, to better perceive our society and our current way of life (Georgiadis, 2007b).

The concept of the boundary object

We obviously understand that Olympism finds itself at the cross-roads of ideas and interests that are sometimes organised by actors, whose centres of interest are very far removed.

Contemporary Olympism has become a constituent of contemporary culture. In this sense, it appears as a complete social event. It involves all its political, economic, cultural, social, technological dimensions and at the same time implicates diverse forms of the daily life of those actors that comprise it through their practices, events, ethics or lifestyles. Therefore, each individual may find personal interests within Olympism, which may be completely different to those of other actors participating in this Olympic phenomenon.

In this sense, Olympism could be defined through the concept of a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Actors who are very different to each other accept to cooperate through the boundary object in order to achieve the goals of Olympism. “*The boundary object is the conceptual or material mechanism that permits a more flexible connection between different positions and at the same time, also defines a sufficiently rigid framework to give structure*” (Hert, 1999).

For which reason the Olympic movement must be able to elicit the interest of diverse actors in its work, so that they may contribute in turn to its promotion, whilst also serving their own interests. The IOC should know how to “translate the interests of others” so that the cosmopolitan set of actors may be transformed into allies mobilized around Olympism while continuing to serve their own interests (Lauriol, Guérin & Zannad, 2004). “Therefore, the existence of a boundary object permits each of the actors not to control all the dimensions or skills linked to a project, but to have a sufficiently simple and coherent illustration thereof to focus upon, to appropriate, to make it serve its own purposes, concerns or identity and finally to decide to mobilize itself for the project” (Lauriol, Guérin & Zannad, 2004).

In that respect the concept of Olympism could be defined as a boundary object but more symbolically, it binds together the dissimilar actors and the diverse worlds that they represent. “By means of this boundary object, the actors of these social worlds can negotiate their differences and forge an agreement out of their respective view points” (Trompette & Vinck, (2009). Obviously, Olympism appears to bridge various concepts, political, economic or philosophical centres of interest. The ties that organise the various worlds conceive and legitimise the position of the Olympic Movement within our modern society.

In order to ensure the perpetuation and promotion of the Olympic movement, the IOC is obliged to structure its operations, taking into account partners from diverse backgrounds and with diverging interests.

Let us now look at the position that the athletes hold and more specifically their involvement, as role models, in promoting Olympic values to young people.

The place of athletes in promoting Olympic education

In each volume the *Olympic review*, edited by the IOC, dedicates an article entitled *My games* to athletes who marked the history of the Games. In 2017, Cathy Freeman, Olympic gold medalist in 2000 in Sydney and Olympic

silver medalist in Atlanta in 1996, revisits her achievements and the creation of the Cathy Freeman foundation. “*The great advantage of being an Australian olympic champion is that I now have a platform I can use to drive issues that I am passionate about, such as indigenous achievement*” (Freeman, 2017). In 2007, she decided to create her own foundation with the goal of enabling children from Aborigine communities to benefit from access to knowledge. “*This Foundation has a vision of an Australia where indigenous and non-indigenous children have the same education standards and opportunities in life*” (Freeman, 2017). According to Freeman the real advantage to being an Olympic champion is that you benefit from recognition, which can help set up ambitious projects such as fostering education in Aborigine communities. Presently, 1,600 indigenous children, benefit from “*five programs that span a child's education from pre-school through to the age of 17*” (Freeman, 2017). The involvement of a former Olympic champion in disseminating to students her “*personal values, chief of which is respect*” (Freeman, 2017), solidarity, exchange, collaboration and social responsibility, is in complete harmony with an Olympic education programme based on the Olympic charter and the values advocated by the IOC such as encouraging greater effort (excellence), preserving human dignity (respect) and encouraging harmony (friendship).

In order to further promote, share and transmit the values of Olympism to young people, former IOC President, Jacques Rogge, decided in 2007 to create YOG. According to the IOC, YOG reflect that “*The IOC has demonstrated its engagement towards the young people of today and tomorrow [which] was not limited to words, but translated into action offering them an event dedicated to them, in the spirit of the Olympic games*” (Comité international olympique, 2011).

The objectives were twofold:

- Encourage the practice of sports;
- Develop the values of Olympism.

No comparison can be drawn between YOG and OG

in terms of operation. Athlete participation is not limited to their sporting performance. They also participate in a program entitled “*Learn & share*” whose purpose is to raise awareness about the values of Olympism, acquiring skills for their life in the future and become prospective ambassadors of Olympism. Within the framework of the workshops five topics were addressed and discussed:

- “*Olympism*;
- *Skills development*;
- *Wellbeing and healthy lifestyle*;
- *Social responsibility*;
- *Expression and digital media*” (Comité international olympique, 2015).

In order to facilitate exchanges and the transmission of experience and thoughts amongst young athletes, the IOC with the help of the International federations (IF) of sports included in the YOG, proposed various programmes including “*Athlete Role Models*”. According to Claudia Bokel, former Chair of IOC's athlete commission, “*the Athlete Role Model programme is a really unique element of the Youth olympic games. ARMs have so much valuable information to pass on to the younger generation. They will really inspire and empower athletes long after the Games conclude, to not only be great ‘Youth Olympians’, but to share the skills and values learnt at the YOG with their communities and peers*” (Comité international olympique, 2018a). In the first summer Youth olympic games held in Singapore in 2010, 47 Athlete Role Models participated for a few days in discussion workshops and educational programs. Two years later in Innsbruck, 34 Athlete Role Models attended the first winter Youth olympic games with the same purpose of actively participating in passing on their experiences and acting in and of themselves a source of inspiration and advise (Comité international olympique, 2018b).

What characterises the YOG is “*learning what is important in the career of an athlete, meeting people from other cultures and celebrate Olympic values [...] The YOG are essentially centred on competition, learning and*

sharing” (Comité international olympique, 2015).

The next Youth Olympic Games will take place in Buenos Aires, where the 3,998 athletes selected will be able to count on the support and availability of Athlete Role Models such as Gabriela Sabatini (tennis) or Paula Pareto (judo). Presently, 54 athletes (Athlete role models were designated in three successive waves by the IOC: 9 November 2017, 25 athletes, 2 February 2018, 17 athletes and 22 March 2018, 12 athletes) have been officially announced by the IOC. The judo Olympic champion of the Rio Olympic games in 2016, Paula Pareto, has a specific purpose to involve herself in the program, namely “*to help the young elite athletes by sharing my experiences that taught me values for both of sport and life. I would like to let them know that you can practice a sport at the highest level and study at the same time, because the sporting life ends one day for each of us and it is important to know how to continue afterwards*” (Comité international olympique, 2018c).

Conclusion

The Athlete Role Model program is an excellent example of athletes’ involvement with young people in order to disseminate Olympic values and pass on their experiences and skills. Other initiatives on a national or local scale draw inspiration from this program in order to raise awareness amongst young people on the values of olympism. For example, in France, on 10 January 2018, in order to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Olympic torch passing through Besançon as part of the torch relay for the 1958 Grenoble OG, three themes related to those Olympics, were presented at the city’s Palais des sports:

- **Culture**, through an exhibition (Olympic posters...), objects (Olympic torch...), a conference on the organisation of the OG and a screening of a documentary by Claude Lelouch and François Reichenbach, 73 days in France;
- **Sports**, with the presence of the French national olympic and sports committee (CNOSF), Mr. Denis

Masseglia, accompanied by two Olympic medalists, namely Florence Masnada (alpine ski) and Stéphane Traineau (judo) and 31 torch bearers in the Olympic torch relay of 1968;

- **Education**, with the presence of senior high school pupils and students.

This initiative, on a more local scale, aspires to the same objectives as the Athlete Role Models program, namely transmitting the values of Olympism drawing chiefly on the Olympic heritage of 1968. In 2024, Paris will organise the Games of the XXXIII Olympiad. For France this is a real opportunity to promote sports to young people, to showcase Olympic values (excellence, friendship and respect), to develop the concept of sports and health, to reinforce the diversity of practices and managing authorities, to go towards a more inclusive society. In order to address these many challenges the Athletes Role Models program is a tool that the organisers of the Paris 2024 Games should use in order to foster Olympic values and to raise awareness about them amongst young people and French society.

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