

Coubertin One Hundred Years Ago: His Second American Visit in 1893

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Historian John J. MacAloon had a point, as he so often does, when he remarked that the French Baron Pierre de Coubertin, “as he always did when frustrated at home . . . departed for the English-speaking world.”¹ It was his second trip to North America, the earlier crossing during the winter months 1889-1890,² a seven-month odyssey through a continent “of fantastic contradictions.”³ Nevertheless, he returned eagerly in the fall of 1893, this time with a double mission. Talks with former Prime Minister Jules Ferry and French President Carnot led to the young thirty-year-old Coubertin as educational representative to the Chicago World’s Fair. Every bit as important to the Baron was his “desperate need to talk to friends and, hopefully, supporters of his Olympic Games dream.”⁴

Exactly a year earlier, on November 25, 1892, after the culmination of several days’ discussions in the Sorbonne University amphitheater, Coubertin called upon the delegates to support his dream for an Olympic Games revival. He was met with “total, absolute incomprehension.”⁵ Insufficient technical preparation, always Coubertin’s weakness, coupled with his historical misreadings of the origins of “athletic amateurism,” resulted in a failed first Sorbonne Congress. Another symposium was immediately planned for June of 1894, a short eighteen months hence. Much work needed to be done in Europe, but especially in those two bastions of so-called “modern” sport, Britain and North America. To prepare for what was hoped would be a successful second Sorbonne Congress, Adolphe de Pallisau and his friend Coubertin convened on August 1, 1893, a gathering of “l’Union des Sociétés françaises de sports athlétiques.”⁶ The most knowledgeable persons in all of France will be there at Paris’ 27 Boulevard des Italiens, an historic date for prideful Frenchmen,” wrote the baron.⁷ Two major problems were discussed — amateurism and the possibility of an international Olympic Games. The latter nearly occupied all of Coubertin’s passion and energy and he looked forward to another North American visit, this time as a member of the French team of educators to the Chicago World’s Fair. Just before leaving, he delivered a stirring lecture at the “Lycée de Chartes” on the triple benefits to children of compulsory daily physical education and voluntary competitive athletics—a feast for mind, body, and spirit.⁸ A contemporary of Coubertin, the English sport leader Theodore Cook, pointed out that the inaction following the failed first Sorbonne conference made Coubertin’s September, 1893 trip a critical mandate, a necessary opportunity to alert key North American sportsmen about the June, 1894 Sorbonne meeting and

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plans for an Olympic Games renaissance shortly after. "The arrow had been shot into the air," wrote Cook.⁹ So very much depended on this return trip to America.

Coubertin's four months in North America during the fall of 1893 are described in his *Souvenirs d'Amérique et de Grèce*, a 181 page travelogue dedicated to his good Princeton University friend and professor of European history, William M. Sloane, Ph.D.¹⁰ Upon arrival in New York City, Coubertin proceeded directly to Chicago and the World's Columbian Exposition. He was much too late to participate in the "International Congress of Education" (July 25-28, 1893), although his name is listed as "Honorary vice-president of the Department Congress of Higher Education," as well as the author of a "discussion thesis" titled "The athletic movement in France."¹¹ America was in a fever of optimism prior to the economic depression of 1893. The Columbian Exposition was created as an outward manifestation of the nation's missionary impulse and burgeoning internationalism. Baron de Coubertin was an avid reader of the liberal American journal *Nation* and had read carefully Lord James Bryce's 1888 *American Commonwealth*, a hugely complimentary view of the United States. Coubertin looked again to studying the United States and learning more of Canada. His view of the "New World" was persistently optimistic and he looked forward to convincing many influential Americans, especially on the college campuses, to send their best athletes to his newest and brightest international enterprise — the Games of the first Olympiad. But first, he had to get American delegates to the second Sorbonne Conference in Paris, just a little over half a year away.

Although Coubertin was unable to participate in Chicago's education congress in July, he found the city to be the very essence of American material progress, and as he said: "I felt myself filled with admiration at the sudden rising of this vigorous sap."¹² The young man was thoroughly impressed with a Chicago Roman Catholic convocation and two liberal-minded clergymen — Cardinal Gibbons and Monsignor Keane, both of whom advocated the startling non-traditional amnesty between modern science and Catholic theology. The latter theologian was president of Catholic University in Washington, D.C., and advocated,

... faith in both God and in science, for in so doing it will usher in a new age . . . and the world would thus be governed with a higher level of wisdom and justice.¹³

Coubertin took the train to Denver, "through Mormon country" and on to California. "Poor California," he wrote, explaining that "Les véritables richesses de son sol privilégié demeuraient inconnues, attendant la fin du mauvais rêve et la venue du bon ouvrier."¹⁴ [the very abundance of this land gives rise to a sense of its unreality]. In San Francisco he stayed at the opulent and appropriately-named San Francisco Olympic Club.¹⁵ He visited the University of California campus in Berkeley, but left no record. Moving rapidly by train, the thirty-year-old Frenchman passed through Texas, Louisiana, up to Washington, D.C., and on to New York City where he scarcely paused. He hurried south to Princeton, New Jersey to visit for three weeks with his senior colleague and friend, the forty-three year old William Milligan Sloane (1850-1928).¹⁶ Sloane was an internationally recognized historian and a constant early supporter of Coubertin's dream-like idea of a truly world-wide Olympic Games.

There was absolutely no inkling in Coubertin's mind at this time that a *first* Olympic festival, if and when it ever should occur, might be celebrated in Athens; if any such idea did lurk in the Baron's subconscious, a November 27, 1893 *New York Times* news item "Greece is bankrupt"¹⁷ could well have sobered him from considering such a prospect.

Coubertin had made little progress in getting Americans excited about a renewed Olympic Games, but Sloane promised to redouble his efforts, at least among the Ivy League constituency. And, together, they hoped that more than a few Americans would join their European sporting colleagues at the next year's all-important second Sorbonne congress. The two rested on Thanksgiving Day and went up to Manhattan Field in New York City for the annual football match between Princeton and Yale Universities. But first they had lunch at the University Club with influential "like-minded" friends about the congress in Paris in 1894. Sloane was discouraged about these men from the universities and their inability to grasp "the conception of international sport."¹⁸ A young Columbia student-athlete was at that luncheon, Gustavus Town Kirby (1874-1956), future president of the IC4A, the American Olympic Committee, and the AAU. Kirby remembered telling Coubertin that the man who could and would get things done was James Edward Sullivan (1860-1914), "the best man capable of organizing an American Olympic Committee."¹⁹ In Kirby's autobiography *I Wonder Why?* he described the unbounded enthusiasm of both Coubertin and Sloane—despite making little progress in educating the university elite, both academic and athletic.²⁰ These good men, said Coubertin, were incapable of sustained thought about a theoretical Olympic Games, for they were "at this very moment preoccupied with a 'secret' war between the universities and the Amateur Athletic Union."²¹

The football game was a gloriously confusing experience for Coubertin. Princeton won 6-0, the first victory in a decade over the Yale football machine. "Glory for Princeton," shouted a *New York Tribune* headline on page one. The biggest crowd in Manhattan Field history, 25,000 "hysterical fans" with an additional 20,000 spectators "blackening the near-by bluff" tried to glimpse a bit of the game. All-night fireworks celebrations followed on the Princeton campus — accompanied by a "tidal wave of howling and immature manhood." Even the usually reserved students at Princeton's Theological Seminary were out in a body carrying "a transparency reading 'Princeton seems everywhere and Yale nowhere'."²² Such fun. The usually sober Coubertin wondered, "What will become of the \$20,000 profit? Shall it be used as an indemnity fund and be divided among the different participants?"²³

Coubertin had done little in America outside of energizing Professor Sloane to begin active recruitment at his own university, at Harvard University, and within the Boston Athletic Association. Sloane was the only American to attend the 1894 Congress. School business prevented him from attending the April, 1896 Olympic Games in Athens, but we can assume considerable satisfaction on his part when he learned that the very small band of American athletes won almost every track and field event. Coubertin himself was there, basking in the glory and in the warm Greek sun, commenting:

The Greeks have overnight become conscious of the native

strength and suppleness of their race . . . The skeptics have been eliminated; the Olympic games have not a single enemy.²⁴

Many can forgive his pollyanna view. After all, despite a less than successful second American visit, Coubertin's unbounded energy coupled with Greek national pride and skill resulted in a memorable Olympic Games, the first and therefore the most important in modern history.

Coubertin's tendency was to be optimistic, although he certainly had his moments of doubt and even depression. He became keenly aware, following his 1893 four-month whirlwind tour of parts of America, that there was absolutely no groundswell of interest in his unique idea of a world Olympic Games. All previous concepts for Olympian Games had been local or for colonial entities like the British Empire. Except for the most isolated instances, and with an exceedingly small number of persons, Coubertin found not a scintilla of interest in his version of revised Olympic Games in the USA in 1893. He must have been deeply disappointed, but we cannot know for sure. In more characteristic fashion, we do know that the enthusiastic and persevering Baron forged ahead. In January 1894 he visited colleagues in London, athletic administrators he hoped would be more receptive to his ideas than were the Americans.

Coubertin's "ace card" was the emerging successful plan for a June 1894 Sorbonne Congress, one significantly better organized and far more widely publicized than the first Congress in 1892. He was right, of course, and the 79 delegates to the second Congress did indeed unanimously vote for a revived Olympic Games. It may be that Coubertin's second American visit so alarmed him that this already workaholic redoubled his efforts during the early months of 1894. And so, in this restricted sense, his 1893 American journey was successful.

Notes

1. John J. MacAloon. *This Great Symbol. Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of The Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 164.
2. Coubertin's USA and Canadian cross-continental odyssey is described in his 1890 *Universités Transatlantiques* (Paris: Librairie Hachete et Cie, 379 pages).
3. *Ibid*, pages 363-364.
4. John Lucas, *The Modern Olympic Games* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1980), p. 33.
5. "C'était l'incompréhension totale, absolue qui commençait." See Pierre de Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques* (Lausanne, Switzerland: Bureau International de Pédagogic Sportive 1931), p. 9.
6. See *Bulletin Du Comité International Jeux Olympiques*, 1, number 1 (Juillet, 1894), 9; also Coubertin's *Une campagne de Vingt-et-un ans 1887-1908* (Paris: Librairie de L'Education Physique, 1909), p. 90.
7. See Coubertin's essay in *Les Sports Athlétiques*, 172 (13 Juillet 1893), 2-4, as reproduced in Norbert Müller, *Pierre de Coubertin Textes Choisis*, Tome II

(Zurich: Weidmann, 1986), pages 99-103. Also, see Lucas, *The Modern Olympic Games*, p. 32.

8. See Coubertin's "Allocution prononcée en 1893...", in *Bulletin du CIO*, 17 (Septembre, 1949), 13.

9. Theodore Cook, "A Foreward as to origins," in *The Fourth Olympiad. Being the Official report of the Olympic Games of 1908* (London: British Olympic Association, 1908), p. 16.

10. For a brief biography, see John Lucas, "Man with a mission - William Milligan Sloane," *The Olympian USA*, 4 (September, 1977), 15, 21; also Lucas, "Professor William Milligan Sloane: Father of the United States Olympic Committee," in *Reflections in Umfeld der Sportgeschichte Festschrift für Horst Ueberhorst* (Andreas Luh: Edgar Beckers, Hrsq., 1991), pages 230-242.

11. See *Proceedings of the International Congress of Education of the World's Columbian Exposition*, July 25-28, 1893. Under the charge of the National Education Association of the United States (New York: NEA, 1894), pages 11, 89.

12. Coubertin, *Olympic Memoirs*. Translated from French by Geoffroy de Navacelle (Lausanne: CIO 1979), p. 39. Originally published 1931.

13. Coubertin's paraphrase of Monsignor Keane can be found in E. Seilliere, *Un Artisan D'Energie Française-Pierre de Coubertin* (Paris: Henri Didier, 1917, pages 44-45; also Louis Callebat, *Pierre de Coubertin* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1988), pages 142-143; MacAloon's *This Great Symbol*, page 164 discusses Msgr. Keane; lastly, see Coubertin's *Souvenirs*, pages 89-98 (endnote 14).

14. Coubertin, *Souvenirs d'Amérique et de Grèce* (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1897), p. 48.

15. There are numerous instances in 19th century America where the word *Olympic* appears in conjunction with sporting and social clubs and societies, edifices and parks, indeed, even sport festivals. The San Francisco Olympic Club, an example of this word association, was established in 1860, three years before Pierre de Coubertin's birth. For the best general discussion on use of the word *Olympic* before 1896, see Karl Lennartz, *Kenntnisse und Vorstellungen von Olympia, 393-1896*, Cologne, 1974. Editors' note. In his memoirs, Coubertin recounted an incident, both humorous and irksome to him, which related to San Francisco and still another version of capitalizing on the word *OLYMPIC*. In his nostalgic reminiscences of his attendance at the 1896 Games in Athens, Coubertin mentioned that he had been approached by an American lady in attendance who, after offering him her congratulations, smilingly told him: "I have already watched Olympic Games." "Really!" said Coubertin, "and where was that?" "In San Francisco," she said. "They were beautiful. Caesar was there." The absurd nature of this statement, at least to Coubertin, prompted him to reflect later that Olympic renditions of this nature were: "A reconstitution, a pageant, a show of the kind the Hippodrome in the avenue l'Alma, or London's Olympia were in the habit of putting on in those far off days . . ." See Pierre de Coubertin, *Olympic Memoirs* (translated from the original French by Geoffrey de Navacelle), Published by the I.O.C., Lausanne, 1979, p. 6.

16. See André Senay and Robert Hervet, *Monsieur De Coubertin* (Paris: S.E.S., 1956), p. 19.

17. *The New York Times*, November 27, 1893, p. 1.

18. Sloane, quoted in *Report of the American Olympic Committee 1920*, p. 77.

19. Robert Korsgaard interviewed Kirby. See the former's doctoral dissertation "A History of the AAU," Columbia University, 1952, p. 183. Also "Gustavus Kirby in the Hall of Fame," *Amateur Athlete*, 25 (January, 1954), 10, 22; Kirby's "World-wide influence of Olympic Games," in E. Dana Caulkins, *Aims and Methods of School Athletics* (New York: Wingate Foundation, 1932), 67; Kirby's "Reminiscences," in *Amateur Athlete*, 9 (December, 1938), 4, 24, 39, and in Kirby's "This Broken-Time Question," *Amateur Athlete*, 18 (September, 1947), 8-9.
20. Gustavus Town Kirby, *I Wonder Why?* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1954), pages 30-31.
21. Coubertin, *Un campagne...*, p. 92.
22. See *New York Tribune*, December 1, 1893, p. I, and December 5, 1893, p. 7; also three full pages in *The New York Times*, December 1, 1893, pages 1-3. *Outing* magazine, volume 23 (January, 1894), page 71, commented: "Princeton outplayed Yale at almost every point." For more, see *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times*, 126 (November 25, 1893), 613.
23. Coubertin, "The Re-establishment of the Olympic Games," *The Chautauquan*, 19 (September, 1894), 699.
24. Coubertin quote located in Bill Henry, *An Approved History of the Olympic Games* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1948), p. 45.