

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Italian *Olimpiadi Universitarie* of 1922: at the origins of the Fascist ideology of sport

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Abstract

University sport was less developed in Italy than in other European countries in the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in April 1922, students from the University of Rome organised a national multi-sport event, which they called the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* (University Olympic Games). Many eminent figures of the ruling class supported the initiative and thousands of undergraduates participated in the competitions. The *Olimpiadi Universitarie* also had an important international impact and facilitated the establishment of the International University Games, which were held from 1924 to 1939. The *Olimpiadi Universitarie* were based on a patriotic-educational concept of sport and played a significant role in spreading physical activities in Italian universities. Additionally, they promoted the idea of sport that in the following years would be accepted by the Fascist regime. The regime developed university sport enormously, but replaced the autonomous initiative of students with control from above.

Keywords: universities; students; sport and nationalism; sport and Fascism; rise of Fascism

Introduction

Historians have been studying Italian sport under Fascism for many years. Among other topics, studies have analysed the policies for promoting sport, the role of the organisations established by the Partito nazionale fascista (National Fascist Party – PNF), the ideology behind sports policy, the construction of sporting facilities, and the role of high-level athletes (see, for example, Dogliani 2000, 2008, Bacci 2002, Landoni 2016). The *ventennio* has drawn the attention of sport historians because in those years physical activities became a mass phenomenon. Fascists considered sport a tool to strengthen both the body and the character of citizens. Therefore, during the *ventennio* sport was one of the main elements of the nationalisation of the masses and the political authorities made every effort to promote it among Italians. The huge spread of physical activities, however, was due not only to the policies of the regime, but also to the rise of mass society, which, as is well known, facilitated the participation of citizens in public life and modern activities, such as sport. Furthermore, sport was not unknown before the *ventennio*, when Italy was ruled by a liberal system, and Fascist policy and ideology were deeply influenced by the concept of athleticism that had arisen in previous years.

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This is also true for student sport: the regime spent much time and effort on promoting athleticism in universities, but its policy was based in part on previous, pre-Fascist, initiatives. One such initiative was the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* (University Olympic Games), which were staged in Rome in April 1922. The Games contributed to popularising the concept of student sport that was later developed by Fascism, while the basic ideas of the organisers became cornerstones of Fascist policy. The story of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* is interesting in and of itself, as a moment in the development of athleticism in the first years after the First World War, but it also highlights the continuity between the sport policies of liberal and Fascist Italy. Sometimes scholars depict Fascist policy as an absolute novelty, without considering that, in certain respects, it relied on ideas that predated the March on Rome. Even the 1922 *Olimpiadi Universitarie* did not develop out of nothing, but were connected to previous experiences of university sport, beginning in the nineteenth century.

Sport and universities

Universities were one of the birthplaces of modern sport. In the pre-industrial age, students at European universities practised fencing, ball games, horse riding, and other physical activities. Modern sport was introduced in the nineteenth century. In 1829, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge began to challenge each other in a rowing regatta and, in the following decades, playing sports became a distinctive feature of Victorian-era university life in the United Kingdom (Holt 1989, 74–86, Anderson 1987). Athleticism also became popular in other Anglo-Saxon countries, such as the United States, where sporting activities began in the colleges of Harvard and Yale in the first half of the nineteenth century and later spread to other universities (Smith 1985, 2011, 8–16, Lewis 1970, Pope 1996).

The growth of modern sport was slower in continental Europe, but students were among the first to take an interest in it. Sporting clubs were established in several universities around the turn of the twentieth century (for example, in France, the Bordeaux Étudiants Club in 1903 and the Paris Université Club in 1906); in Hungary, a national federation of university sport was established in 1907; in Germany, students had practised gymnastics since the early nineteenth century and later facilitated the diffusion of modern sporting disciplines (Kruger 2012, 2015).¹

A novel phenomenon could not but attract criticism. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many professors and intellectuals complained that physical activities distracted students from intellectual work (Bale 2014), but this criticism did not prevent the development of sport. After the First World War, the acceleration in the development of mass society enabled the further spread of physical activities in universities all over Europe. Furthermore, a new international student organisation, the Confédération internationale des étudiants (CIE – International Confederation of Students), set up in 1919 (Laqua 2017), established its sports office in 1922 and was heavily involved in organising international competitions.

Italian modern athleticism developed gradually in the decades after unification. Most members of the ruling class viewed physical activities as a complement of military training and a tool to strengthen the moral qualities and the patriotism of the youth, according to a model that had developed in Europe since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Not by chance, most Italian clubs were established with a monarchist-conservative political ideology (Dietschy and Pivato 2019, 33–77, Giuntini 1988, Teja and Ulzega, 1993).

Sport attracted the interest of the aristocracy and middle class. Students, both in secondary schools and universities, were the most involved category, along with soldiers.

After unification, only a minority of Italian youth could afford higher education, but the number of university enrolments increased progressively. In 1860, there were 9,400 university enrolments; in 1920 this number had soared to 62,000, about 1 per cent of citizens aged between 20 and 24 (Cammelli and di Francia 1996, 18–23).² This percentage was slightly lower than that of the countries of continental Europe, such as France and Germany, and much smaller than the United Kingdom, where nearly 3 per cent of young people were enrolled at university. Moreover, in Italy the female presence was minimal, comprising only 10 per cent of students in 1921 (Cammelli and di Francia 1996, 18–23). From a political standpoint, Italian students were an ideologically diverse group, although in the first decades of the twentieth century many were attracted to nationalist groups (Ventroni 2001, Rocucci 2001, D’Orsi 2007, Fonzo 2017). In 1914–15, most undergraduates joined the interventionist front and, after the war, many of them entered the Fascist movement. In November 2021, 19,973 Italian students were members of the PNF, representing approximately 13 per cent of the militants (Petersen 1975). This does not mean that all students were fascist; on the contrary, some of them joined anti-fascist groups and others remained loyal to the political leaders of the liberal area or were not engaged in political activities. However, on average, students were attracted by Fascism more than other young people (Papadia 2013, Papa 2013, Fonzo 2019). More specifically on students, see De Negri 1975, Salustri 2016).

In the decades after unification, Italian students imported several sporting codes from abroad. Football was among the most popular,³ but students also practised rowing, skiing, alpinism, fencing, athletics, and tennis. On the whole, though, sport and physical activity developed slowly in Italian universities; it was only after the First World War that university sport spread rapidly.

The war, as is known, hastened the process of the nationalisation of the masses and contributed to the spread of the cult of masculinity: physical strength was no longer viewed as something in contrast to intellectual development. As elsewhere in the world, in the nineteenth century many Italian intellectuals had criticised the practice of sports, but gradually it gained recognition and, after the war, large sections of the ruling class accepted the idea that physical activities were useful for enhancing the moral qualities and the patriotism of the youth.

In Italy, many newspapers and sports managers lamented that the government did not encourage sport in universities. For example, an article in the liberal right-leaning *Giornale d’Italia* in 1922 compared Italy unfavourably to other countries:

The examples of America, of England and, in part, of Germany, which have created first-class sporting centres in their universities and use sport as a tool for civic discipline and education of the character, have not borne fruit in our country. The Ministry of Public Education and the academic authorities have not introduced gymnastic exercises and sports in universities. They have even opposed the attempts of students to introduce them.⁴

The article in *Il Giornale d’Italia* shows that the Italian ruling class’s attitude toward sport was changing, as evidenced by the support gained by students in 1922 (see below). After the First World War, the idea that sport was not a frivolous distraction but a tool to enhance the moral quality of the youth and an important element of their education became more widely accepted within the ruling class. Among the supporters of this new concept were the Futurist movement (Giuntini 2015) and many conservatives. More generally, support was stronger within the right-wing sphere, while left-wing groups were less interested in sport and sometimes viewed it as a useless activity. The importance of sport was later accepted and popularised by the Fascist regime, which

regarded physical activities as one of the most important tools for the education of the youth. During the regime, sports and gymnastics were the main element of the education of members of juvenile organisations, such as the Opera nazionale Balilla (ONB) and Fasci giovanili di combattimento; sport also constituted an important part of the programmes of the Gruppi universitari fascisti (Fascist University Groups – GUF), the organisation for students (see, on the education of the youth during the Fascist *ventennio*, Zapponi 1982, Dogliani 2012, Koon 2017). In short, the policy of the Fascist organisations drew on ideas that had arisen during liberal Italy and become more popular after the First World War.

In 1922, the level of Italian university sport was not comparable to that of the Anglo-Saxon world but the number of students playing sports was increasing. Against this background, in 1922 undergraduates from the University ‘La Sapienza’ of Rome made an attempt to promote the practice of sport in universities.

The organisation of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* and the conflict with the National Olympic Committee

The *Olimpiadi Universitarie* was the first national university contest held in Italy. The initiative was launched in the spring of 1921 at the University ‘La Sapienza’, where in previous years students had established a Circolo sportivo universitario (University Sporting Club). In the spring of 1921, the club transformed itself into the Comitato Olimpico Studentesco Italiano (COSI – Italian Student Olympic Committee), chaired by Corrado Petrone, a recent law graduate and future member of the Camera dei fasci e delle corporazioni (the assembly that in 1939 replaced the Chamber of Deputies).

COSI immediately initiated the organisation of a national multi-sport event open to all Italian students. The name, *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, was chosen in protest against the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which in March 1921 had rejected the application of Rome to host the 1924 Olympic Games (the final decision to award the Games to Paris was made in June). Soon after its establishment, COSI took steps to create an honorary committee of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, with the aim of gaining the support of state bodies. Petrone approached prominent establishment figures, most of whom agreed to join the committee. These included the Crown Prince Umberto,⁵ Prime Minister Ivanoe Bonomi, two former prime ministers, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando and Luigi Luzzatti, and the most celebrated commanders of the First World War, General Armando Diaz and Grand Admiral Paolo Thaon di Revel.⁶ COSI also obtained the support of other student associations, including the most prestigious of them, the Corda Fratres, and it even benefited from the official patronage of the king.

The *Olimpiadi Universitarie* were based on the patriotic-educational concept of sport that had emerged in the nineteenth century and which had grown stronger after the First World War. It drew its main support from monarchist-conservative circles. The majority of the supporters of COSI belonged to the liberal right or to the Associazione nazionalista italiana (ANI – Italian Nationalist Association), the main Italian nationalist group. The contribution of Fascists was less relevant. The only senior figure within the PNF who actively cooperated with COSI was Alfredo Misuri – and he left the party in March 1922 to join the ANI (see Misuri 1944, Fonzo 2017). COSI was closer to the *traditional* Italian right than to the *popular-radical* right represented by Fascism. Additionally, Fascists had not yet elaborated their ideas on sport, focused as they were on fighting their political opponents. On the whole, the initiative of COSI was well received by the ruling class, testifying to the change in elite attitudes towards sport.

The first public appearance of COSI was at an assembly held at 'La Sapienza' on 22 July 1921 to announce the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* to the public and discuss how to raise funds. After the meeting, COSI issued a statement full of patriotic rhetoric:

Italians, you only know university students for their noisy demonstrations. Now we call on you to see them in a different light: disciplined, tidy, rigid or moving with extreme agility in sports competitions; we call on you to admire their artistic and literary gems. With great pride, we organise these National Students Olympics for the first time in the world. They will serve as an example for other nations.⁷

However, when the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* became public knowledge, some problems arose. First of all, COSI faced many difficulties in raising funds: the organisers estimated the expenses at 310,000 lire and sought the support of state bodies, but the government offered only 15,000 lire.⁸ Additionally, the Committee risked losing its political support because of the opposition of the Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano (CONI – Italian National Olympic Committee) which waged a fierce campaign against the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*. In August 1921, the executive commission of CONI declared COSI's use of the word '*Olimpiadi*' to be illegitimate and urged Italian sporting federations not to support the initiative. The president, Carlo Montù, also wrote to the prime minister and to members of the honorary committee established by COSI, urging them to refuse any help to the students.⁹

Such a strong opposition is surprising, as CONI should have been pleased with the development of sport in universities. However, in the early 1920s the committee was struggling to establish itself as the leading institution of Italian sport and some of its members were afraid that COSI challenged this role. Within CONI, the decision to oppose the student initiative caused some controversy. Montù, also for reasons other than the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, left the presidency in November 1921 and was replaced by Francesco Mauro, leader of the Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio (FIGC – Italian Football Federation). Mauro did not express a stance on the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, but Montù, who continued to be a member of the IOC, did not stop pressurising state bodies and political leaders.¹⁰ He also worked to prevent the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* from gaining recognition at international level and some National Olympic Committees, including that of France, refused to recognise the initiative. The other Italian member of the IOC, Senator Giorgio Guglielmi, supported the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* and was also a member of COSI's honorary committee, but he carried less political weight than Montù. However, despite the strenuous opposition of CONI, Petrone and his fellows retained some of the political support that they had gained. The government took an intermediate position, offering 'moral support' to COSI, which meant praising its initiatives, but refusing further funds. Indeed, both Petrone and Montù had supporters in the ruling class.

Despite the controversy, the preparations for the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* continued and the event was scheduled for April 1922. Italian students welcomed the announcement and established local committees in all universities to organise qualifiers, select teams, and raise funds. In February, COSI issued the definitive programme, which allowed all students enrolled in an Italian university in the academic year 1921–2 to participate. The programme did not say anything about female participation, but it listed the sports on the agenda: athletics, fencing, cycling, gymnastics, swimming, skiing, weightlifting, boxing, football, basketball and volleyball, along with contests in art, literature, and science.¹¹ The competitions were to take place in the Stadio della Farnesina, situated in the northern part of Rome, and had to follow the rules of the national sporting federations.

Organisers were confident that the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* would boost the diffusion of sport in universities and consequently enhance the character and the patriotism of

students. In a letter sent to the Queen Mother Margherita to request funding, Petrone defined the aims of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* as: 'To harmonically merge the three disciplines: art, science and sport; to spur the young to the cult of beauty and truth; to disseminate the healthiest forms of physical education in universities; to shape the perfect man'.¹² These words were almost a prefiguration of the Fascist idea of the new man. Sport, according to COSI, was capable of carrying out a real 'anthropological revolution', completely changing the character of students: through physical activities, they would develop virtues such as obedience, love of the fatherland, spirit of sacrifice. The idea of the new man that developed during the *ventennio* was quite similar, although the regime defined the concept better and added other 'virtues', first and foremost veneration for the Duce and the capability of being permanently mobilised.¹³

In 1922, no Italian newspaper, not even those close to the left, criticised the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* and some observers praised COSI's initiative. On the eve of the Games, *Il Giornale d'Italia* wrote:

Nobody imagined that sporting activities were so popular among our university students! The Italian universities still have a medieval-monastic nature and, while being centres of the most audacious reforms in the intellectual field, they have been resistant to the basic physical need of humanity, eager to conquer the supreme goal – good health.¹⁴

However, the problems that had arisen in the organisational stage demonstrated that COSI was too young an institution. Unlike in other countries, in Italy there were no well-established federations of university sport, which made it difficult to obtain full acknowledgement by the state.

The opening and the competitions

The problems did not prevent the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* from taking place as scheduled. Around 2,500 undergraduates representing all 26 universities in Italy registered for the competitions, but not all participated, and the exact number of athletes is unknown.¹⁵ What is certain is that COSI received several messages of endorsement from well-known public figures, including the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, who praised the initiative with thundering words: 'The marvellous culture of our students, the agile and luminous intelligence of the artists of Italy, the agility and the strength of our sportsmen, will have their glorification'.¹⁶

The opening of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* highlighted both the ideology of COSI and its difficulties in relations with the state bodies. On 17 April a ceremony was held at the Costanzi theatre, with the participation of eminent personalities, including a representative of the government, the undersecretary of war Pietro Lissia. All speakers emphasised the patriotic and educational value of the initiative, as well as the importance of sport for military training. Lissia, for example, stated that Italian students were able 'to educate body and mind through science and to re-establish the equilibrium between physical and spiritual energies'. Furthermore, several speakers evoked the myth of Rome, as was predictable in a ceremony full of patriotic rhetoric: the rector of Sapienza university, Francesco Scaduto, mentioned 'our great ancestors, who took care of the spirit without neglecting the body'; the mayor of Rome, Giannetto Valli, reminded the audience of the importance attached to sport by ancient peoples.¹⁷ The ceremony highlighted once again that sport was understood as a tool to enhance both the students' character and their physical body. In addition, athleticism was considered useful to raise the sense of nationhood and even to ease military training, as sporting activities could make soldiers

stronger and more agile. All these elements would soon become cornerstones of the Fascist ideology of sport.

The ceremony demonstrated that COSI had gained a wide moral support within the ruling class, but the problem of funds had not been solved – an issue Petrone raised in his speech. When the ceremony ended, the students headed to the Viminale (a few dozen metres from the theatre), where a Cabinet meeting was being held, to solicit a subsidy. A delegation, received by the general secretary of the presidency of the council, obtained 100,000 lire.¹⁸ The case showed that opinion about student sport was in a transitional stage: the moral support of the state bodies and their presence in the honorary committee indicated that physical activities were no longer considered a frivolous activity; at the same time, the difficulties faced by COSI in raising funds demonstrated that, even after the First World War, Italian institutions did not consider it necessary to allocate resources for the organisation of sporting contests.

The competitions, held from 17 to 24 April, showcased the progress made by university sport and the challenges that still needed to be overcome. The *Olimpiadi Universitarie* officially began on the afternoon of 17 April with a football match and, in the following days, the tournaments followed one another at a fast pace.¹⁹ Athletics was the discipline with the largest number of competitions and included almost all Olympic events. After the First World War the popularity of athletics was increasing, partly because it had become an element of military training (Giuntini 2017, 41–190), and the participation in the competitions of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* was quite high. Among the other sports, the programme included team-based and individual gymnastics competitions. The discipline was losing ground as an agonistic sport, but it was still practised as a training exercise and for gymnastic displays. Fencing was in a different situation: Italy was the leading country in the discipline and some of the sport's most competitive athletes were university students. Not by chance, the 1922 Games included tournaments of all the three weapons: foil, épée and sabre. As regards cycling, the programme included road and track races. The inclusion of cycling reflected its popularity with university students at this time: in subsequent years, cycling would gain huge popularity among the wider Italian population, but university students would abandon the bicycle because of its association with the lower classes (Fonzo 2020, 101–103).²⁰ In the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, the main cycling competition was the road race, held on 20 April. Boxing, weightlifting, wrestling, shooting, and tennis were among the other individual sports included.

The Games also included tournaments of football, basketball, and volleyball. Football was in a transitional stage from a niche sport to a discipline loved by all social classes and, among the players, university students were still numerous. Students also liked basketball, which had become popular in Italy during the First World War, to the point that, in the following years, many universities formed teams to participate in the official league (Battente 2016). Volleyball was considered a pastime and not a real sport, but because of its popularity among students it was included in the Games (Serapiglia 2016).

The disciplines included in the programme were mostly the same as those encouraged during the *ventennio* by the Fascist regime. The regime promoted the practice of sports that were useful for the education of the youth and for military training, or (more so in the 1930s) carried the possibility of achieving success in international competition. The regime considered athletics the main element of physical education and strongly encouraged it among the members of its organisations. Similarly, the Fascist authorities promoted fencing and other combat sports, which were thought to develop the virtues of courage and bravery. The regime also encouraged cycling, which, although not popular among university students, was promoted among the members of organisations such as the *Fasci giovanili di combattimento* and the *Milizia volontaria per la sicurezza nazionale*, as the bicycle was useful for the fast mobilisation of military units. Among team sports,

Fascism encouraged basketball, but it had many doubts about the usefulness of football as a mass sport, considering it a professional discipline, not suitable for the education of the youth (Fonzo 2020, 86–106). Nevertheless, in the second half of the 1930s Fascist organisations included competitions of football in their contests, as the game was too popular to be excluded. In short, many disciplines privileged by the Fascist regime were included in the programme of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*. This is logical, because they were the most popular sports among young people. However, their popularity was also due to the encouragement of political leaders and sports managers, who considered these disciplines particularly useful for the formation of young people. Fascism would take up this idea.

In many of the competitions at the 1922 Games, there were university-enrolled professional sportsmen and athletes who were destined to compete at the highest levels.²¹ At this time, professional and amateur sports were not clearly separated and, unlike future student contests, the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* did not prevent professional athletes from participating.

Women were marginalised at the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*. Only 30 female students from Turin joined the Games – and they were not allowed to participate in competitive events; instead, they performed some gymnastic shows. In the 1920s, female sport was rarely accepted in Western countries, with many theorists of athleticism, including Pierre De Coubertin, considering it inappropriate (see, among others, Guttman 1992). Sportswomen in Italy were particularly hindered by the opposition of the Church and the predominantly rural, conservative, character of Italian society. Nevertheless, the participation of women in physical activities was not completely unknown, at least within the urban middle class (Gori 2004, Canella, Giuntini and Granata 2019). The female gymnasts at the Games received some positive comments for their performances but also some criticism. For example, *Il Giornale d'Italia* praised the bodyweight exercises, but believed that ‘the exercises with iron sticks were less successful, as they are more suited for men than for women’.²² The newspaper believed that women should only play certain sports, an idea that would prevail for many years. However, the fact that female students participated in the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, albeit marginally, shows that the opposition to women’s sport was not absolute (at the very same time as the Games, Italian female athletes were also participating in an international contest in Monaco). The attitude of COSI and the press toward female sport was similar to that of Fascism: for many years the regime limited female participation in sporting competitions, believing that women’s bodies were not suitable for the most tiring disciplines (an idea quite common in Western countries and across sporting organisations). However, over the years the attitude of the regime changed and in the second half of the 1930s, during the ‘totalitarian acceleration’, the participation of women gained a greater recognition (Gori 2004).

The *Olimpiadi Universitarie* officially ended on 24 April, although some competitions continued in the following days. Furthermore, on the sidelines of the Games, COSI organised two football matches between a national student squad and two teams from Rome – Lazio and Alba. The student selection was a precursor of the national university team, which would be officially established in 1927.²³

From an international perspective, the short-term impact of the Games was less than that expected by the organisers. Petrone claimed that there were 200 foreign students in Rome but, according to press reports, there were only two representatives of the CIE, a dozen Swiss students, a group of students from Czechoslovakia, and few others. On 27 April, the Czechoslovak students challenged their Italian counterparts to an athletics competition, which was the only international event held within the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*.²⁴ No representative from Western Europe was present, probably due to Carlo Montù’s pressure on the National Olympic Committees.

Public and press interest was generally low. Some events, such as the opening ceremony, gathered a large crowd, but most competitions attracted few spectators. The press, in turn, paid little attention to the Games. Only *Il Giornale d'Italia*, which was close to the ideology on which the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* were based, showed a constant interest. The other daily papers of Rome, including *Il Messaggero*, published a few articles on the Games, whereas the majority of Italian newspapers, such as *Corriere della Sera* (Milan) and *La Stampa* (Turin), published only brief reports on the competition results. The socialist press, including *Avanti!*, the official organ of the Italian Socialist Party, ignored the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* almost completely. The Italian sports newspaper, *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, reported the results every day and also devoted some articles to the Games, but COSI considered its coverage inadequate and Petrone criticised its 'almost hostile indifference'.²⁵ The lack of press interest was unsurprising: in 1922, sport had not reached the popularity that it would gain in the next few years, and interest in amateur competitions was especially low. The lack of press attention represented a significant difference from subsequent attitudes during the *ventennio*, when the regime encouraged the media to cover all sports events, including amateur tournaments.

However, in some respects the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* shared similarities with the university contests organised during the Fascist period. More specifically, in 1932 the secretary of the PNF, Achille Starace, introduced the *Littoriali dello sport*, a national competition open to all Italian students. Like the 1922 Games, the *Littoriali* included competitions in the main sporting disciplines and were inaugurated with political ceremonies. Furthermore, the contest was based on the same patriotic-educational concept of sport as the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*. The *Littoriali* did not arise directly from the model of the 1922 Games, which were not mentioned when the PNF announced the event, but the two contests had several elements in common.

Compared to the PNF, COSI had far fewer resources, but it managed to make the 1922 *Olimpiadi Universitarie* a success. The high number of participants demonstrated that, despite the scant press attention, athleticism had made much progress. Indeed, the event raised much attention among students and sporting managers. However, there were still many limits to overcome. After the Games, *La Gazzetta dello Sport* wrote:

In Italy, there are students who play sports – not very many; there are students who are passionate about sports and have started practising them – and they make up the majority. However, so far, student sports teams do not exist.²⁶

The main problem, according to *La Gazzetta*, was the lack of university sports organisations. The potential to further develop physical activities was clear and many sporting managers expected institutions to take steps in this direction, but the political picture was very unstable and hampered the initiatives of COSI.

Conclusion: the impact and consequences of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* on Italian and international sport

The *Olimpiadi Universitarie* demonstrated that many students and members of the ruling class understood sport as a tool of patriotic education. It is true that other political factions, such as Socialists and Catholics, were developing their own sporting programmes in the same years (Giuntini 2018, Pivato 2019) but they attracted few students. Most Italian undergraduates welcomed the organisation of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* and nobody expressed criticism, not even the students belonging to other political groupings. In Italian universities, right-wing ideology – both in its radical-popular and traditional forms – clearly prevailed.

Moreover, the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* impacted Italian students in general. Petrone claimed that the event had shown the 'new soul' of Italian undergraduates.²⁷ This claim was exaggerated, but the high participation of students demonstrated that physical activities were indeed becoming more and more popular in the universities. More generally, the Games represented an important moment of the rise of mass athleticism in Italy.

The *Olimpiadi Universitarie* also had long-term international consequences. After the Games, COSI remained the main sporting organisation of Italian students, representing them within the CIE. In May 1923, when the Confédération organised an international competition of athletics in Paris, COSI oversaw Italian participation.²⁸ On that occasion, the Italian representatives proposed a contest open to students from around the world: 'We believe that we should organise the complete international Olympics (art, sport, science), after which the national Olympics will take place in every country'.²⁹ The CIE accepted the proposal and in 1924 the first International University Games was held in Warsaw. The Games took place every two years (with some exceptions) until 1939 and were the most important university contest of the interwar period. Of course, the credit for their establishment did not belong only to Italian students: international competitions would have been organised even without the example of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, as after the First World War sporting activities were spreading in universities all over the world. Furthermore, the International Games were different from COSI's proposal, as they did not include national competitions as qualifiers and did not feature art and literature contests. Nevertheless, the role of Italian students was very important, as they made the first proposal.

In Italy, the rise of the Fascist movement limited the spread of student sport in the short term. As is well known, the years in Italy between the end of the First World War and the March on Rome were characterised by political instability and the violence of fascist squads. Universities were involved in the fight, as the fascist GUF battled for hegemony over other student organisations. While many undergraduates were attracted to Fascism, there were also several important non-fascist associations, such as the Corda Fratres, the prestigious student group established in 1898, and the Federazione universitaria cattolica italiana (FUCI – Italian Catholic University Federation), which challenged the claims of the GUF. Sometimes the violence of the *camicie nere* (Blackshirts) also reached the universities. For example, in February 1922 fascists assaulted the rector of the Bocconi University of Milan, Angelo Sraffa. Political tensions on and off campus prevented students from organising new national sporting contests for some years. Furthermore, at this stage the GUF paid little attention to sport: they recognised the importance of physical activities, but the fight for control of the universities was its priority. As already noted, the GUF did not participate in the organisation of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*.

The general political picture changed after Mussolini became prime minister (October 1922). COSI did not oppose Fascism, to the point where one of the most prominent leaders of the PNF, Giuseppe Bottai, led the delegation sent to the Paris competitions in 1923. In addition, in a statement presented to the CIE on that occasion, Corrado Petrone praised the *camicie nere*, arguing that, along with the *Olimpiadi universitarie*, they had demonstrated the vitality of Italian youth:

In 1921–1922, students accomplished a double task: some prepared the people for the revolution, in order to valorise the victory [in the First World War] and to promote a new concept of politics; other university students organised a great event of strength, intelligence and culture [the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*].³⁰

However, the Fascist party aimed at seizing control of Italian students and did not tolerate independent organisations. After the March on Rome, the GUF became more and more

active. Its ascent was not hampered by tensions with the Fascist party, which sought to curtail its political autonomy (Nello 1978, 109–156; La Rovere 2003). The GUF aimed to take control of the sports activities and, to weaken the role of COSI, it used a new Fascist-controlled student association, the *Unione nazionale universitaria* (UNU – National University Union), formally established in Rome during the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, but actually active from 1923. In the mid-1920s, the student leagues (GUF, Corda Fratres, FUCI, UNU, COSI, etc.) came into conflict, because the fight between Fascists and antifascists made impossible the existence of a unitary association. The greatest controversy in matter of sports concerned the organisation of the second International University Games, scheduled in Rome in 1925, because both COSI and UNU claimed to be the legitimate representatives of Italian students and wanted to organise the event.³¹ The general political situation at this time was incandescent and, as is well known, during 1925 and 1926 Mussolini established a real dictatorship, outlawing all non-Fascist parties and associations. The progressive fascistisation of Italy also involved universities. In 1925 and 1926, after the crisis provoked by the murder of Giacomo Matteotti (10 June 1924), the GUF gained complete hegemony. On some occasions it also used violence against its rivals. For example, on 21 March 1925 a squad of fascist students raided a meeting of the Corda Fratres in Naples and beat the participants (La Rovere 2003, 93). COSI ceased to exist in 1925 and by 1927, all non-Fascist university organisations were dismantled and the GUF became the only representative of Italian students at the national and international levels.³² Over the years, almost all undergraduates joined the Fascist University Groups.

The International University Games in Rome were postponed to 1927 and organised by the GUF, which had by then incorporated the UNU. Furthermore, since the mid-1920s the Fascist regime had begun to invest huge resources in university sport, which became one of the main tools for the fascistisation of students (Fonzo 2020). Mussolini and the Fascist hierarchy, like the organisers of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, believed that physical activities could enhance not only the body, but also the character of students, making them courageous, loyal to the regime, and ready to be permanently mobilised. The 1922 University Olympics had demonstrated the potential to develop physical activities among students, but the real growth occurred during the regime, due to both the efforts of the regime and the rise of mass society (Fonzo 2020). The Fascist policy for universities was part of a more general effort to spread sport in Italy, as the regime considered it an essential tool for the nationalisation of the masses.

More generally, Fascist university sport was based on a pre-existing ideology, which had found one of its main manifestations in the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*. Many ideas that had arisen in the nineteenth century, and were obsessively repeated during the 1922 Games, became pillars of the ideology of athleticism during the *ventennio*. The cornerstones of the Fascist concept of sport were the theory that it enhanced both the body and the character of students; the idea of using sporting activities to create the ‘new man’ and, in this specific case, the ‘new student’; the idea of *politicising* students and improving their patriotic feelings through physical activities; the concept that students were more intelligent and, therefore, more suitable for athletic competitions than the rest of population; and the use of a mythical past, mainly that of ancient Rome, as an (alleged) precedent of the sporting activity of students.³³ All these topics were present in the *Olimpiadi Universitarie*, although some of them, for example the creation of the new man, were not explicitly declared. In essence, the continuities between the liberal and Fascist concepts of sport were evident. The 1922 University Games had promoted the idea of athleticism that Fascism would appropriate. Furthermore, COSI, having made athleticism more popular in universities, eased the GUF’s task of spreading physical activities among students.

However, the ideology of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* was not invented by COSI, but, at least in part, it came from ideas common across the entire Western world, such as the patriotic-educational concept and the attitude toward female participation, which had been developing since the nineteenth century. The organisers of the *Olimpiadi Universitarie* had incorporated some Italian elements, such as the use of the myth of ancient Rome, which later became part of the sporting ideology of the Fascist regime.

The continuities between student sport of the liberal and the Fascist periods do not mean that the Fascist policy was entirely based on what had come before. On the contrary, the regime introduced many innovations, but these mainly concerned the implementation of sporting policy, rather than ideology. Fascism, indeed, replaced the autonomous initiative of students with control from above. For this purpose, it charged its organisations (such as the GUF, Opera Nazionale Balilla, Dopolavoro, Fasci giovanili di combattimento) with promoting physical activities, which was one of their main tasks. These organisations based their initiatives on a pre-existing ideology, which they made more suitable for a regime that aspired to be totalitarian.

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Notes

1. For an overview of the nationalistic value of physical education in Germany, see also the seminal works of George Mosse (1988, 1991).
2. The First World War had encouraged the growth in student numbers, as many youngsters had enrolled in the university to delay conscription. After the war the number of students decreased and in 1925 was 45,600 (also due to the consequences of the 1923 school reform, which had made access to university more difficult).
3. In 1921, the students of Genoa tried to establish a Federazione calcistica universitaria (University Football Federation), but the attempt was unsuccessful. See *La Gazzetta dello Sport* 1924.
4. *Il Giornale d'Italia* 1922a.
5. Letter of the Prefecture of Rome to the Presidency of the Council, 3 June 1921, in *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* (Central State Archive, hereafter ACS), *Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri* (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, hereafter PCM), *Gabinetto* (Cabinet, hereafter Gab), *Fascicoli per categorie* (Files by categories, hereafter FC), 1927, file (hereafter f.) 14, 3, 3427.
6. See the list in a flyer produced by COSI itself, undated, in ACS, PCM, Gab., FC, 1927, f. 14, 3, 3427.
7. Statement of COSI, undated (but issued in July–August 1921), in ACS, PCM, Gab., FC, 1927, f. 14, 3, 3427. See also Impiglia and Lang, 1997, Russi 2009.
8. Memorandum of the Presidency of the Council for the president Bonomi, 5 August 1921; Letter of COSI to an ‘onorevole’ (Member of Parliament, probably Alfredo Misuri), 4 September 1921; memorandum of the Ministry of the Interior, 29 September 1921; letter of Giuseppe Bevione to the secretary of the Presidency of the Council, 13 October 1921, all stored in ACS, PCM, Gab., FC, 1927, f. 14, 3, 3427. COSI collected small subsidies from other institutions: 6,000 lire from the Ministries of War and Navy, 400 from the Ministry of Public Works, 500 from the Queen Mother Margherita. See the letters stored in ACS, *Ministero dei Lavori Pubblici* (Minister of Public Works) *Divisione Affari Generali* (Department of General Affairs), *Associazioni* (Associations), package (hereafter p.). 15, f. 329; ACS, *Real Casa* (Royal House, hereafter RC), *Segreteria di S. M. la Regina e S. M. la Regina madre* (Secretary of H.M. the Queen and H.M. the Queen Mother, hereafter Regina), p. 104, f. 2342.
9. Statement of the executive committee of CONI, undated; letter of Carlo Montù to the members of the honorary committee of the *Olimpiadi universitarie*, 13 September 1921; letter of Carlo Montù to the Ministry of the Interior, 21 September 1921, all stored in ACS, PCM, Gab., FC, 1927, f. 14, 3, 3427.
10. See, for example, the letter of Carlo Montù to an ‘*Illusterrissimo signore*’ (most distinguished man), 15 March 1922 (it is not possible to identify the recipient; perhaps Montù sent the letter to all the members of the honorary committee). The letter is stored in ACS, PCM, Gab., FC, 1927, f. 14, 3, 3427.
11. See the booklet with the programme, *Prime Olimpiadi Universitarie*, stored in Historical archive of the University of Rome ‘La Sapienza’ (hereafter ASURM), p. 155a, f. 119.
12. Letter of Corrado Petrone to the Queen Mother Margherita, 7 March 1922, in ACS, RC, Regina, p. 104, f. 2342.
13. On the Fascist concept of the ‘new man’ see Bernhard and Klinkhammer 2017, Gentile 2005, 236–264.
14. *Il Giornale d'Italia* 1922b.
15. *La Gazzetta dello Sport* 1922b.

16. The message of d'Annunzio was quoted in a booklet of COSI, *Rapport Official présenté au congrès international sportif de Paris*, 1923. A copy is stored in ASURM, p. 155a, f. 119.
17. Excerpts of the speeches were reported in *Il Messaggero* 1922.
18. ACS, PCM, Gab., FC, 1927, f. 14, 3, 3427.
19. See the reports in *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, *Il Messaggero* and *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 18 April 1922. The preliminary rounds were played in the previous days.
20. For a general history of cycling in Italy see, among the numerous studies, Marchesini 2009, Cardoza 2010.
21. For the results of the competitions, see *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, *Il Giornale d'Italia* and *Il Messaggero* of the days 19–29 April 1922. For the artistic and literary contests, COSI organised an exhibition to display the artworks, and evaluated the literary works. There is no record of the science contests, which were likely not held.
22. *Il Giornale d'Italia* 1922b.
23. *La Gazzetta dello Sport* 1922a; *Il Giornale d'Italia* 1922d.
24. *Il Giornale d'Italia* 1922c.
25. *Il Giornale d'Italia* 1922e.
26. *La Gazzetta dello Sport* 1922e.
27. Speech of Petrone at the 1923 Conference of the CIE, published in the booklet presented by COSI to the Conference, *Rapport Official présenté au congrès international sportif de Paris*, 1923, stored in ASURM, p. 155a, f. 119.
28. Letter of Corrado Petrone to Benito Mussolini, 11 April 1923, in ACS, PCM, Gab., FC, 1927, f. 14, 3, 3427.
29. The statement, in French, was published in the booklet presented to the Conference, in ASURM, p. 155a, f. 119.
30. Booklet presented to the Conference, in ASURM, p. 155a, f. 119. Petrone, despite praising the Fascist movement, criticised its conservatism and violence.
31. The communications on the issue, written by both the UNU and COSI, are stored in ASURM, p. 155a, f. 119.
32. Only the FUCI remained alive, but its activities were downsized.
33. See the wide literature on sport and fascism, mentioned above, and, more specifically on students, Fonzo 2020.

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Italian summary

Nei primi decenni del Novecento, in Italia lo sport universitario era meno sviluppato rispetto ad altri Paesi europei. Tuttavia, nell'aprile del 1922 alcuni studenti dell'Università di Roma organizzarono una manifestazione nazionale multisportiva, le Olimpiadi Universitarie. L'iniziativa, sostenuta da numerosi esponenti della classe dirigente, registrò la partecipazione di migliaia di studenti ed ebbe anche un importante impatto sul piano internazionale, favorendo la nascita dei Giochi Mondiali Universitari, che si tennero dal 1924 al 1939. Le Olimpiadi Universitarie erano basate sul concetto 'patriottico-educativo' di sport ed ebbero un ruolo significativo nella diffusione delle attività ginnico-sportive nelle università italiane. Inoltre, promossero l'idea di sport che negli anni successivi sarebbe stata accettata dal regime fascista. Il regime sviluppò enormemente l'atletismo universitario, ma sostituì l'iniziativa autonoma degli studenti con il controllo dall'alto.

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