

Pierre de Coubertin and the Olympic Athlete

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Statue of a boxer (1st century B.C.)

*„to be always the first and to
outperform the others“*

(nature of Greek agonistic rooted in Homer's *Ilias*)

*„He dies here in the stadium after
having promised death or victory
to Zeus“*

(Inscription of the boxer Agathos Daimon's
tombstone)

Athletic Excellence at the Ancient Olympic Games

1. • Only winners crowned with olive branches
2. • At home victorious athletes were given valuable gifts and ascribed special status
3. • Top level performance required / expected
4. • Athletes trained the whole year
5. • Mandatory training months in Elis required

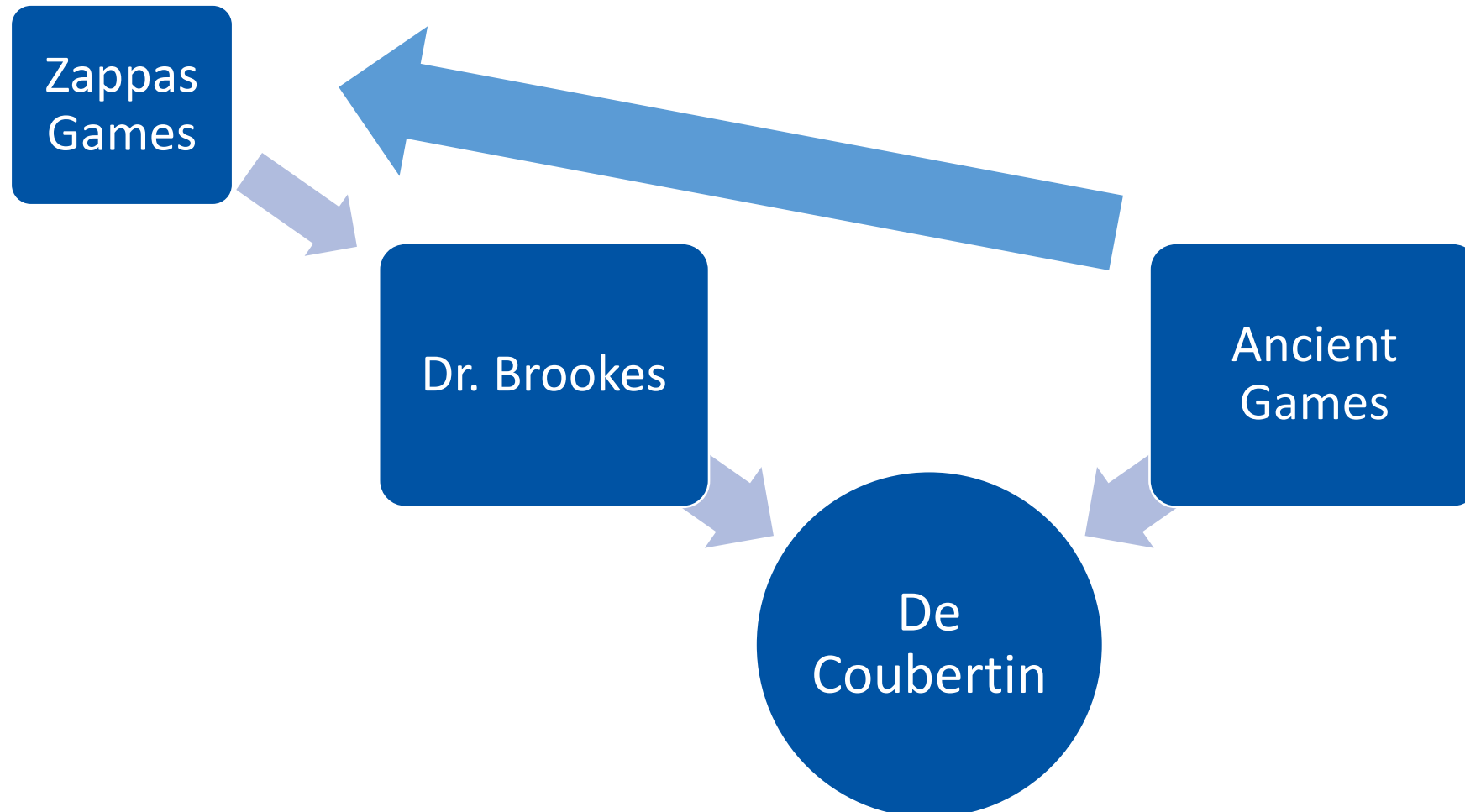
Athletic Excellence at the Ancient Olympic Games



Ancient Olympia: Athletes' Association

- **Nationwide operating athletes' association**
- **Composition:**
 - Three priests
 - Official representative of the respective festival (Xystarch)
 - Two assessors (Archons)
 - Treasurer
 - General Secretary of the local athletes' association

„Premodern“ Olympic Games



Pierre de Coubertin



Coubertin's objective was to come up with a modern concept of the Olympic Games based on educational objectives; one of them was to refer to athletes as the main actors of the Olympic Games.

Coubertin followed a (too) idealistic picture of the ancient Greek athletes.

The Philosophic
Foundation of Modern
Olympism

07th August, 1935: printed
version in Le Sport Suisse

Athletes are in the focus of
his educational thinking



A Clear Age Group in Mind



US „student team“ at the 1896 Athens
Olympic Games

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

A Clear Age Group in Mind

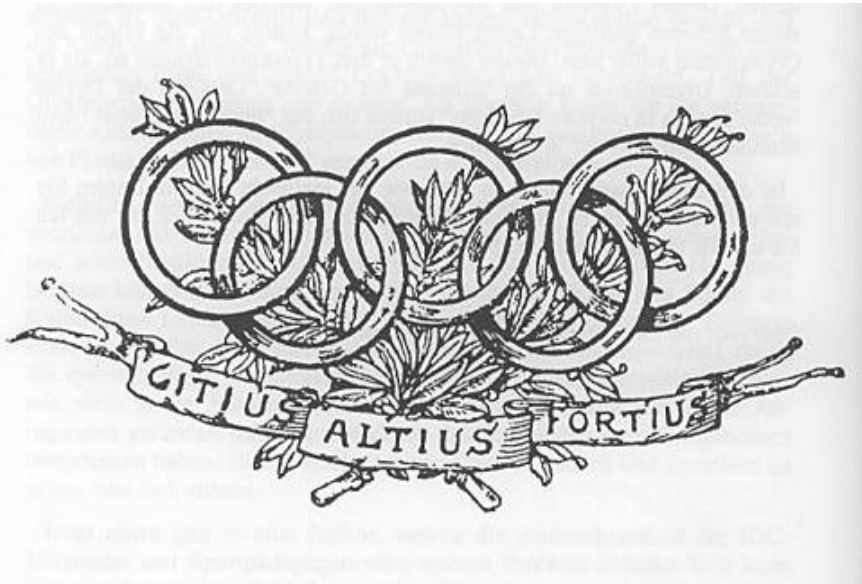
The Olympic Games were to offer young adults some kind of final education stressing the development of highly social and moral values

Coubertin regards the Olympic Games as a useful support in the transition of the mature athlete into a respective and responsible person of society



US „student team“ at the 1896 Athens Olympic Games

Athletic Excellence



The motto was originally coined by Dominican father Henri Didon (1840-1900)

Fundamental for a correct understanding
of Olympic Sport

The famous motto:
Strive for the individual best result

No exclusion to achieve records per se

The motto was published in connection
with the Olympic rings in 1914

Medal Ceremony

- Victorious athletes deserved to be honored for outstanding performance at the Olympic Games.
- Coubertin approved the medal ceremonies.
- Tradition since 1896 Olympic Games.
- Athens 1896: victory ceremony as a special festive element.

Medal Ceremony: Athens 1896



Spiridon Louis: Winner of the first Olympic marathon

1932: Introduction of the Winner's Podium



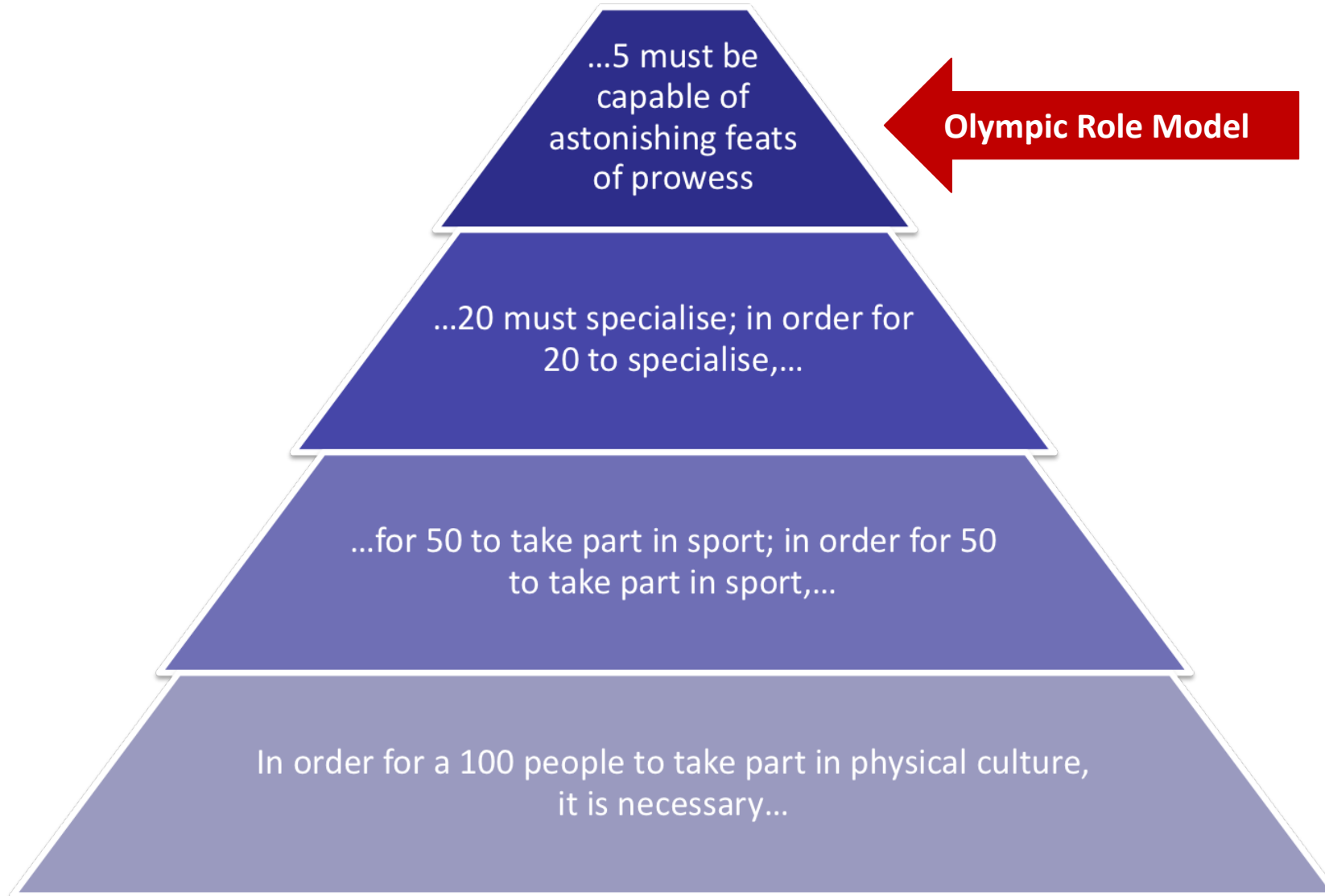
1932 Lake Placid Winter Games

With the introduction of the winning podium, the positions were eventually swapped and the athlete has since received a special symbolic appreciation.

This clearly met Coubertin's expectation to honour the athlete in a very respectful way and to symbolically stress his role as key actor of the Olympic Movement.

Olympic Athlete as a Role Model

- Participation in the Olympic Games reserved for the best athletes only.
- Selection based on individual achievement and not social origin.
- Not all athletes can become an Olympic athlete.
- Coubertin states that an Olympic athlete has to be a role model.
- Role model has to stimulate in sport for the masses.
- Coubertin`s Olympic pyramid.



The Olympic Athlete as a Role Model

In his article *The Re-establishment of the Modern Olympic Games*, published in 1894, Coubertin highlighted the educational nature of athletic excellence and amateurism:

“Sporting can only produce good moral effects, can indeed, maintain its existence, only as it is founded upon disinterestedness, loyalty and chivalric sentiment.”




Denial of the educational effectiveness of professionalism.



Pierre de Coubertin (1863 – 1937)

Olympic Athlete as a Role Model



<p>Amateur:</p> <p>Display of athletic excellence</p> <p>Honorable athlete</p> <p>Value oriented</p> <p>Role model</p>	<p>Professional:</p> <p>Display of athletic excellence</p> <p>Questionable character</p> <p>Winning at all costs</p> <p>No role model</p>
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Olympic Athlete as a Role Model

- Athletic excellence has to be based on amateurism.
- Coubertin accused professionalism of promoting uncontrolled performance development.
- Codex of amateurism should prevent athletes from undermining integrity of sport.
- Athletes should feel a firm attitude to the value of amateurism.
- Attitude should be stressed in the Olympic oath.

Olympic Athlete as a Role Model

- Coubertin mentioned the Olympic oath for the first time in 1906.
- Approval at the 1914 Olympic Congress.
- 1916 Berlin Olympic Games cancelled.
- 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games: debut of the Olympic oath.
- Belgium fencer Victor Boin selected as speaker.

Olympic Athlete as a Role Model

“We swear that we are taking part in the Olympic Games as loyal competitors, overseeing the rules governing the Games, and anxious to show how a spirit of chivalry for the honour of your countries and for the glory of sport.”



1920 Antwerp Opening Ceremony:
Olympic oath

No Voices for Athletes

- Coubertin clearly regarded athletes as key actors.
- No institutional athletes` representation.
- Traditional viewpoint.
- One-dimensional power relationship between athletes and officials.
- Almost unquestioned by all actors involved till 1970s.

New Research

- 1973: Xth Olympic Congress in Varna.
- Invitation of 10 athletes; passive role.
- 1981: XIth Olympic Congress in Baden-Baden.
- Invitation of 30 athletes; active participation.
- Foundation of the IOC Athletes' Commission.

New Research

- 1981 - 1996: Appointments of Athletes to the Commission.
- Since 1996: Election of the majority of athletes to the Commission.
- Since 1999: 15 athletes as IOC members.
- Since 2000: Chair of the Commission on the IOC Executive Board.
- Increasing institutional representation.

Selected References

- Pierre de Coubertin, 'The Philosophic Foundation of Modern Olympism', in Norbert Müller (ed.), *Pierre de Coubertin 1863-1937. Olympism: Selected Writings* (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2000), 581-583.
- Christoph Bertling and Stephan Wassong, 'Striving for Athletic Excellence: A Core Value and Challenge for the Profile of the Ancient and Modern Olympic Games', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 33 (2016), 434-450.
- Wassong, Stephan, 'The Membership Composition of the Athletes' Commission of the International Olympic Committee: Between Appointments and Elections, 1981–2000', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, online <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2021.1973440>.

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Thanks for your attention