



The modern pentathlon

An undervalued Olympic sport

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When the French philanthropist Baron de Coubertin realised that his Olympic idea was not always understood by military men all over the world he introduced on the Olympic programme at Stockholm (1912) a multiple competition which was quite consciously cut out for officers and which because of its versatility he called the “modern pentathlon”.

This event consisted of cross-country riding over a distance of 5000 metres, 300 metres swimming, épée fencing, pistol shooting and 4000 metres cross-country running.

American Olympic historian John Grombach explains the rationale for such a fascinating and unusual compendium of events.

“The modern pentathlon, which should have been called the ‘military pentathlon’, was based on the function of the dramatic military courier or aide-de-camp who in the glorious Napoleonic days or even as late as 1914 was often called upon to deliver on the battlefield a message or an order that might mean victory for his country. The aide-de-camp or courier, before the advent of radio,

had to be able to ride a strange horse over hill and dale and over obstacles of every kind and, when his horse became exhausted or was shot from under him, had to proceed on foot by running cross-country ; and when he came to a stream or river he had to cross it by swimming, and if he encountered an enemy he had to shoot his way through with his pistol; and then, at close quarters, he had to fight any remaining enemy with his sword, if he was finally to deliver the message.”¹

At Stockholm competing for the USA in the modern pentathlon was George Patton who was later to become a brilliant, flamboyant if controversial general. Martin Blumenson in his magnificent study of Patton’s correspondence described the young American military student in athletic terms—“Horseman, hunter, racer, steeplechaser... polo player.. and above all, soldier.”²

On board the “S. S. Finland” crossing the Atlantic to Antwerp and disembarkation for the Stockholm athletic arenas, Patton ran two miles on deck each morning, did shooting and fencing practice and had an adapted swimming work-out :

“... he was with the swimming team in a canvas tank, 20 by 8 feet in size, 4 feet deep, where a swimmer was roped to a ship's bolt and swam against the rope, remaining in one place in the water but getting a great deal of exercise.”³

Patton, despite shooting a practice score of 197 out of 200 on 4th July, had two inexplicable misses in the competition on 7th July.

His shooting scores were :

10	10	10	9	8
10	10	10	0	0
10	10	9	9	8
10	10	10	9	7

This gave him a total of 169 out of 200 and took him to 21st place in a field of 42.⁴

On 8th July Patton was sixth fastest in the swim and had his first look at the cross-country riding steeplechase course. The fencing took up two days (9th and 10th July) and Patton came third. 11th July saw him come third in the cross-country steeplechase, and in the final event, the cross-country run, despite collapsing at the finish, he was again in third place. His shooting lapses however resulted in his overall place being fifth. He later was to comment on this first modern pentathlon :

“The high spirit of sportsmanship and generosity manifested throughout speaks volumes for the character of the officers of the present day. There was not a single incident of a protest or any unsportsmanlike quibbling or fighting for points which I regret to say marred some of the other civilian competitions at the Olympic Games. Each man did his best and took what fortune sent like a true soldier, and at the end we all felt more like good friends and comrades than rivals in a severe competition, yet this spirit of friendship in no manner detracted from the zeal with which all strove for success.”⁵

By 1920 the pentathlon pistol shooting had been standardised and

“... consisted of 20 timed-fire shots, in four series of five, fired at turning silhouette targets at 25 metres with any type of .22 calibre pistol.”⁶

While Sweden has had a most illustrious record in the Olympic Games with nine individual champions from 1912 to 1976 inclusive, the Hungarian Andras Balczó has been the most successful of all modern



pentathletes with three gold and two silver medals.

Modern pentathlon today

Modern pentathlon is the finest test of the all-round sportsman. The pentathlete must possess athletic versatility and has to resolve a happy balance in his physical attributes. As a marksman he must have an iron grip, a steady hand, a capacity to stay “cool” in a stressful environment, and excellent eyesight.

But the slowness and deliberate quality of pistol shooting is totally foreign to the quicksilver, swashbuckling, dancing grace and fleetness of foot required by the fencer. The strong legs of the cross-country runner used to powering along, fighting and overcoming the resistance of cross-country running courses, must accommodate themselves to the flanks of a horse that need sensitive, squeezing pressures. The hard hands of the shooter must be transformed into gentle, soothing hands careful not to pull at a horse's bit. The stamina and staying power of the runner have to live in the same body as

the sprinting speed and rapid movement of the swimmer.

In each event there is an "ideal" target performance called the "bogey". This target score is 1000 points and the pentathlete can score higher or lower than the 1000 points depending on the level of performance. Pvciaak-Peciak of Poland won the gold medal at the Olympic Games in Montreal, 1976, with a score of 5520.

The riding event is a combination of cross-country riding and show-jumping. The organisers of the competition provide the horses that are trained specially over a period of one year prior to the competition. On the first day of the pentathlon the athletes draw horses by lots and are allowed a short period of time (20 minutes) to practise with the horse and get used to a mount that they have never met before. A contestant can draw a good, bad or indifferent horse and the first day's scores can be dramatically influenced by the type of horse assigned in the draw. However, specific regulations go some way to protect the competitor.

"The horses must be selected with the utmost care in order to secure equality between them. They must all be capable of completing the course, twice in a day, without disobediences and with few faults, if any, for time or over obstacles."

The riding course stretches over about 800 metres with fifteen fences, jumps and obstacles. The maximum height for any fence is 120 cm. A time limit has to be maintained (two minutes or better) and so time faults, knock-downs and refusals can all mean points subtracted from the ideal score. The maximum score of 1100 points comes from a "clear" round completed in less than two minutes.

In fencing the weapon is the electric épée and each competitor has to take on every other athlete in the competition in a long series of "one-hit-wins" bouts. Instead of the foil, which would mean a complicated system of officiating to see if certain-zones of the body are hit, the épée is relatively simple with a strike on any part of one's opponent winning that match. The "bogey" is to win 70% of the bouts.

In shooting the contestants fire 20 times with a .22 pistol at a target 25 metres away. The target, however, is not stationary and snap shooting is required. This means that the

target swings round for three seconds and away for seven. The athlete fires 20 times. The perfect score is 200 (Charles Leonard of the USA shot 200 at the Olympic Games in Berlin, 1936). The "bogey" score is 194 and each point outside this number adds on or takes off 22 points from 1000 points.

The swimming event is over 300 metres in an indoor 50 metre Olympic swimming pool. The standard time is 3:54 with 8 points added or subtracted for each second above or below the "bogey" clocking.

The final activity is a cross-country run over 4000 metres with the "bogey" at 14:15. Slower or faster times alter the score by 3 scoring points a second.

The modern pentathlon historically has had to survive various pressures among which have been a recommendation to omit the equestrian component and set up more sophisticated points scoring systems.

Dr. Stabenow (GER) explains :

"Because of the increasing difficulty in procuring horses for this event, it has also been suggested to do away with riding altogether and to substitute rowing in a skiff, or cycling. But already in the 1930's disappointing experiences were made with the so-called "B-pentathlon" when cross-country motor-cycling was substituted for riding.

The (traditional) placing system was simple. The best in each individual event was awarded 0 point, the second got 1 point, the third 2, and so forth. This system had, however, the disadvantage that a particularly good performance was not taken into account. The best swimmer for instance, was awarded 0 point if he swum the distance of 300 metres in five minutes; however, the competitor finishing second was also awarded one point if he covered the same distance in about eight minutes.

*For this reason, in the post-war years one has done away with the valuation of the placing and the point system was introduced."*⁸

A comparative study : 1948 and 1976

It is useful to make a comparison of athletic performances at London (1948) and Montreal (1976). The riding event has been altered since 1948 and is thus not included. The



followed by 12:26.50, 12:29.70, 12:32.20, 12:45.80, 12:47.60, 12:51.50 and 12:52.30. A margin of difference of around two minutes 9/10.

Two competitors at the Olympic Games in London have been largely responsible for the development, expansion and popularisation of the modern pentathlon. Sweden's Captain W. Grut won the gold medal in 1948, is now the Secretary General of the International Modern Pentathlon and Biathlon Union and has worked with unflagging energy to promote modern pentathlon.

Also at London a Hungarian, Lieutenant F. Hegedus, despite being disqualified in the riding (thus scoring no points) managed to finish overall in twelfth place. His greatest contribution to the modern pentathlon however is his definitive and exhaustive text which is now the major international text book on the event.¹¹

Future development

fencing is not considered, as placings in any Olympic competition depend on the level and quality of the fencers participating. However, objective norms can be applied in the shooting, swimming and running sections.

At London the best shooting score was 194 and the average score of the top eight competitors was fractionally over 191. Montreal had a top shooting score of 198 and the average score of the top eight competitors was 195.75—an improvement in the average top scores of more than 5 points over a period of thirty years.

In the area of swimming greater advances have been made. At London the fastest 300 metre freestyle was 4:17. The next best seven times were 4:21.1, 4:24, 4:25.7, 4:29, 4:33, 4:38.9 and 4:40.3. At Montreal the top swimming time was 3:13.610 followed by 3:15.800, 3:20.130, 3:20.810, 3:23.660, 3:23.770, 3:24.250 and 3:25.470. At a glance one can see that the times have improved by a massive 70 seconds on average.

However the greatest advances have been made in the area of the 4000 metre cross-country run. Fastest time at London was 14:09.9, followed by 14:21.9, 14:24.6, 15:07.5, 15:08.7, 15:13.7, 15:22.5 and 15:28.9. At Montreal the quickest time was 12:09.50,

What does the future hold for this sport that has “charisma” and a “Beau Geste atmosphere.”¹²

One of the major problems is the time consuming nature of the necessary training to prepare adequately for the demands of the five activities in the modern pentathlon. For example the five-man USA squad that prepared for the Olympic Games in Montreal were averaging forty hours of training a week, eleven months in the year.¹³

Nevertheless with forty-nine affiliated national associations the International Modern Pentathlon Union is in a strong position to campaign for all manner of development programmes. Their international biathlon competitions in running and swimming have been most successful and now the Modern Pentathlon Association of Great Britain has launched a well thought out biathlon badge award scheme with various levels from grade IV to gold standard.¹⁴ An exciting dimension here is that such awards are open to women and indeed women now compete in their own modern pentathlon competitions. One looks forward excitedly to the day when women will be able to compete in this sport at the Olympic Games.

Undoubtedly the greatest advances will come when the “elitest tag” is removed from the

modern pentathlon, While it would not be easy, professional physical educators and athletics coaches should take a hard and tough look at school sports and ask themselves whether it is not time for philosophical changes to take place. For example, in top-level international swimming it is normal to be "retired" at the age of 20 ! Yet take the case of Australian pentathlete Peter Macken who competed at Montreal at the age of 38—and that was his fifth Olympic Games ! Or the case of Colonel Bengt Ljungquist (not a pentathlete, it is true) who fenced at Berlin, London, Helsinki and Melbourne and then "retired" from fencing (at the age of 44) to take up international show jumping !

An experimental programme in the modern pentathlon was begun at the University of Otago, New Zealand, in 1977 with students majoring in physical education. Five men and two women took part and it is hoped that from such small beginnings the modern pentathlon will be introduced into schools. The only dimension that had to be altered (for reasons of safety) was shooting where Smith and Wesson and Crossman target air-pistols were used.

If physical education prepares one for life then the modern pentathlon has much to offer. In riding there is a recreational activity that can span a lifetime. Fencing can be a new skill-learning situation for "skill hungry" students.

Fencing and shooting have the excitement and thrills of all-out action : an appropriate trying-out ground for frontier spirit ? Swimming is marvellous exercise and running (with the tremendous following for jogging) can set a positive attitude towards physical fitness that can dramatically improve the personal quality of healthy living.

As one New Zealand student remarked at the conclusion of *her* introduction to the modern pentathlon :

"It was the first time in my life I was able to play all the roles I had ever wanted—Princess Anne (riding), Douglas Fairbanks Jr. (fencing), Mark Spitz (swimming), Starsky and Hutch (shooting) and John Walker (running)."

But, the best testament to the modern pentathlon comes from Wille Grut :

"Modern pentathlon does develop qualities in human beings : courage (riding), tactical mind

and alertness (fencing), cool nerves when in a tight corner (shooting) and excellent physical stamina (running and swimming)."

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- ⁴ **Ibid.**, p. 230.
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- ⁶ J. Grombach, **op. cit.**, p. 109.
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