

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

As Olympics End, a Look at How They Began

John Stepling · Thursday, August 9th, 2012

A few disparate thoughts as the Olympics descended on us. The games of Dow Chemical, McDonalds, and British Petroleum. The games of UK swat teams on neighborhood roofs. The games of forced evictions.

But anyway....

The “father” of the modern Olympics is Pierre de Coubertin. Born to parents Baron Charles Louis Frédy, Baron de Coubertin and Marie–Marcelle Gigault de Crisenoy, in 1863.

Pierre’s father was a royalist and dilettante painter, whose themes ran to the Roman Catholic Church and the royal family.

Pierre developed an interest in education, fueled by a visit to England where he met Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School. Arnold was a believer in the morally edifying effects of athletics. He was also an aristocrat and saw sport as somehow a strengthener of character for the nation’s future rulers.



Pierre never really found his calling in education, but he did, amid a lurid romanticizing of ancient Greece, come to envision a revival of the games of ancient Olympia..(in 776 BC). For de Coubertin, this was a vision of the ruling class...”amateur athletes”... recreating a spirit of sacred truce and elemental well being.

The first games of the modern Olympiad were in 1896.

In 1980, a man already a force for the IOC, became the official head. Antonio Samaranch. Grandee of Spain, supporter of Franco, thief, and pal of King Juan Carlos.

Here is a small bit of history from [Andrew Jennings](#) (who has written extensively on Samaranch....)

“Samaranch deserted from the Army of the Spanish Republic in 1937 and joined the fascist rebels, led by General Franco. After they won the civil war, backed by Hitler and Mussolini, he ingratiated himself with Franco’s daughter Carmen.

In 1956 Samaranch was pictured in his fascist uniform at a ceremony mourning fascist ‘martyrs.’ Note the Olympic-style flaming torches in the background. (The Olympic torch relay was invented by Adolf Hitler’s spin-doctors for the 1936 Games. Now it belongs to Coca-Cola.)

In the 1960s, again wearing his fascist uniform, Samaranch was shaking hands with the dictator. In 1967 he was sworn in at quasi-religious ceremony as Franco’s Sports Minister.

Days later he repeated his loyalty pledge surrounded by fascist goons wearing regulation blue shirts. Samaranch never missed a chance to grovel to Franco and wore his blue shirt at yet another fascist ceremony in 1974.”



The truth is, Samaranch encouraged large scale theft. IOC members provided Samaranch with a lot of loyalty in return for the money they skimmed.

None of this is going to matter much to the millions glued in front of their TVs. People will post on Facebook, or text friends, or whatever....” I hate beach volleyball, its so-o-o dumb”, or “I love those swimmers, they’re so cute”...or whateverthefuckever. I turned on fencing yesterday. I had fenced as a teen and always loved the ritual, the grace and discipline of the sport. It was a sort of refuge from the commercial hysteria of big money sports. It also retained something of its austere origins, an almost monk like minimalist meditative dimension. To my horror, I found crowds doing the “wave,” flashing lights and loud vulgar MCs brought straight from Vegas. The fencers themselves (I caught some of the sabre semi finals) still had a bit of the old style, but mostly they yelled and screamed — unheard of to my teachers — and the entire sense of the ritualistic monasterial beauty I remembered had been replaced with the pathological need to make stupid and available for mass consumption. It may as well have been the WCW.



Now, I see there is a lurking sort of contradiction here....my nostalgia for the rarefied gentlemanly art of fencing, which one could accuse as elitist. I think, however, its more a nostalgia for the skills that required an art. It should never have been a sport anyway. Its not really a sport, now. To get into this further would mean an entire treatise on the nature of “sport” — and that’s a bit beyond me today.

White water canoeing? Where you have to build the course and build rapids...? Beach volleyball? I don’t know, honestly, if team sports should even be in the Olympics. But then, I don’t really think we need the Olympics at all. Not the Samaranch structured spectacle of global finance — the nationalist spittle flying from a million open mouths as they cheer one or another “representative of their country” toward victory. That half of the Qatar weight lifting team is nationalized, and originally from Bulgaria, that three Nigerian basketball players have never set foot in Nigeria, that a good amount of money is paid to keep the poor out of sight during the weeks of media attention.....no, I think it’s just not needed. Better to have young men return to apprentice themselves to fencing masters — or learn skills nobody will ever pay you a lot to perform. Maybe that doesn’t exist anymore. I can dream, though.

Even if it doesn’t, the opening Boyle-directed spectacle was enough to keep me away this time around.



Images, top to bottom: Samaranch at center; de Coubertin; Samaranch kneeling with Franco standing; historic fencing; the Queen and entourage at the London 2012 Opening Ceremonies.

This entry was posted on Thursday, August 9th, 2012 at 5:06 am and is filed under [Film](#), [Discourse](#), [Lifestyle](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.

