

THE OLYMPIC GAMES

By JOHN KIERAN

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After a double gap in the schedule due to World War II, the Olympic Games are to be resumed in 1948; the locale, London. Following the ancient order, the modern Olympic Games ordinarily are held every four years, but the last Olympic Games were at Berlin in 1936. Gunfire erased the 1940 and 1944 games, just as earlier gunfire in World War I erased the 1916 games. The

interruption of the modern Olympic schedule on account of war furnishes a curious commentary on the progress of civilization. In the days of early Greece the wars among rival Greek cities and belligerent states were suspended when it came time to hold the Olympic Games. Athletes and spectators from all parts of Greece, friend or enemy, were allowed to go to and from the games under the safe conduct of the ordained Olympic truce. The Greeks had a word for this Olympic truce: *Hieromenia*. We have no modern word for it because mankind now has reached the cultural stage

where we refuse to halt our organized slaughters even temporarily; the wars must go on and the Olympic Games must be put off. Thus we note the advance of civilization down the ages.

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The background of the ancient Olympic Games was religious and cultural. Archeologists tell us that the great temple of Hera and some other shrines in the Olympic enclosure date back beyond the earliest recorded Olympic athletic competition, which was in 776 B. C. At the height of the ancient games the competition in various sports never extended beyond five days, whereas the religious shrines were in use all through the year and there were sacred fires there that were never allowed to die out. The huge statue of Zeus in the Olympic enclosure was carved by Phidias. Herodotus read parts of his history to Olympic spectators and Pindar celebrated some of the Olympic victors in Greek verse. There was dramatic, artistic and literary as well as athletic competition in the Olympic enclosure.

The ancient Olympic Games ran on for more than eleven centuries. When "the glory that was Greece" faded, "the grandeur that was Rome" took charge and continued the Olympic

program under new management. But the decline and fall of the Roman Empire carried the Olympic Games down in the general collapse. The games were halted by decree of Emperor Theodosius I in 394 A. D. It didn't matter much by that time. The games had long lost their religious and cultural significance and had fallen to the low estate of being part of the program of "bread and circuses" that Roman emperors had been tossing to their slaves and hirelings.

There is no religious background to the modern Olympic Games unless a belief that international peace can be approached through mutual acquaintance and better understanding among nations can be described as a religion. It was definitely as an educational and cultural venture, as a contribution toward international friendship, that the modern Olympic Games were organized and set in motion at Athens in 1896 by Baron Pierre de Coubertin and his associates. Baron de Coubertin was not an athlete; he was a French educator. He believed that the better the peoples of the world knew one another, the better chance there would be of keeping the peace. Since it was to be a campaign of education, it should begin with the young. Because youngsters and sports have gone together since time when the memory of man runneth not to the contrary, Baron de Coubertin decided that his best method of education would be the

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