

08 APR 2024

PIERRE DE COUBERTIN SPEAKS TO THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN PENTATHLON



George Hirthler is an Executive Board member of the International Pierre de Coubertin Committee (CIPC). He is also author of *The Idealist*, the fictionalised biography of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, and the creator of Coubertin Speaks, a website dedicated to Coubertin's ideas.

In this piece below, Hirthler interviews Baron Pierre de Coubertin and began by asking the Baron a pointed question:

GH: "Baron de Coubertin, as you're aware, the Modern Pentathlon, which you created for the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games, is changing. The UIPM is replacing its equestrian competition with an obstacle course, a much more contemporary sport that's become very popular based on a television format that is broadcast in 160 countries. How do you feel about this change of tradition?"

"A lot of people considered me too traditional, too rooted in the past, but I always had my eye on the future. Obviously, I led the resurrection of the Olympic Games to unite the world in friendship

and peace through sport—and that has always been a future goal, which we're still celebrating today.

"Even when I invented the Modern Pentathlon, I was looking to the future! Yes, the idea was rooted in the life and death challenges a Napoleonic courier would face carrying a message back to headquarters, but even then I was mixing together sports that weren't traditionally aligned.

"I always said the modern pentathlete deserves the title of the complete athlete.

"In the invention of a five-event contest, I had my eye on the evolution of international sport and the growing need for athletes to master multiple disciplines. I wanted to provide an Olympic showcase for those rare individuals with the ability to ride, shoot, fence, swim and run at sustained levels of excellence across a successive set of challenges. And that's what I did - and that's why I always said the modern pentathlete deserves the title of the complete athlete."

GH: So are you surprised that UIPM is making these changes?

PdC: "Am I surprised the sport is changing and evolving with the times? Of course not. If you're familiar with my position on change, you'll know that in 1936, writing about the Olympic Movement overall, I spelled out my opinion, and I quote: 'In reality, there are almost always two forms of evolution in an institution: the evolution of appearances, and the evolution of the soul. The first tries to adapt to current trends, and changes according to the whims of fashion. The second remains as steadfast as the principles on which the institution is based.'

"That's true for the International Olympic Committee, which has recently evolved immensely through its Olympic Agenda 2020 reforms, and it is equally true of individual sports.

"As I see it, the evolution of the Modern Pentathlon was a modern necessity. The move from equestrian to an obstacle course speaks of change that is responsive to the times and yet protects the principles at the soul of the sport. Would you expect me to object to a sport that sought to broaden its audience by integrating an exciting, new discipline? Did you think I would protest the break with tradition, when I recognise that the obstacle course segment of the pentathlon would appeal to younger people? Did you think I would stand in the way of a sport that may draw on a broader pool of competitors, many of whom will be familiar with running the gamut through their military training? Oh no, I applaud the move and embrace it wholeheartedly."

GH: You seem to be very conversant in the issues at hand.

PdC: "Of course, I am. I keep an eye on all things Olympics. By the way, if you were paying attention, you would have noted that the Modern Pentathlon has been evolving all along. They became fully gender neutral and changed the whole format to a single day competition in the 1990s. They went to a laser pistol - a very progressive innovation - in the 2010s and managed to put all the events in a single sports complex at Rio 2016. So from my perspective, the obstacle course is a natural next step.

"And you know what I like about it? By its very nature, an obstacle course is unpredictable and that makes it exciting. Swinging from rings, climbing rope walls, scrambling under barriers, etc., makes every race a contest of full dexterity, judgement, strength, and speed. I love the fact that the typical course presents eight challenges. There's flexibility in the format which gives it remarkable prospects for the future. If I wasn't so damn old, I'd love to try it myself."

GH: Anything else, Baron?

PdC: "Well, I'm delighted that the equestrian edition will crown its final champions in Paris 2024,

and that Hollywood, I mean Los Angeles, will introduce the new obstacle edition of the Modern Pentathlon to the world. Nothing more appropriate. I see a great future ahead.

“And one final point: I love the word obstacle. It resonates with me because I spent my entire Olympic career overcoming obstacles. Putting the Olympic Games on the world map was like running an obstacle course for 50 years.”

For the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics, Modern Pentathlon will replace horse jumping with obstacle racing.