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## Digging for Olympic Truth

Professor says Baron de Coubertin's role in Games' revival is a myth, and he knows where bodies are buried.

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ST. LOUIS — For more than 100 years, Baron Pierre de Coubertin of France has been glorified as the man who "invented" the modern Olympic Games.

It's not true, says a University of Florida professor.

An English physician and a gaggle of 19th century Greeks did more to revive the Games, among them an eccentric philanthropist whose body was buried — per his instructions — in Romania, Albania and Athens, according to David C. Young, a classics professor with a long standing interest in the Olympics.

De Coubertin, Young said, delivering the keynote address at a conference here last weekend on the import of the Games in Greece, was a "late-comer to the Olympic revival" who "succeeded in carrying out the ideas of these Olympic forefathers and took all the credit."

Young said afterward in an interview, "The stuff is controversial. I recognize it's controversial. But it's true."

Bob Barney, director emeritus of the Center for Olympic Studies at Canada's University of Western Ontario, said Monday, "It is true," adding, "This is not the first myth David Young has exploded."

In 1984, Young wrote a book documenting his claim there were no "amateur" athletes in the ancient Games. Young taught for 26 years at UC Santa Barbara before moving to Florida in 1989; he reads ancient and modern Greek and came to his study of the Games after establishing his expertise in the ancient Greek poet Pindar, who wrote about athletes at the Olympics.

With the Games in Athens in 2004 approaching, Young's case for the role of others preceding De Coubertin is likely to receive increasing attention, particularly with Greek authorities and Greek-Americans committed to highlighting connections between the ancient and modern Games.

The conference, organized by Michael Cosmopoulos, professor of Greek studies at the University of Missouri St. Louis, drew professors from Europe and North America as well as representatives of the Greek government from Athens and Washington.

In a book published in 1996, "The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival," Young first made his case for the English doctor, William Penny Brookes, as well as the enigmatic Greek businessman, Evangelis Zappas, and others, in-

cluding a Greek poet of the 1830s, Panagiotis Soutsos. The book took more than 10 years to research; it has received scant attention outside the relatively small circle of Olympic scholars.

In the 1830s, shortly after Greece had won its independence from Turkey, Soutsos published poems proposing a revival of the ancient Games as a means of sparking national spirit. The ancient Games began in 776 B.C. and were held, typically every four years, until the fourth century A.D.

The idea intrigued the wealthy Zappas. With his backing, the Greeks staged what Young called the first Zappas Olympiad in November 1859, in Athens. Brookes, after reading about the event in an English newspaper, sent 10 British pounds to be used as a prize for a running event, Young said.

Zappas died in 1865. But with his fortune, three more Zappas Olympiads would follow — in 1870, 1875 and 1888. The 1870 event, held in a renovated Panathinaikon stadium, the ancient facility near central Athens, drew a crowd estimated at 30,000 — a mark not matched until the 1924 Paris Games. The 2004 Games will feature the archery competition at the same stadium.

Brookes' interest in the Zappas Olympiad derived from his own push to revive the Olympics. In 1850, he had launched the Wenlock Olympian Games — dedicated to the "moral, physical and intellectual improvement" of the town, a notion that Young said clearly anticipates De Coubertin's far-reaching international Olympic ideals.

In 1889 Brookes and De Coubertin struck up a correspondence. In 1890 the baron paid the doctor a visit in England.

Upon returning to France, however, De Coubertin wrote there was "no longer any need to invoke memories of Greece and to seek encouragement of the past."

But by 1892, he had done a 180-degree turn. That fall, he presented the notion of an Olympic revival as a brilliant idea, and one that — as he claimed in his own 1908 book — was all his own.

In 1894, under De Coubertin's direction, the International Olympic Committee was formed. In 1896, the first modern Games under the direction of the IOC and the first IOC president, Demetrios Vikelas, a Greek, took place — in Athens.

Meantime, as his will prescribed, Zappas' body was first buried at a church in Romania. After four years, the will ordered, the body was to be dug up and decapitated; the skull was to be placed in Athens, at a new Olympic building, and the portion below the neck was to be interred at his native village in Albania.

The building, the Zappeion, now stands in central Athens, a short distance from the Panathinaikon stadium. Zappas' head is indeed entombed there, Young said.

"It isn't so much that I want credit," Young said. "I want the truth to be spread."