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WHY THE THOROUGHLY ‘MODERN’ PENTATHLON NEEDS TO BECOME A 90- MINUTE WONDER

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This article was written by Alan Hubbard and first appeared on insidethegames.biz.

To some the modern pentathlon may sound as if it has been plucked from *Strictly Come Dancing*, rather like the American smooth or the Boston two-step.

To the more discerning it is the ultimate sporting test in strength, skill, endurance and tactical nous, that is the very essence of Olympism.

It has been so since 1912 when the founder of the Modern Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, whose brainchild it was, first introduced it in Stockholm.

It was then a multi-day five discipline event – running, shooting, swimming, riding and fencing – for some 84 years until the requirements of television for a more compact version of the sport saw it

condensed into a single day for Atlanta 1996.

Times change, and in the case of the mod pen, quite literally so. In order to survive as an Olympic event those who run the sport internationally are now proposing that it is concertinaed into - wait for it - just 90 minutes.

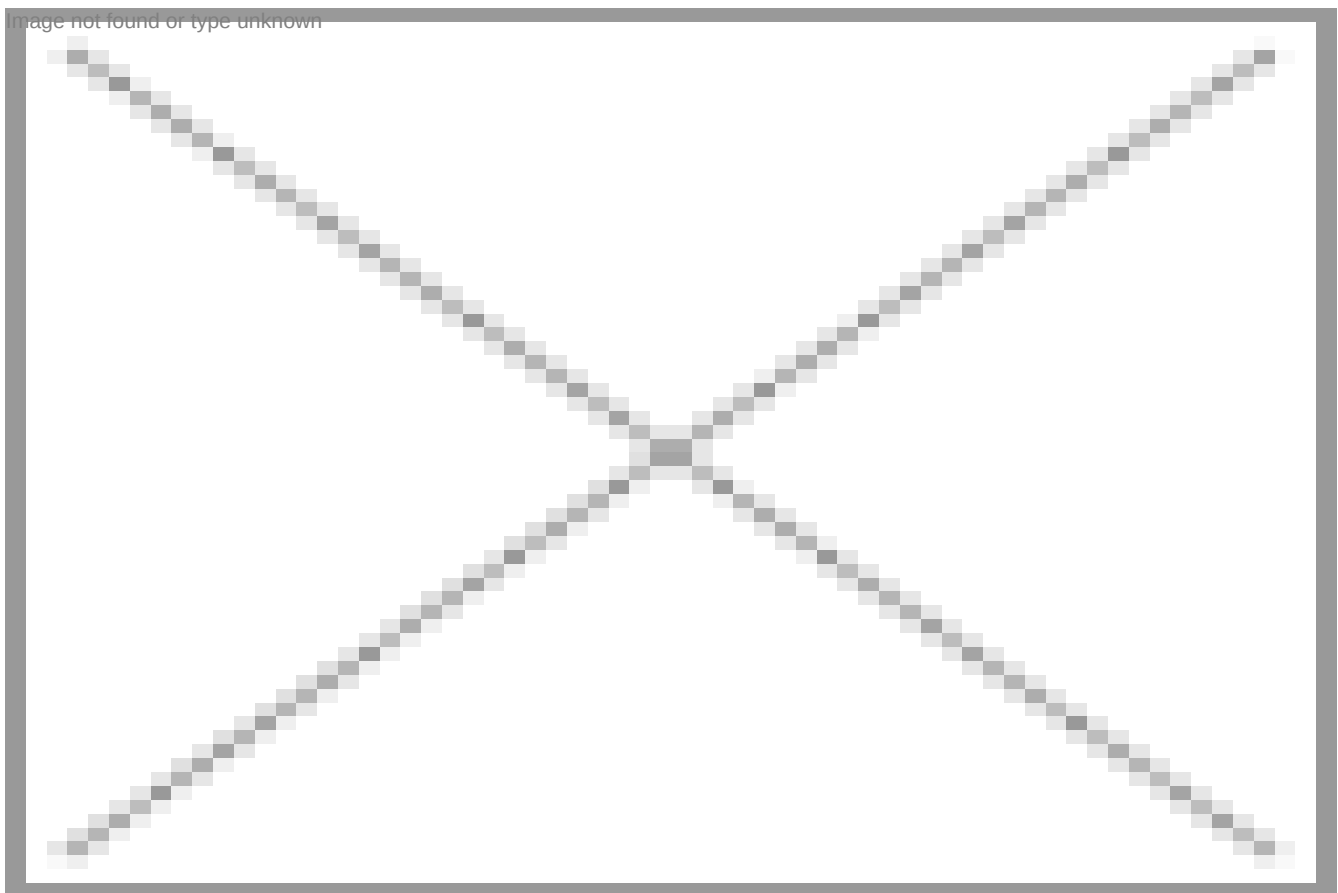
It sounds unbelievable - in fact virtually impossible - but the governing body believe it must be done in order to escape the anticipated Olympic cull that is likely to take place over the next four years.

There is British support for such revamping as modern pentathlon has brought a multitude of successes to Team GB and individual athletes in both male and female Olympic, world and European competitions over the years.

Now for Paris 2024 - and beyond to Los Angeles in 2028 - it is envisaged that 12 finalists will compete in the traditional events with running and shooting by laser (as introduced at London 2012) combined into a sort of summer biathlon.

To the aficionados this may seem a betrayal of De Coubertin's original concept but needs must when television drives, and as the competitors will tell you, it is better than nothing.

And nothing might well be the case unless modern pentathlon does, err, modernise, with both the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and television networks greedy for viewers.



They believe these viewers are now more attracted by shorter competitions in left-field activities - like skateboarding, climbing up walls in a gymnasium and wushu - which sounds more like a character in Aladdin than an Chinese martial art.

The one-day format will remain intact for Tokyo next year, should these Games take place, as we

hope they do with the COVID cloud still hanging over us.

After that the Executive Board of the International Modern Pentathlon Union (UIPM) has voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Paris plan.

They argue it is designed to raise the profile and popularity of the sport, which it may well do, although the ultimate aim is to ensure its survival at the Games after several attempts to remove it over the years - moves which would have the dear old Baron turning in his proverbial in Olympia.

The new format for a 90-minute modern pentathlon with an elimination system is designed to reduce not only the overall length of the competition but create a more dynamic sport with a continuous flow. It will be more "broadcast friendly".

It will also be a sustainable and cost-effective model for the future of the sport, they say.

On a personal note the modern pentathlon evokes memories for me of the wonderful event at Montreal 1976 when I watched GB's very own dashing White Sergeant, subsequently Captain, Jeremy "Jim" Fox lead his squad to glory, and Olympic gold - one of the nation's greatest triumphs at the Games.

For me, the sport has always been a reminder of a gentler, more romantic era before the pursuit of glory became suffused by greed, drugs, duplicity and mind-numbing reality television.

Ah yes, the great god TV. There was once an argument that modern pentathlon was unsuitable for the box. But to help make it more televisual, what was once a five-day test was compressed into one, played out between dawn and dusk.

In London, mod pen also pioneered laser shooting ahead of other gun disciplines, which controversially still employ real bullets.

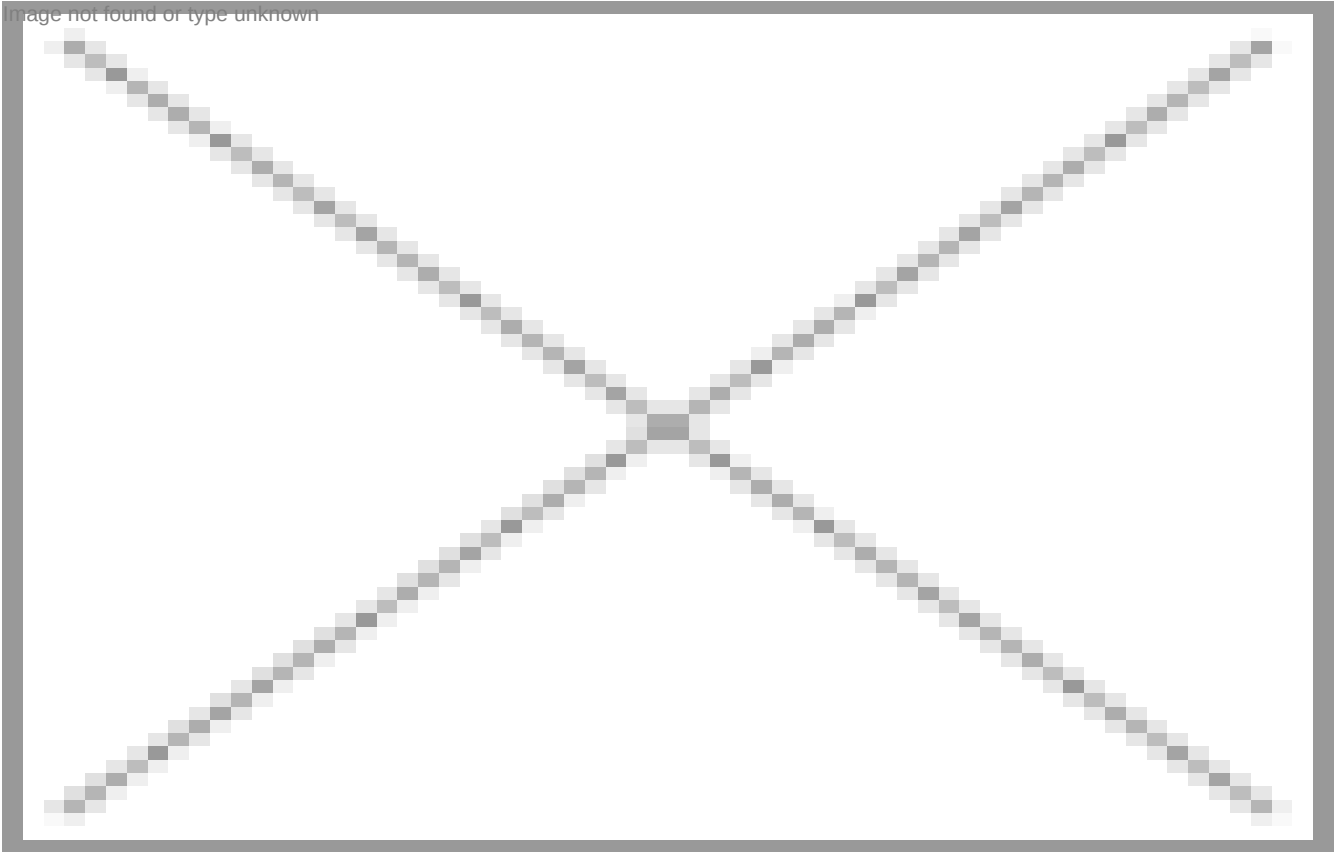
Despite these innovations and the popularity of the sport among emerging nations, apparently there are those at the IOC who sniffily perceive the modern pentathlon as old fashioned, and there is little doubt that its continued presence is threatened.

Britain is well represented internationally, too. Martin Dawe, a former competitor and team manager, is now vice-chair of Pentathlon GB and an Executive Board member of the body. He is not alone in underscoring the threat to the sport.

He points out that it is no longer largely the preserve of Eastern Europe having spread across all continents, notably to Asia and South America.

UIPM has also introduced a successful mixed relay event to the Youth Olympics. But is all this "modern" enough for the IOC?

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Olympic gold medallist Jim Fox is presented with his certificate from the World Olympians Association

One who hopes so is Fox, who has been at the forefront of the fight to preserve its Olympic status but now, alas, is confined to wheelchair.

Now 79, the old soldier who was arguably Britain's outstanding all-round sportsman is a victim of Parkinson's disease.

Fox competed at four Olympics and as well as his Montreal gold won a bronze at the World Championships in Mexico. He was national champion 10 times.

A fencing master who unearthed the roots of Russian cheating by exposing the Soviet Boris Onishchenko (who I labelled Disonischenko when he contrived to alter the tip of his épée to electronically register illegal points in Montreal), Fox was also a prolific cross-country runner, swimmer, marksman and horseman.

It is all the more tragic that such a sporting superman should have been struck down 24 years ago by an illness which attacks muscles and mobility - the same crippling condition that affects his famous namesake, the actor Michael J. Fox, and even targeted a more celebrated sporting contemporary from the 1970s, Muhammad Ali.

As Dawe says: "It is such an irony that Jim and Ali, two of the fittest most personable and virile young men sport has ever known, should both be struck down by this terrible disease."

Recently, Dawe and former GB competitor and team manager Dominic Mahoney visited Fox at his care home to present him with a certificate from the World Olympians Association which permits him to put the much-cherished OLY acronym after the OBE he already has.

Over the years Fox has become a close friend and there has never been any skirting around the subject of his crippling illness.

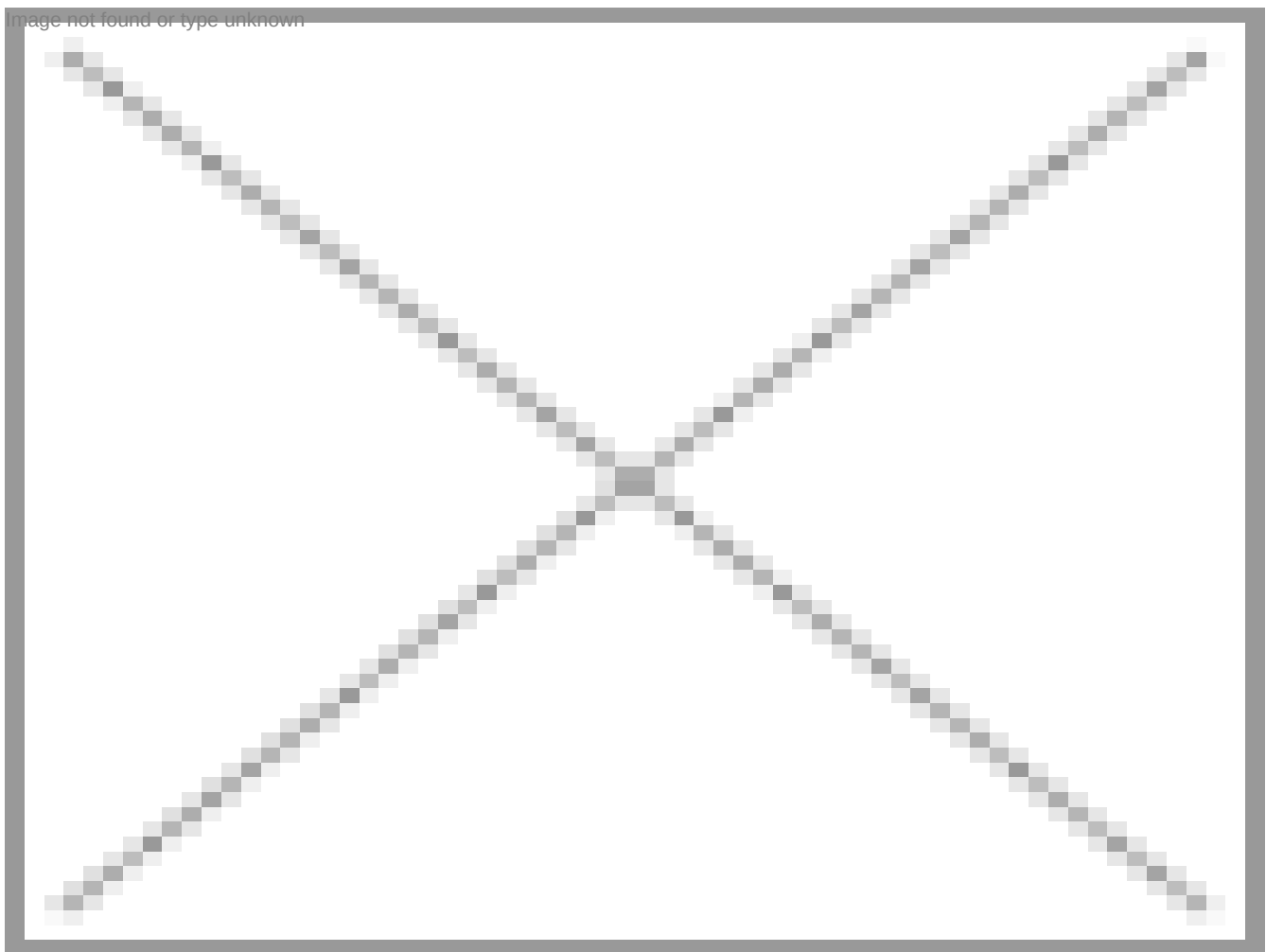
He once told me: "I always tell people up front what's wrong with me, I don't want them to think I'm pissed."

In Fox's case, the fact that he spurned self-pity for a vigorous, reborn self-belief has been spurred by the incentive to fight for the preservation of a pursuit that brought him so much fulfilment.

In a sporting world so disfigured by excess, Fox is well aware that modern pentathlon is regarded as something of an anachronism.

But he is angered by the real possibility that the ultimate test for any Olympian could be replaced on the Olympic stage by "Mickey Mouse sports".

"It is a disgrace that this should even be considered, an insult to Baron de Coubertin," he has said.



"The modern pentathlon has always been the very essence of what the Games should be about.

"But it makes me very sad to think the sport could be evicted. This must not happen."

Some years back, the late IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch suggested to a German

newspaper that the sport's days were numbered. Fox fired off a furious salvo to Lausanne.

It is believed that the Princess Royal, a fellow competitor in Montreal and an IOC member, also inserted a flea in the Presidential ear. A swift retraction followed.

Fox hopes the sport in which Britain has always had such a great tradition can entice more youngsters of both sexes.

For those who would like to join the "Keep Mod Pen" campaign I recommend a browse through *Modern Pentathlon, A Centenary History*, by Andy Archibald.

His final chapter concludes: "Nobody who knows anything about the modern sport can ever accuse modern pentathlon of being anachronistic.

"Every such charge against us has been patiently remedied and modern pentathlon remains in every way the most searching test of the sporting all-rounder."

Hear hear! Even if it means those who still evoke the Corinthian spirit of Olympus have to become 90-minute wonders.