

The Decadent Olympics of 1896

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Throughout history, recurring instances of progress and modernity led to the formation of a more advanced, more complex collaboration of societies worldwide. For example, European imperialist efforts to modernize “uncivilized” worlds in Africa and Asia to gain an advantage in the global economy through the Atlantic Slave Trade exemplifies a particular instance where nations were looking to become better and more dominant than their counterparts. The same is true for a period at the turn of the nineteenth century from 1890 to 1900. Labeled as a “decade of decadence,” this period is another exemplar of nations looking to progress, mainly in the realm of science in this particular instance. As nations were looking to become superior in this decade, fearing the possible effect of degeneration and Social Darwinism, or survival of the fittest, society also looked to progress into a more modern society. The emergence of “New Woman,” increased crime rates, and a sexual and moral revolution challenged what was assumed to be “acceptable” in society and left many governments and religious institutions scurrying to remedy such ills.

But a French nobleman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, envisioned a different method to address these issues while still fighting the effects of degeneration and Social Darwinism. What Coubertin proposed was a unique way to use athletics to exemplify qualities that established positive role models through individual athletic performance and education around the world. His research and his passion for athletics led him to the idea of reviving the Olympic Games in 1896. By looking to restore national pride and prominence, specifically in France, Coubertin created a system that demanded physical fitness of humans to fight off degeneration by being supremely strong while creating an institution that taught greater lessons in peace, tolerance, morality, and connectivity. Through the revival of the 1896 Olympic Games, society was provided with an example and an institution that looked to reform, teach lessons, and give opportunity for greatness to nations and individuals on an international stage.

The Modern Olympic Movement began in Athens, Greece, in late March 1896. Revived by Pierre de Coubertin and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the 1896 games marked the first time the Olympics were held since they were banned in Ancient Greece fifteen centuries prior. At the conclusion of the 1896 Games, the IOC declared that the Olympiads would be hosted by different cities worldwide—an unpopular idea in Greece as it claimed the Olympics as its own. The next two Olympiads, 1900 (Paris) and 1904 (St. Louis) were held in conjunction with world fairs, even though the 1904 world fair was held in Chicago. Because these two Olympiads were considered to be unsuccessful, the IOC decided to hold an intermediate Olympiad in 1906, and the Games continued in 1908 and are still held every four years. Although interrupted twice by world wars, the Olympic Movement prospered,

establishing the Winter Olympics at each two year interval between the Summer Games after the success of the IOC sponsored "International Winter Sports Week" held in France in 1924.¹

While the entire Modern Olympic Movement is generally perceived to be one of the most successful widespread sports organizations in modern history, it is the 1896 Olympiad that laid the foundation for Olympic success. For if the 1896 Games had been a failure, many IOC members predicted that continuation of the games would be rather difficult. In fact, the 1896 Games may not have occurred because Greece, gaining its independence in 1830 from the Ottomans, was a relatively new nation, looking to establish a profitable economy and did not have the funds to finance such an effort. Fortunately for the IOC and the movement, a wealthy Greek merchant in combination with many Greek citizens donated the necessary funds to host the event and reconstruct the Olympic facility in Athens.² In the end, Greece reaped a profitable income as a result of hosting the games, generating 400,000 drachmas for the Organizing Committee in combination with tickets sales and souvenirs, which brought in an additional 200,000 drachmas.³

Although the 1896 Olympiad's success thrived on the abundance of Greek participants, it is estimated that thirteen nations took part in the games. Interestingly, eleven of these thirteen nations were European countries with the exception of the United States and Egypt.⁴ Imperialism played a role in the lack of diversity of nations from multiple continents in that many European nations, such as Great Britain and France, had colonized a majority of African and a few Asian nations. What is important to note here is the fact that the Olympic Charter "...states that no country may be represented by anyone but its own nationals..." thus eliminating participation from colonized African and Asian nations as the likely athletes that would compete from these nations were European Imperialists in these conquered nations.⁵ After the games were completed, the United States finished with the most first place finishes in the events with eleven winners, and Greece finished with forty five of its athletes winning a medal, the most of any nation in the 1896 Games. Behind these two countries were Germany and France, finishing with over ten athletes placing in the various events.⁶

With these thirteen nations participating, nine main events comprised the various athletic competitions during the first Olympiad. Of these nine events, Athletics, or track and field, Shooting, and Gymnastics were the most popular games.⁷ Other main events included Cycling, Fencing, Weightlifting, and Wrestling. According to Coubertin's research, Track and Field, Shooting, and Gymnastics were specifically included in the physical training program of many military institutions of the participating nations, such as Germany, who focused on gymnastics to build up strength and endurance needed for battle. Thus, these events were, in Coubertin's opinion, necessary to attain his goals of a prominent and strong French military. In addition, the shooting event self-evidently correlates to the impact of military training on the events included in the 1896 Olympics. Moreover, the greater picture which illustrates a decadent theme from this era is the fact that through winning events, nations looked to establish greatness on an international scale in their quest to become the "fittest." This is specifically addressed by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the revivalist of the Olympics, who looked to use athletics to "...create superior humans, to become

supremely human..." to ultimately bring specific nations to prominence on the international stage.⁸

As Coubertin stated, becoming superior and supreme individuals to represent respective nations was exactly what many athletes accomplished in 1896. Germany dominated the gymnastic events, having three athletes win a combined nine different events in the gymnastic games.⁹ In addition, American athletes also dominated in 1896 as they won eleven different events, most of which were in the Track and Field events. One of the most famous American athletes was long-jumper James Connolly, a Harvard student, whose victory placed him in the record books as he became the first winner in the modern era.¹⁰ Lastly, Greek marathon runner Spyridon Louis "[revived] national pride in past glory" by winning the marathon event, where all but four of the participants were Greek citizens.¹¹ In the larger sense, these individuals, through their accomplishments in 1896, were successful at invigorating national pride and setting a positive example for their respective nations, specifically exemplified through the victory of Spyridon Louis—a main goal of reviving the 1896 Olympics.

While the 1896 games were quite successful, it is important to call attention to the individual whose efforts made such an event possible. This man, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was the man who proposed and enthusiastically pursued the task of reviving Olympic sport. Coubertin was born to a noble, aristocratic family in Paris on January 1, 1863, whose family lineage could be traced back to Louis VI.¹² Growing up, Coubertin attended a Jesuit institution in Paris where he studied law and political science, finishing among the top three of his class. It was at this institution where Coubertin, although deprived of athletic and physical activity academically, began to ride horses, box, fence, and row.¹³ After completing his studies, Coubertin began to devote his time to "...work as an amateur—someone motivated by a love of the work, not by a desire to earn money" in the initial phases of his obsession for physical activity and athletics.¹⁴ In addition, he began to research efforts that would help revive France after its demoralizing defeat to Prussia in the war of 1870-1871.

In order for Coubertin to satisfy his profound love of athletics and his desire to reform his country, he began to travel around the world to many prosperous nations to study societies—specifically educational systems—to give him ideas about how exactly to revive the French society. For example, he was particularly impressed with English institutions and became an "Anglophile," or a lover of English things, because he noticed that "England seemed to be enjoying great success, whereas the French were struggling to recover for past misfortunes."¹⁵ Moreover, Coubertin was fascinated by the role of physical education in the English educational curriculum, leading him to begin to think that England's domestic and military success revolved around the principles found in physical education.¹⁶ Ultimately, Coubertin's studies not only in England but also in the United States formulated his initiative to use athletics as a way to reform and rejuvenate France and, in the final event, the world at large.

After completing a substantial amount of research on athletics on the international scale, Coubertin began to suggest the idea of reviving the Olympics. Although his first proposal in 1892 was denied, he worked harder and ultimately formed the Union of Sports Societies and Athletic Sport (USFSA) in France to promote athletics nation wide. The success of the USFSA led to the formation of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), where plans were accepted to revive the

Olympic Games internationally in 1896, and Coubertin was ultimately the second president of the IOC.

In the remaining years of his life, Coubertin continued his work with the IOC and peace keeping efforts in Geneva. On September of 1937, Baron Pierre de Coubertin died of a stroke in Geneva; he was known to the world as a pioneer in modern education and athletics on the global scale.¹⁷ In his will, Coubertin wished his body to be buried in Lausanne, the home of the IOC, "but first, his heart was to be removed from his breast, encased in a marble column and buried separately at Olympia in Greece."¹⁸ Perhaps this was the most appropriate burial choice as the modern Olympic revival owes its existence to Coubertin's compassion for and profound dedication to athletics all over the world. Coubertin lived to see ten Olympiads since his project of revival, and he worked to reform society through implementation of athletic participation until his death in 1937.

Through Coubertin's extensive research and work, Olympic revival "became possible...even necessary."¹⁹ However, the larger question to be addressed concerns what exactly made 1896 the "necessary" time to revive the games. One argument to be made is the fact that this period between 1890 and 1900 is often times associated with progress—socially, politically, academically, and nationally. For example, Coubertin's "profound conviction that [athletics were] one of the cornerstones of progress and health for the youth of [his] day" led to the belief that physical activity and athletics would first yield progress in health in order to achieve progress in other realms, such as in the military.²⁰ In achieving progress in society and in the military through athletics, Coubertin looked to put France on the map in the context of the imperial scramble, specifically in Africa, where England had established control throughout the continent. Ultimately, Coubertin looked to use athletics and physical education as a way to improve health in the youth of the period that would enable a stronger, more prominent generation to succeed in the future and ward off signs of degeneration to create the fittest race to compete with the progress and dominance of other European nations, such as England.

However, the fact that some nations were substantially ahead of others posed a problem for Coubertin's vision. Coubertin noticed that the more progressive nations, such as the United States, were participating in athletic games that were years ahead of the games in most of Europe. For example, Americans were literally ahead of the game athletically as early as 1856 when the nation declared baseball its national pastime.²¹ Moreover, other sports such as American football became another popular sport as more than 40,000 spectators gathered to watch Princeton and Yale play football on Thanksgiving Day, 1893. In fact Americans "recognized the Thanksgiving Day football game as 'the greatest sporting event and spectacle combined that this country has to show.'"²² Through baseball and football, Americans were given a unique identity through sports, while many European countries were still focusing on traditional games, such as fencing, cycling, and gymnastics (although some such as England, were playing soccer and tennis).

Another way Coubertin looked to use athletics to spur progress was in the context of the military. For example, Coubertin, a lover of English society, "came to believe that bodies strengthened by sport...had made Englishmen into the kind of soldiers who could beat Napoleon's army" which opened his eyes to sport as a

way for a nation to progress militarily.²³ Moreover, "Coubertin was convinced that the introduction of a system of school sports...might strengthen the democratic society of France and reinvigorate the moral discipline of those enlisting in the French Army."²⁴ Again, Coubertin's main vision of a French movement to reestablish national greatness was an outcome specifically attributed to physical education that would inevitably make stronger, more physically fit citizens to supply the French Army after its embarrassing defeat to the Germans in 1871. Therefore, sports, physical activity, and physical education would ultimately serve the purpose of spurring nations to have better, healthier citizens that would eventually yield progress in different realms of the global society.

While Coubertin specifically wanted to use revival to jump start French progression, the IOC determined that the 1896 Olympics would be held in Athens, Greece. Holding the Olympics in Greece was essential to Greek prominence as it was a fairly new independent nation at the onset of the games. Because Greece was considered to be subordinate to many European nations, hosting the Olympics would be an event that would link Greece with progress and modernity and essentially provide Greece with an "Enlightenment" to display such progress to the world.²⁵ More importantly, the 1896 Games asserted the fact that, "[m]odern Greek identity is based on the concept of continuity with ancient Greece, and the 1896 Olympics connected modern with ancient" to ultimately give the Greek people identity as Greece, through many of the hardships newly independent nations face, hosted the world.²⁶

Another decadent issue the 1896 Olympics looked to address was how to reform and remedy the declining morality of society during this period. Coubertin believed that sport should be regarded concerning the individual so that individual performance and success might inspire and motivate others to imitate a particular athlete.²⁷ This is why Coubertin and the IOC decided to exclude any type of group or team sport, such as baseball and football, for they feared such sport would yield corruption rather than building character to inspire.²⁸ Coubertin's beliefs became reality when Spyridon Louis won the marathon and thus provided a national identity to Greek citizens in addition to his individual performance to inspire citizens to remain healthy, moral individuals to ultimately achieve such a prestigious accomplishment as winning the marathon. Thus, athletic competition looked to provide citizens with role models that displayed moral qualities to remedy society's immoral practices and yield inspiration and motivation through athletic individual performance.

One final purpose for revival in 1896 was the Olympic role in teaching lessons in peace and its design to create a common place for athletes to compete. For example, Coubertin stated that, "sport can do something more for us...to safeguard the essential good without which no durable reconstruction will be possible—social peace."²⁹ From its inception, Coubertin and the IOC recognized the fact that the Olympics would do more than simply provide a common playing field for the world's athletes—it could be used as a tool to teach lessons in morality, peace, and increase connectivity by bringing nations together on common ground. In the final analysis, Olympic sport teaches something about peace by obliging the world to set aside their conflicts, treat others as equals, and tolerate differences.³⁰ Ultimately, sport does more than provide strength, greatness, and progress; Olympic intentions align with the notions and agendas of other peace keeping organizations, such as the Hague Conventions and Alfred Nobel's

1895 request for the world to establish a fund to award individuals for their peace keeping efforts.³¹

While the Olympics were successful in teaching lessons of peace, it is important to note that the 1896 Games did fail in one particular area. There are no records of female participation in the 1896 games. Perhaps this is to be rationalized by the time period of 1896, where the emergence of the "New Woman" created a stir in the decadent period leading to the popular belief that a woman's place was not in society but at home. However, in many European societies, women were allowed to participate in specific athletic activities, such as cycling and tennis. Although these two sports were included in the 1896 Games, Coubertin and the IOC denied female participation in the first Olympiad—perhaps to remain consistent to the widespread decadent male belief that a woman's place was in the home, not in the athletic or societal realms. Women, however, were permitted to participate in the 1900 Games in Paris, France, after the IOC recognized its double standard in denying participation to women.

In the larger picture, the Olympics provided a variety of positive and motivational ways to inspire and institute progress, peace, and unity through athletic competition. Its success and approach to addressing and teaching a variety of lessons about sportsmanship and peace led to a unanimous decision by the IOC to revive the games every four years in different cities world wide. Although some critics of the movement claim that moving the Olympics every four years is insane because the host staffs do not remain the same from nation to nation, Coubertin recognized the essential international element to hosting the Olympics, looking to bring such a great impact as the Olympics on Greek society to other nations worldwide.³² Regardless of opposition to moving the Olympics, Coubertin and the IOC moved the Second Olympiad to Paris, France, in 1900. From this point forward, the summer games were held every four years in different cities across the globe to ultimately avoid a loss of connectivity in the world, a theme that emerged during the period of revival.

In the final analysis, the Olympics did more than just set aside a time and place for international athletic competition; it looked to reform society, teach lessons, and give opportunity to nations and individuals. Through many issues rising in the decadent period from 1890 to 1900, Baron Pierre de Coubertin envisioned an event that would display the need for athletics in modern society while recognizing the potential for such an idea to teach a variety of complex lessons greater than sport itself. Perhaps this is why many of Coubertin's advisors and friends could not fully comprehend such a movement; however, his persistence and dedication eventually led to widespread approval and support for the revival of the games in 1896 to do more than just provide for international athletics. In the greater picture, the Modern Olympic Movement is a tool from which life lessons and peace efforts result to reform society and remind the world that there is more to life than its differences with other nations, and the legacy of such a movement lives on today.

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- ⁵ Pierre de Coubertin, *Coubertin's Olympism: Selected Writings* (Lausanne, Switzerland: International Olympic Committee, 2000), 265.
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- ¹² Weber, "Pierre de Coubertin and the Introduction of Organised Sport in France," 4.
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²⁷ de Coubertin, *Coubertin's Olympism*, 543.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

³⁰ Heather L. Reid, "Olympic Sport and Its Lessons for Peace," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 33 (2006): 207.

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³² Christina Larson, "Moveable Feat: The Insanity of Relocating the Olympics Every Four Years," *Washington Monthly*, July-August, 2004.