

The Greek Prime Minister has renewed his enchanting proposal that the Olympic Games should be returned to their original home. In his letter to Lord Killanin, Mr. Constantine Karamanlis invoked the conventional pictures about the Games: "pure Olympic ceremonial... the austere and sober athletic spirit... the appealing concept of the game for the game's sake." Forty British MPs have signed a motion supporting his proposal.

What god, what hero, what man shall I loudly praise? Zeus the President of the International Olympic Committee, Heracles, who founded the Games, and Fred Bioggs for his 27 baskets in the basketball final? Or

course the ancient Olympics are the oldest and most sporting athletics meeting in the world. But some of the guff at present written about them errs on the side of romance rather than realism. Human frailty was not absent from Olympia.

Chauvinism intruded even in that golden age. For example, one year Elis and Athens combined to exclude the Spartan squad, supposedly on religious grounds, in much the same way that modern nations combine to exclude others or boycott the modern Games.

It is true that the ancient Olympics like the modern were nominally strictly amateur. The winners received only the glory and chaplets of wild olive. All competitors were required to weed the track and clear the stadium before the races. The facilities provided for the athletes were minimal, washing facilities inadequate, and lavatories behind the nearest bush.

However, an Olympic winner was made for life, in much the same way that a modern Russian or American super-star need trouble himself or herself about nothing except sport. An athlete who had won at Olympia could expect high rewards and claim a large pension from his native city, as well as an Ode from Pin-



dar if he was lucky.

There were other lucrative perks. During Roman imperial rule a city in Asia Minor is said to have offered an Olympic winner 30,000 drachmas to enter its local sports. At that time a Roman soldier was paid between 250 and 300 drachmas a year.

The host nation did well out of the Games also. The oligarchy of rich gentlemen farmers of Elis, who ran the show had power to fine offenders. Anybody who broke the sacred truce was fined at the rate of two minae per hoplite.

In 480 the great Theogenes, having won the boxing, scratched from the final of the pankration (kicking and hitting were allowed; biting and gouging were illegal; umpires stood by with rods ready to flog any athlete who broke the rules). He was summoned before the stewards and ordered to pay a fine of one talent to Olympian Zeus—a diplomatic euphe-

mism for themselves.

He was also ordered to pay one talent to the other finalist, Euthymus "because it seemed to them that it was only to spite him that Theogenes had entered for the boxing". Theogenes paid his fine to the authorities (he had to, if he wanted ever to compete at Olympia again), but came to a disreputable private arrangement with Euthymus that his part of the fine should be remitted on condition that Theogenes did not enter for the boxing at the next Olympics.

The ancient Olympics because of the penury or greed of the Olympic committee, on occasions had to invite commercial sponsorship. For example, King Herod of Judea, distinctly a non-Greek, was made president of the Games to 12 BC to help them through a particularly sticky financial patch. King Philip II of Macedon built impressive monuments.

The admirable Herodus Atticus, a wealthy Roman born in Athens, built an elaborate water supply and sanitation system at last in the second century BC.

Conditions for athletes and spectators at Olympia were not Elysian but hellish. Epictetus the philosopher drew a stoic moral from them: "True, there are hardships and difficulties in life. Are they not to be found

even at Olympia? Don't you get baked by the sun there? Don't you get crushed by the crowds? Don't you find it impossible to get a bath? Don't you get soaked whenever it rains? Don't you have an overdose of noise, of shouting, and of exasperation? Yet you steel your heart and put up with it all because think that the spectacle makes it worth while."

It is regrettable to have to report it but there was a good deal of cheating in the ancient Olympics. Lucian

Running in the Games Orsippus dropped his shorts and gained a little speed to win the sprint.

notes that pankratiasts were called Lions' because of the amount of biting they did. Sostratus of Sicily, three times victor at Olympia was famous for his finger-breaking trick. The word for gouging (which pankratiasts were not supposed to do) was the ordinary Greek word for to dig made into a compound so that it means to gouge alongside the other chan'. No Greek pankratiast ever gouged; they all, continually gouged in retaliation.

In spite of romantic modern rhetoric the ancient Olympics were not the apotheosis of sporting amateurism as practised by gentlemen (and one could raise a question mark about them too).

Nevertheless they did have some good ideas. Any woman caught at the Games or even on the opposite side of the River Alpheus was removed by being thrown down the cliffs of Mount Typhaeum. The ancient Games

consisted only of foot-races the pentathlon (which included the discus and javelin throwing), the 200 metre sprint, the standing long jump and wrestling. During the seventh century BC boxing, chariot-races, horse-races and the pankration were introduced. So there were no ridiculous team sports or events that depended on the opinions of judges. From 720 BC onwards athletes competed naked after Orsippus dropped his shorts and gained a little speed to win the sprint.

By all means let us return the Olympics to Greece but let us not suppose with the starry-eyed Baron Pierre de Coubertin that they exemplified nothing but the noble and chivalrous character of athletics."

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