



# Olympism and the values of sport: De Coubertin and the Thailand Olympic Academy

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## Abstract

In this paper, the author examines how the Thailand Olympic Academy (TOA) can be conceptualized and nurtured into the Olympism values of sport as per de Coubertin's ideal and vision for the Thailand Olympic Academy. The author offers a conceptualization of Baron Pierre de Coubertin's emphasis that "The future of civilization rests at this moment neither on political nor on economic bases. It depends solely on the direction which will be given to education." To reform the education offered or even better drive social reform, Coubertin accepted to use "Athletes" as means and "Olympism" as the object. He had no hope for any country heading to "Utopia" and saw no one wanting to give it a thought. The term "Olympic education", according to Muller (2000), has not been used until 1970s and it is very doubtful at the beginning amongst researchers that the aim of this subject is to really look at the educational ideals of the ancient Greece or is it merely a marketing campaign of the Olympic Games. For Coubertin himself, "Sporting education" rather than "Olympic education" is to be championed and is in fact the title of his book published in 1922, "*Pedagogies sportive*" (Muller, 2000). It is interesting and challenging to study how the Olympics can promote a social reform through not only individual sportsperson's but also with a group of people or an organization that, over the last 150 years, has become the world's dominant economic institution (Bakan, 2004). The overall aim of the study was to analyze the ideas of the Thailand Olympic Academy with empirical data in order to adjust and to improve the path ahead for Olympic Movement in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Sport, values, Olympism, Thailand Olympic Academy, de Coubertin.

## Introduction

Pierre de Coubertin's efforts and ideas on Olympism endured for fifty consecutive years with approximately 15,000 pages of papers dedicated to this idea. Muller (2000) encapsulates this this with three sayings as followings: (a) "To celebrate the Olympic Games is to appeal to history"; (b) "Olympism is not a system, but a spiritual and moral attitude"; (c) "My unshakable faith in youth and the future has been and remains the principle that gives life to my work."

One of the last pieces of work on Coubertin's Neo-Olympism, the Unfinished Symphony written in 1936, stated that Olympism was the key part of his work (Muller, 2000). To reform the education of the youth and world in general and drive social reform, Coubertin accepted the idea of using "Athletes" as means and "Olympism" as the object. He had no hope for any country heading to a so-called "Utopia" and saw no one of consequence wishing to give it any thought. It is obvious from his work that Coubertin put great efforts on driving the education side of sports, but why? Three kinds of relationship between sport and education can be considered: (a) Sport drives education as the ancient Roman Juvenal stated "*mens sana in corpore sano*" (a healthy mind in a healthy body). The expression is widely used in sporting and educational settings to express the theory that physical exercise is an important part of mental and psychological well-being; (b) Education drives sport: education will lead people towards sport in a proper way against commercialism and corruption; (c) Sport and education are undivided and unified as one to enhance human being.

Coubertin's emphasis on history is stated by Muller (2000) as "the first of all the sciences in terms of significance and education effectiveness" and it brings in an idea of retrospection on



the history of sports and of Greek in particular, in order to appropriately appreciate the far-sighted vision of Coubertin in the revival of modern Olympic Games.

### **The Origin of Sport**

The origin of sport is credited to the ancient Greeks. Although the earliest evidence of physical exercise takes place in 3800 B.C.E. at Memphis in Egypt (Levinson & Christensen, 1996), there is no sense of competition which is the main characteristic of sport (Miller, 2004). It was the Greeks who instituted and promoted the idea of exercise and athletics to the world today. The Greeks placed more emphasis on exercise than any previous society. The Athenians exercised and played for the sheer enjoyment of it (Levinson & Christensen, 1996).

Gods were the very reason for Greeks to live, to be better, to contest and to die their beliefs. Physical and intellectual perfection were the approximation to gods who possessed all the ideal forms of a human (Koursi, 2003). It is said that the first patrons of the (Olympic) Games were in fact the gods, the last, men (Powell, 1994). The International Olympic Committee (1994) asserts that “indeed, the ancient Games, from Iphitos (884 BC) to Coroebus (776 BC) and from Coroebus to Theodosius (AD 394), were usually large votive festivities dedicated to Zeus and to the other gods of Mount Olympus, even though, under Roman occupation, the cult of the Emperor also had its place. The winning athlete, a delegate of the City States, offered up his physical and moral beauty to the divinities of creation. Nothing could be more pleasing to Zeus than a tribute paid by the “Olympionike”.”

Apart from Gods, the Greek also had heralds and heroes, of which, Heracles or the Roman Hercules was the most respected. He descended from Zeus through Alcmene and was claimed by Pindar to commence the Olympic Games (Poole & Poole, 1963). As quoted by Parry (2009), Palaeologos commends Hercules in that “the idea is that the sculptures of the demi-God Hercules in Olympia performed a morally educative function, standing as role models, especially for the athletes who were there to train for the Games, of physical, moral and intellectual virtue: Hercules is shown bearded, with beautiful features, a well-trained body, fine, proportional muscles, as a representative of the “kalos k’ agathos” type, where the body is well-formed and harmonious, the expression of a beautiful soul, and the face radiates intelligence, kindness and integrity.”

For ancient Greeks, the supreme value of life was the whole balance of one’s body and mind which can’t be entirely separated. It was the perfection of all that Peleus desired for his son, Achilles, to be best in words and deeds. Apollo—the God of light—is also a “far-shooting archer” and “lyre-player” and “leader of the Muses” and is another good example of the whole balance or perfection (Koursi, 2003).

Essays by Michael de Montaigne in 1580 referred to Plato saying that “it is not a mind, it is not a body, that we are training up; it is a man, and we ought not to divide him into two parts; we are not to fashion one without the other, but make them draw together like two horses harnessed to a coach.” “meden agan” or “nothing in excess” (Poole & Poole, 1963) and the favorite watchword for Greeks— “mean of middle” or the exact point of rightness between both ends—is among the best adjective for perfection (Powell, 1994). The Greeks were the ones who “love beauty without excess, and love wisdom without being weak” (Koursi, 2003).

To be perfect, ancient Greek took great pain in driving formal education. According to Platonov and Guskov (1997), although education was not mandatory by law, there were no illiterates in the Athens by the 5th century B.C. Socrates voiced that “it would be a shame, because of one’s own ignorance, to get old without any chance of seeing, by observing one’s own body, what a human body can look like in the prime of one’s age and beauty.” “Be educated in cities” is also what Aristotle added for the education of the youth.



## The Olympic Games

The sporting events held at Olympia were the oldest and most significant of the four national Greek athletic festivals. The games were conducted on a sanctioned basis every four years from 776 B.C.E. onwards. The Olympic Games are thus not a myth but a legacy, although the story of the Olympic Games shows us a combination or interaction between Gods and men. Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Strabo, Phlegon, Thales, Eusebius of Caesarea, Herod the Great, Lucian, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were among philosophers and poets who confirmed that the Olympic Games are real, man-made, and not mythical (Powell, 1994).

The passion of the Greeks was for practice and perfection and this was put into the Olympic Games. 'Athlete' and the idea of contest was used by Homer to describe the Trojan War and the labors of Hercules during the first Olympic Games. 'Athletes' implies a masculine form and the prize for the contest (Powell, 1994) was a laurel wreath. Valuable prizes could be won in athletic competitions, but victory at Olympia brought the greatest respect. Winning contestants were allowed to put up statues of themselves inside the sanctuary of Zeus to honor their victories. If an athlete won three times they could set up specially commissioned portrait statues which could cost up to ten times their average yearly salary. Athletes also tied a woolen band around their forehead, and occasionally around their arms and legs as sign of their great victory. The winners at Olympia received laurel wreaths of wild olive, just like Herakles did when he ran in the first races at Olympia. Miller (2004) notes that "Athlon", a noun, and "Athleuein", a verb, means a prize, and to compete for a prize respectively an athlete is to compete for a prize honourably. There is no sport for sport's sake in the ancient concept. There is no team competition and there is no prize for being a runner-up. One man wins and the others lose. This is the concept of "arête" that leaves no room for 'nearby'. Athletes practiced and competed in the nude as the word "gymnos" and "gymnazein" imply. The competitors, at Olympia, were categorized into two groups of ages—Andres (men) and Paides (boys). Basic equipment and supply for athlete to exercise and practice were a jar of olive oil (rubbing body before exercise), strigil or stlegnis—a curved tool concave in section to scrape the body after exercise, a sponge, a cap or hairnet, dust or powder (konis) using for cleaning after the exercise. The punishment for breaking rules during the exercise session was simply a flogging.

The legacy of the ancient Olympic Games has to be noted along with the history of Greece itself. Although the civilization of Greece can be traced as far back as the Paleolithic Period (approx., 60,000-8,000 B.C.), the Olympic Games embarked in 776 B.C. This made the entire Greek ethnos fully aware of their national identity of commonly shared language, ancestors and religious beliefs. The spirit of the Olympic Games has continuously journeyed through the never-ending wars from internal states and external enemies battling the Greeks. By 432-404 B.C., the country was permanently divided into military camps led by the city states of Athens and Sparta. From 146 B.C. to 1453 A.D., Greece was subjugated by the Roman Empire. Greece was then conquered by the Ottoman Turkish Empire in 1456 A.D. and was able to declare its independence long after, in 1828 A.D. (Mavromatakit, n.d.).

In addition to Olympic Games, Coubertin was also very much impressed by the American dream which he believed resulted from a synthesis between the British education system of 'unselfish mentality' and German 'effectiveness and discipline' that emancipated humans to be a free man and that there "was a meaningful correlation between the mentality, the ambitions and practices of people on the one hand, and the way in which physical exercises were understood and organized on the other" (Maes, 2009).

With the revival of Olympic Games in mind, Coubertin unveiled his Olympic Idea under the strategic Olympic Movement. The first move was then to set up the Olympic Congress in which the main body of the Olympic Games was to be created and organized. The first Olympic Congress was held in the amphitheatre of the old Sorbonne University in Paris from 16th to



24th of June 1894. Demetrius Vikelas who was then the president of the Pan-Hellenic Gymnastics Society became the first President of the International Olympic Committee. The soul of the Olympics has transcended Coubertin's Olympic Idea to Olympism, which was put forward by International Olympic Committee (2016) as "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." The goal is to "place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity" and to assert that "the practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play. The organization, administration and management of sport must be controlled by independent sports organizations. Any form of discrimination with regard to a country or a person on grounds of race, religion, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement."

### **Conceptualizing the Olympic Movement into Coubertin's ideal**

The Olympic Movement is actually the grand strategy of Olympism that is "the concerted, organized, universal and permanent action, carried out under the supreme authority of the IOC, of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values of Olympism. It covers the five continents. It reaches its peak with the bringing together of the world's athletes at the great sports festival, the Olympic Games. Its symbol is five interlaced rings". Arbitration on the Olympic Movement is subject to, and requires compliance with the Olympic Charter and recognition by the IOC.

From the concept of Olympism to the Olympic Games, a platform to consolidate all participants in realizing sport values, Baron Pierre de Coubertin had a primary intention to employ the movement as the tool for creating peace and harmony for all mankind. The International Olympic Committee also recognizes education as the backbone of the Olympic Movement. This was the beginning of establishing the International Olympic Academy (IOA) in 1961 as the learning center of Olympic Education. For 55 years, the IOA has been an international sport organization which is responsible for implementing the mission: (1) To function as an international academic center for Olympic studies, education and research. (2) To act as an International forum for the expression and exchange of ideas among the Olympic Family. (3) To bring together people from all over the world, in a spirit of friendship and cooperation. (4) To motivate people to use the experiences and knowledge gained in the IOA productively, in promoting the Olympic Ideals in their respective countries. (5) To serve and promote the ideals and principles of the Olympic Movement. (6) To cooperate with and assist the National Olympic Academies and other institutions devoted to Olympic education. (7) To further explore and enhance the contribution of Olympism to humanity.

### **Thailand Olympic Academy**

As an IOA member since 2001, the Thailand Olympic Academy (TOA) has been conducting various activities in implementing IOA policy in all dimensions, for example, organizing seminars and workshops about the Olympic Movement for athletes, sport administrators, P.E. teachers, sports scientists, educators, artists and journalists, organizing the Olympic Movement and Olympic Education activities for youth, organizing culture and education activities on the Olympic Day annually. The TOA also supports and promotes the Olympic Movement courses into physical education, Sports Science curricula in universities as well as integrating the Olympic Movement contents into physical education classes. With its long efforts and true commitment, currently, the knowledge about the Olympic Movement is widely



spread all over the country which can be counted as a success story for Thailand's Olympic Academy.

According to the good memories of the International Olympic Academy's contribution to the society, the TOA would like to raise the impression about the cooperation between IOC, IOA and the Organizing Committee of the first Youth Olympic Games (SYOGOC) in organizing Culture and Education Program (CEP) during the first Youth Olympic Games in Singapore during 2010. The CEP consisted of 7 main activities as follows: Art and Culture, Community Project: Evening Festival, Discovery Activities, Exhibits and Games, Chat with Champions, Exploration Journey, and Island Adventure. All the activities are highly suitable for delivering the Olympism concept, and this was through 12 days of the Culture and Education Program. The Youth Olympic Village was an excellent learning center as well as cultural exchange space for all of the 3,500 Youth Olympians. In addition, this program drove inspiration in developing friendship, with athletes pushing themselves for excellence in all aspects and giving respect to each other as Olympic Family members. The success of this exceptional collaboration program was mentioned by the IOC President, Jacques Rogge during the meeting day with young athlete representatives of all 205 participating countries, on August 25, 2010. The speech stated that "from today, all Youth Athletes participating in the 1st Youth Olympic Games, Singapore 2010 are accepted as Youth Olympians in the Olympic Family and CEP activities will be continued and be a part of future Youth Olympic Games" At this moment, everyone realized that the IOA is an educational organization which is the center of the Olympic Movement knowledge, and truly accomplishes the desired mission.

The TOA has unofficially been undertaking this matter ever since 1991. In so doing, it has had an opportunity to conduct training, seminars, produce journals, newsletters, printed materials and leaflets to disseminate more useful information concerning the Olympic Movement. It was however not until the 25th of March 2002 when the Thailand Olympic Academy was officially established, becoming the 103rd member country of the International Olympic Academy and registered itself with the IOA at Olympia, Greece.

The TOA is an annual residential workshop for selected sport-minded Thais and its philosophical base is Olympism. This workshop provides an opportunity for the participants to examine their own values and beliefs concerning sport and the Olympic Movement. The participants are chosen based on their interest and experience in the Olympic Movement and are selected to provide a balance between women and men, and to furnish representation from all regions of Thailand. Sport scholars, sport administrators, international speakers and Olympic leaders contribute to a setting in which participants learn about the Thai amateur sport system, the Olympic Movement and the issues which confront the Olympic Movement today. The TOA is a leadership development program in the sense that one of its objectives is to encourage its participations to effect change in sport. In essence, the TOA strives to develop ambassadors of the Olympic Movement in Thai communities. The week - long session revolves around the concept of critical reflection, an adult learning approach that emphasizes the examination of one's own values and beliefs leading to the ability to critically question the status quo and work toward positive social reform (Somphong et al., 2019).

In 17 years, the Thailand Olympic Academy has organized the Sport Administration Course attended by 600 sports personnel, and the TOA had an opportunity to screen athletes participating in the Olympic Games Youth Camp and the Asian Games Youth Camp under the patronage of the IOC, OS and OCA. This propelled and further introduced Olympic education to be taught in the Physical Education Institutes. Presently more than 10 Higher Education Institutes have already included Olympic education as part of their curricula, in joint academically cooperation with 17 Institutes of Physical Education. In addition Olympic Study Centers have been set up to disseminate the Olympic Movement, Organizing the Olympic Education at the yearly Olympic Day and serve to enhance knowledge and understanding among children and youths between the ages of 8 – 15. About 1,000 people participate each



time. This builds networks among National Olympic Academies needed to exchange knowledge and experiences of the works undertaken by other countries, like Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Mongolia, Cambodia and Vietnam. Setting up the Thailand Olympic Museum is expected to be completed by the end of 2020. The idea of developing research and a development framework in five areas for national sport development is as follows: (1) 1st – 6th National Sport Development Plan. (1988 – 2020) (2) Education Institutes and National Sport Development (3) Structure and Administrative Management of National Sport Associations and Provincial Sport Associations. (4) Sport Equipment Standard and Sport Facilities (5) Guidelines and Directions of Professional Sports in Thailand.

### **Future plans of the Thailand Olympic Academy**

Organizing the youth camp so as to transfer knowledge and enthusiasm about the Olympic Movement by means of stressing leadership, sportsmanship, fair play, friendship, respect and solidarity to children and youths from students of the Sports School, comprising 20 schools in total through the cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism and Sports.

Educating on Olympism must be compulsory for all school teachers in cooperation with the Ministry of Education so as to let many teachers absorb sport values in teaching and create a common sense among children and make them value sport far more given its role in life.

Coordinating relationships with the Provincial Administrations by means of organizing sport administration course training to their personnel who are responsible for local sport development.

Developing a Thai Sport Administration textbook which is expected to be finished by 2020. These textbook will hopefully be given to private and public agencies and institutes for further reference and studies.

Creating networks with that of education institutes, agencies and domestic organizations for perusal and for exchange of knowledge which is related to the Olympic Movement process in line with Pierre de Coubertin' ideas, who wished to see education instituted as a knowledgeable base of learning about Olympism.

Creating networks with other National Olympic Academies, especially in the Asian countries which is already under limited discussion.

Orienting, following – up and monitoring the course instruction of Olympic education in education institutes as to inquire about problems and obstacles, while strengthening knowledge and to update information on the Olympic Movement in general.

### **Conclusion**

Sport organization, the Olympics in particular, discloses its legend and secret nicely to the eyes of the world in many aspects. First of all, the vision of the organization emerges even before the establishment of the organization. Vision is the *a priori*. This somehow contradicts the orthodox view of what organization and its vision are. For ordinary organizations, it is common that vision comes basically from the boardroom, for it follows the mainstream concept of management “Strategy-Structure-System” which derives from Chandler’s proposition of “Structure follows Strategy” together with another management precept of “System supports Structure”. Sport organization however redirects what it should be—Strategy, Structure, and System are dependent variables and have to follow the Vision of the organization strictly.

Secondly, sport organization proves that the vision is not merely a statement of a plain desire of the board of directors representing shareholders on the annual report of an organization. It is strategic for the vision to be shared and understood by all members of the organization; still,



it is like 'Plato's Cave' as it is difficult to project the vision for others to view. Without a great effort, time, and good communication skills, it is next to impossible for a man who envisions explaining to the man who does not.

Thirdly, as Coubertin confirms his Neo-Olympism aimed to reform social mores through sport by using "Athletes" as means and "Olympic" as the object; The Olympics is truly not sport for the sake of sport, but an aid to human development through a particular strategy, for now, using sport. Knowing this is to understand that the strategy, not the vision, can be arrived at and it is actually necessary to be revisited regularly, reviewed, and revised from time to time to fit and integrate itself into an ever changing or evolution of surrounding, environment, and context.

Fourth, considering the Olympic Games as a strategy of the Olympic ideal in particular, one can see that the categories of the Games can be grouped into age group of athletes (adult and youth), conditions of terrain (summer and winter), and physical need of athletes (normal and special needs). The IOC inaugurated the Games with one category in 1896 and five at the present Olympic Summer Games, Olympic Winter Games, Paralympic Summer Games, Paralympic Winter Games, and Youth Games. Mathematically, a combination of three groups of two conditions results in eight possible Games. Which strategy of the Games is left for the IOC, and if what will be the choice for the IOC in the future? Likely categories are Winter Youth Games, Paralympic Youth Summer Games, and Paralympic Youth Winter Games.

Fifth, the Olympics is travelling so far for sport but it is too short for education. At the present time, Olympic education is the study of Olympic—knowing Olympic education is better for the sake of the Olympics itself, and not the way Olympics is taught and integrated into any form of education namely formal, non-formal, and informal education. The latter was in fact be the actual ambition of the father of the Modern Olympics to revive the Olympic legacy at the first Congress on 12-26 June 1894 in Paris and to be the force to sustain the Olympic Movement as a whole. Another dimension of Olympic education is how it can be used as a model, not only to develop sport, but also to make an organization (of sport, of other sectors, and of different levels) more effective, more efficient, and more intelligent. Relating to organizations, the Olympic ideal can also be used as a model for organization not only sport but also in other sectors or levels of life. Sport organization which shares the same vision of sport and is governed by the International Federations (IFs) should benefit directly from the prototype of the Olympics (Charter, Ethics, organization of the Games, and so on.) and find no difficulty in benchmarking.) For organization in other sectors, the fact that the Olympics is a non-profit and non-governmental initiative may seem to be unique amongst others.

Finally, in this paper, the researcher has analyzed the ideas of the Thailand Olympic Academy using empirical data in order to adjust and to improve the Olympic Movement in Thailand. TOA believed that the Olympic ideal would turn youthful personalities into better people and have a place in building a healthier life for the minds as well as bodies of people of all ages. TOA will do our best to inculcate these values into youngsters for the betterment of Thai society and future generations.

In line with his professional career as a university professor, and the committee of Thailand Olympic Academy, the researcher has the authority to transfer knowledge and strengthen the understanding about, as well as to promote the values of Olympism by using the Olympic Movement whose vision is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youths and other people of all ages through Olympic Education so as to accomplish the aims of the contemporary Olympics.

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