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Coubertin and Americans: Wary Relationships, 1889-1925



It is perhaps not good strategy to divulge one's conclusion in the opening paragraph of an historical examination, but, to set the tone for the opening session here this morning, I would like to state that in my opinion the Baron Pierre de Coubertin was generally wary of Americans, not, of course, those Yanks he very carefully screened and selected to be members of the IOC, individuals he could control and, who, more often than not, had little association with sport, but rather those who occupied important positions in the domestic affairs of American amateur and Olympic sport, whose powerful regional and national agendas clashed with the Baron's own master plan for international sport.

Having said that, I open this paper's viewpoint by offering a contemporary observation on which to superimpose the final conclusions I pose. Any examiner of the contemporary relationship between the International Olympic Committee and its global family of some 197 National Olympic Committees cannot help but be struck by the fact that the United States Olympic Committee stands supreme among them all in political and economic power and substance. One has only to glance at the huge dividends that the USOC demands, and gets, from the IOC's television and corporate sponsorship negotiations. Beyond those economic variables, of course, is the lingering political legacy of Avery Brundage, bishop of the IOC cathedral from 1952 to 1972, and other Americans who have wielded power and influence since in global Olympic matters, the latest of whom is Anita DeFrantz, Executive Board member and most recently-elected vice- president of the IOC. If doubt lingers after considering all this, then visit the USOC's vast and impressive multi-million dollar headquarters complex in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a miniature city in itself. Here, one gets in Olympic perspective the same vision of strength, power and influence as does one who stands before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. and gazes up towards the impressive bleech-white capitol building at the apex of an expansive and imposing mall.

Some folks have likened the USOC/IOC relationship as emulating the proverbial „tail that wags the dog“ scenario. The beginning of such a scenario occurred practically at the outset of the modern Olympic phenomenon. That statement, of course, begs the question: What was the relationship between early American Olympic leaders and Pierre de Coubertin, acknowledged founder and revered nurturer of the Modern Olympic Movement, throughout the time of the Baron's presidency from 1896 to 1925? Would Coubertin, if he were alive today, be shocked by what

has come to pass between the Americans and his cherished IOC? I doubt it very much, and I point out a few observations that supports that stance.

Coubertin's initial experience with Americans was innocent enough. He sailed from the very port city in which we convene this morning to New York on the liner Normandie in late July 1889. He lingered in America for some months, attended an important American physical education conference in Boston, at which he presented an address on the value of sports and games in school physical education programs, visited briefly in Canada, and traveled through parts of the trans-Mississippi West, the South, and eastern seaboard states. Acquaintances made along the way were many, one of them a recently-defeated New York City mayoral candidate by the name of Theodore Roosevelt, who, scarcely a dozen years later, would become the president of the United States. More about the Roosevelt-Coubertin connection later. By far the most important contact the 26 year old Coubertin made on this first American odyssey was a 39 year old professor of history at Princeton University, William Milligan Sloane. Sloane shared many qualities with Coubertin. Each was fluent in the other's native tongue. Each were the recipients of „high education.“ They shared a passion for history, as well as for current events. Sloane was highly knowledgeable about, and an admirer, of contemporary France, which he had visited several times. Though neither was an athlete in the truest sense of the word (Sloane even less so than Coubertin), they reached common ground through a mutual interest in sport. Sloane's connection in that regard was his membership on the Princeton University Faculty Athletic Advisory Committee for most of the 1880s. Through Sloane, Coubertin learned and witnessed much of what he came to admire about American University sport, a phenomenon which he felt closely paralleled the sporting ethic he had witnessed in the British Public Schools.

Coubertin visited America for the second and last time in 1893, staying four months, three weeks of which were spent with Sloane at Princeton. By then they had become good friends. When Coubertin convened the now famous Sorbonne Conference in June 1894, Sloane was there to support his friend in his endeavour to initiate something called the Modern Olympic Games. Naturally, Sloane was Coubertin's choice as America's first member to the IOC. Sloane served in that regard until 1925, the year, in fact, that Coubertin stepped down as president of the IOC. And, as is well known, there would have been no American Olympic team in Athens in 1896 but not for Sloane's zealous organizing efforts in America on behalf of his French friend's crusade. Through the years their friendship remained bonded in mutual admiration and affection. Sloane's letters to Coubertin, scores of them surviving, attest to this fact. Sloane was one of the select cadre of Coubertin's lifetime corpus of literally hundreds upon hundreds of correspondents, who usually opened his letters to the Baron with the salutation, „Mon cher Pierre.“ In the final analysis, William Milligan Sloane's influence on Coubertin was one which not only served faithfully and actively for the Olympic cause for a quarter century, „opened doors“ for critical Coubertin athletic contacts in America, and helped to establish the precedent of American interest and participation in Olympic Games, but also sought to smooth and console Pierre de Coubertin's often ruffled and frustrated feelings in dealings with other Americans.

If Coubertin found a warm and enduring American „Olympic friend“ in the person of William Milligan Sloane, he was a bit uncomfortable with some important American sporting personality relationships during the period under examination here. During Coubertin's second visit to America in 1893, Sloane arranged for the Baron to meet in New York with a small group of intercollegiate athletic officials from prominent eastern universities. Participation in international sport, indeed, helping to establish something referred to as Olympic Games in modern context, engendered absolutely no enthusiasm from the group. They had enough troubles of their own trying to administer athletic affairs in domestic context. However, one of their number, Gustavus Town Kirby of Columbia University, told the Baron that „James Edward Sullivan is your man in the United States capable of organizing an Olympic Committee.“ If he was so inclined, Sullivan was indeed „just the man“ for the job. When Coubertin first met Sullivan a short time later in New York, the American sports czar, a man of rough and ready Irish-American descent, was the no-nonsense secretary of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), on its way towards becoming the most powerful amateur

sports administration body in the United States. The Sullivan/Coubertin personas clashed immediately. They would continue to rasp against each other until the untimely passing of Sullivan in 1914. Sullivan's background and innate character were as different from that of Coubertin as fin de siècle France was from America. Sullivan irritated Coubertin no end by writing to him and describing Sloane as „a lovely gentleman [...] (but) he knows nothing about athletics [...] certainly he is unknown in the athletic legislative halls of this country (America).” Sloane retaliated later with equally uncomplimentary remarks about Sullivan. „Sullivan is a ghetto-poor Irish-American,” he wrote to Coubertin, „a man whose great faults are those of his birth and breeding, but he is unfortunately a representative man and holds the organized athletes of the clubs in the hollow of his hand.” Coubertin, caught in the middle of these events, sided with Sloane, carefully avoiding ever considering Sullivan for membership on the IOC, something we know the brash, ego-centric American dearly desired. „Why,” questioned Sullivan in 1906, „has my name been denied from your membership [...] after a decade of loyal service to the Olympic Movement?” Calling the Baron at one time or another such things as „an inept leader,” „a powerless and pathetic figure,” further alienated their relationship.

Time after time Sullivan called Coubertin to question on Olympic issues. Most nettling to the Baron were Sullivan's efforts to establish an international organization to govern track and field, in effect, a dangerous challenge to Coubertin's initiatives to consolidate the IOC's power in international sport. There was more. Sullivan carped at Coubertin for atrocious French management of the 1900 Paris Games, for the Baron's long delay in presenting him with a promised gold medallion for organization of the 1904 Games in St. Louis, and for the way in which the IOC co-opted new members. On the other hand, Coubertin was at odds with Sullivan's obstreperous behaviour, his overt, sometimes crude American nationalism, his desire to win at all cost. Although their relationship mellowed from time to time, especially near the end of their association, the two men were too many spheres apart even to begin to reconcile their fundamental differences. From Sullivan, Coubertin began to form a quite different impression of American „Olympic folks” than what the „soft” character and style of William Milligan Sloane had rendered for him.

In May 1901, after a whirlwind of events, and a challenge from Sullivan on the IOC's authority to deal with sporting matters in the United States, Coubertin and the IOC awarded the 1904 Olympic Games to the American mid-west city of Chicago. An energetic lawyer/real-estate developer in Chicago, **Henry Jewett Furber**, engineered the successful bid for the Games. Furber subsequently continued in a leadership role as head of the Games' organizing committee. Scores of letters passed between Furber and Coubertin on all sorts of organizational matters. In the summer of 1902, Furber sailed to Europe with a letter of introduction from President Roosevelt to present to ministers and heads-of-state for the purpose of gathering support from various countries to send Olympic athletes to Chicago in 1904. Furber took this opportunity to meet with Coubertin personally. Stymied and frustrated by what he may have perceived as an attempt by Coubertin to avoid him, he finally cornered the Baron on his mother-in-law's estate near Münster in the Alsace in late September 1902. We have only Coubertin's impression of the meetings between Furber and himself. Writing some two weeks later to a personal friend, Swiss IOC member Godefroy de Blonay, the Baron may have unwittingly revealed his feelings on Americans in general. „Furber,” wrote Coubertin, „is a very interesting individual, shrewd and egotistical. He is very much of a bluffer, just like a Chicagoan. I handled him to the best of my ability.” Although Coubertin referred to the term „bluffer” as being a perceived trait of Chicagoans, could not Coubertin's psyche have unconsciously applied that term to Americans in general? I think so! The 1904 Games, of course, were eventually transferred to St. Louis, scarcely a year and a half before their celebration, and Big Jim Sullivan, the Baron's often nemesis, ended up running them. The St. Louis Games, besides being immersed in the greater spectacle of the 1904 Louisiana Purchase World's Fair Exposition, were attendant to a conglomerate of amateur sporting tournaments and exhibitions that lasted for months, all capped off by a crude attempt to feature aboriginal people from various areas of the world in performances of Euro-American-derived sporting exercises practiced by so-called „civilized” people. The result of all this was farcical

entertainment for the largely American crowds which looked on. Coubertin, at home in Paris, upon learning of this „Anthropology Days“ component of „his“ Olympic Games, could only shrug resignedly and lament, „Only in America.“

As promised, I return for a moment to the relationship between Coubertin and the American he might well have admired most of all, Teddy Roosevelt. Remember that the young Baron de Coubertin had met Roosevelt fleetingly during his first visit to America in 1889. They would meet but once again, briefly, in Paris in 1909, after Roosevelt had left the office of American President. To be blunt, the corpus of communication between Coubertin and Roosevelt is both sparse and rather one sided, that is, the Baron writing to Roosevelt to pass on greetings and send along a sample of his latest literary effort on French history or the value of athletic sport, each subject of which he knew captured Roosevelt's interest. Roosevelt's responses were always conciliatory and usually offered comments or, at times, a literary piece that the President had himself composed on the place and value of athletic exercise in the lives of Americans.

On two occasions Coubertin asked a favor. In early June 1901, seven days after Chicago had been awarded the 1904 Games, Coubertin wrote to President William McKinley asking the head-of-state to serve as honorary president of the Olympic Games of 1904. McKinley was assassinated three months later and Roosevelt, as Vice-President, promptly took his place. Roosevelt had scarcely settled into the oval office of the White House when he received a letter from Coubertin. The Baron told Roosevelt of his request conveyed to his predecessor some months earlier, inferred that he had received a favorable reply (there is absolutely no record to support the Baron's contention), and asked the „new chief of the Great American Republic“ to accept the honorary presidency of the forthcoming Chicago Games. Three weeks later Roosevelt responded, telling Coubertin he regretted being unable to accede to his request, and that his cabinet had advised him not to give the unavoidable impression of governmental connection with the Games. Coubertin pressed „his excellency“ to reconsider, pointing out precedents established in 1896 and 1900. Again, Roosevelt demurred. This could not have made the Baron a happy man.

In early 1913, while preparing for the Lausanne Olympic Congress scheduled for May, the Baron wrote to Roosevelt to ask if he would present a speech at the affair. Roosevelt declined, saying he was „worked to the very limit.“ But the ex-president did send an article he had just written on „The Vigor of Life“ which he thought might be of interest. Coubertin included the Roosevelt piece in the conference proceedings.

What can we make of Roosevelt's relationship with the Baron de Coubertin? In my opinion, not much. It was cordial, fleeting and inconclusive. True, Roosevelt's endorsement of vigorous athletic sport as a critical dimension of personal health and physical fitness were in tune with the Baron's thinking on the matter, but it hardly played a critical role in shaping the Baron's philosophy, that was well in place long before Roosevelt was levered into the American presidency and the Baron commenced to pursue a literary relationship with the the American head-of-state.

By the time Coubertin retired from his post of IOC president in 1925, there had been other episodes which did not particularly endear the Baron to American Olympic people. And, in return, Coubertin most probably cringed at some of the rough treatment he took in the American press. I list a couple of incidents. Sullivan wanted the Baron to agree to celebrate the 1916 Games in „safe America.“ In Chicago, San Francisco or Cincinnati, „any one of them would do a good job,“ wrote Sullivan to Coubertin in July 1914, just three weeks before fateful August 1st. Coubertin refused to think of it, writing to Sullivan in early September, telling him, „I will not personally make any proposal in favor of a change.“ That was the end of the matter. Sullivan passed away on September 16th, in fact, before the Baron's last communication arrived in the New York office of the most recognized pillar of American amateur sport.

At the 1920 IOC General Session meetings held in conjunction with the Antwerp Games, Coubertin's loyal and steadfast friend, William Milligan Sloane, introduced him to a self-made, wealthy California realtor and land developer. His name was William May Garland. Garland arrived in Antwerp armed with a bid from the City of Los Angeles to host the 1924 Olympic Games. It was a flamboyant bid, well organized and developed, markedly

distinctive from the bids that IOC members normally reviewed. Garland was aghast that his city's proposal was but one of a total of fourteen. Undaunted, Garland forged ahead. In strong subsequent letters to Coubertin, Garland reinforced details of the Los Angeles plan, including, of course, news of the the almost completed great Memorial Stadium, which, as history now stands, has been the celebrated centerpiece of two Summer Olympic festivals. Garland pressed Coubertin to argue for Los Angeles at the 1921 IOC Session in Lausanne, at which the hosting decision for 1924 Games would be made. But the Baron had other plans for the 1924 Olympic Games, and they didn't include Los Angeles. Some three months before the Lausanne meetings, he wrote to his IOC colleagues saying that it was his intention to leave the presidency after the 1924 Games. His final wish was that his colleagues vote for Paris to celebrate the 1924 festival in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Modern Olympic Games (the Baron put a great deal of stock in anniversary celebrations). Further, Coubertin stated that Amsterdam should have the 1928 Games. Garland, indisposed in California and unable to appear in Lausanne to argue the Los Angeles case in the face of Coubertin's initiatives for Paris and Amsterdam, persuaded two American AAU/Olympic officials, the venerable Gustavus Town Kirby and AAU secretary Fred Rubien, to appear in Lausanne on his behalf. Kirby and Rubien arrived at the meeting late, in fact, shortly after the final decision on the matter had been made. Though there were protests to the Baron's way of engineering the whole business, particularly from the Italians whose cherished city of Rome was a hosting contender, in the end Coubertin got his way. The vote was 14-4, with one abstention. We are told that upon learning of the final decision the fiery Italians stormed out of the meetings. There was no American representation at the IOC Session. Both Bartow Weeks and the aged Sloane were ill. Allison Armour, the third American IOC member had resigned that very year and had not been replaced. When Kirby and Rubien finally arrived in the meeting hall, only to learn that the hosting decision had been concluded without their input, they were both outraged. Their anger was subsequently paraded in the American press, producing such headlines as „Steamroller Methods Seen In Grant of Olympic Games,“ and „American Bid Receives Scant Courtesy.“ Though Los Angeles would eventually get Olympic Games, and, indeed, IOC membership for Garland, relations between American Olympic officials were not exactly serene as the Baron bowed out of the IOC presidency at the Prague Sessions in 1925.

What I have tried to demonstrate in this brief application is the fact that although Coubertin appreciated much of what he saw in Americans, their individualism, their enthusiasm and energy, their bent for organization, he also found that such normally positive characteristics were often difficult to manage in the context of dealing with his own agenda on Olympic matters. Fiery American nationalism often reinforced a perception held by many sports folks throughout the world that Americans were intent on pursuing an agenda underscored by the dictum, „winning isn't everything, it's the only thing.“ This bent, of course, contributed to the Baron's often alienation from American Olympic officials.

In returning to this paper's opening remarks relative to American power and influence, in modern International Olympic matters, what might the Baron Pierre de Coubertin's reaction be towards all this if he were alive to witness it. Quite frankly, I think he would say, „*The present state of affairs doesn't surprise me at all. In Olympic matters the Americans have to be watched carefully, and, if possible, controlled. To that end, I think I did a better job than the individual who presently occupies my old seat.*“

Bibliographical Essay

In constructing this paper I have depended on several sources. Knowing fully well that several biographical treatments of Coubertin have been done, I referred to the nearest at hand, John J. MacAloon's, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago, 1981). For Coubertin's special

relationship with William Milligan Sloane, I consulted John Lucas's, „William Milligan Sloane: Father of the United States Olympic Committee (Umbruch und Kontinuität im Sport-Reflexionen im Umfeld der Sportgeschichte, Bochum 1991). For research on Furber's and Coubertin's relationship, I depended on my own, „Born from Dilemma: America Awakens to the Modern Olympic Games, 1901-1903" (Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies, Vol. I-1992). On the relationship between Coubertin and James Sullivan, I examined John Lucas's, „Early Olympic Antagonists: Pierre de Coubertin Versus James E. Sullivan" (Stadion, Vol. III, No. 2, 1977). For Coubertin's relationship with William M. Garland, I turned again to my own research, „Resistance, Persistence, Providence: The 1932 Los Angeles Games in Perspective" (The Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, Vol. 67, No. 2, 1996). On Theodore Roosevelt I used several sources, of which the most helpful was perhaps John Lucas's, „Theodore Roosevelt and Baron Pierre de Coubertin: Entangling Olympic Games Involvement, 1901-1918" (Stadion, Vols. VIII / IX, 1982-1983). I also found Lucas's, „American Involvement in the Athens Games of 1906--Bridge Between Failure and Success" (Stadion, Vol. VI, 1980) to be important. For other information, I found the following helpful: Norbert Müller's, „One Hundred Years of Olympic Congresses, 1894-1994" (Lausanne 1994); my own, „William M. Garland and California's Quest to Host Olympic Games" (Welt der Spiele: Politische, soziale und pädagogische Aspekte, Sankt Augustin, 1993); and John Lucas's, „Coubertin One Hundred Years Ago: His Second American Visit in 1893" (Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies, Vol. II-1993).

Résumé

Coubertin et les Américains: des relations prudentes, 1889-1925

Ici, l'auteur se demande quel genre de relations Coubertin, alors Président du CIO a pu avoir avec certains américains haut placés et s'étant intéressés aux affaires olympiques. Ensuite vient un aperçu illustrant les relations de Coubertin entretenues avec William Milligan Sloane, James Edward Sullivan, Henry Jewett Furber, ~~Theodore Roosevelt~~ et William May Garland.

La plus exceptionnelle fut celle entretenue avec Sloane. Les deux hommes, ayant les mêmes intérêts, s'entendirent à merveille. Grâce à cette entente, Sloane fut le premier Américain à devenir membre du CIO. Le contact entre Coubertin et Roosevelt restera fugitif et peu fructueux. Ce dernier décline la présidence d'honneur qui lui avait été offerte lors des Jeux de 1904. Cela n'empêcha pas Coubertin d'admirer Roosevelt.

Comment ont été les relations entretenues avec les autres américains mentionnés un peu plus haut? Réserve et attitude négative la plupart du temps, c'est le comportement typique de Coubertin envers les Américains en général; méfiance surtout envers ceux très haut placés dans le sport américain et le sport olympique. Il avait du mal à concilier leur esprit positif, ce qu'il avait apprécié, avec ses propres efforts déployés pour le sport international et pour l'olympisme.