
INFLUENTIAL FIGURES IN SPORT: PRIMO NEBIOLO

BY ERIC LAHMY



Mr. Primo Nebiolo is one of the most prominent sports leaders in the world. A native of Turin, now sixty years old, a bachelor of law and former long-jumper, he took a very early interest in the organisation of sport. Today, he is President of the International Amateur Athletics Federation, of the Federation Internationale du Sport Universitaire and the recently formed Association des Fédérations Internationales Olympiques d'été (Association of International Olympic Federations for Summer Sports). Mr. Nebiolo, who is also the President of the Italian Athletics Federation and Vice-President of the Italian Olympic Committee, makes no secret of the fact that he considers himself a "full-time leader", and that, in his opinion, sport cannot manage with part-time leadership only, in view of both the multiplicity and the significance of the problems it presents.

Q : Mr. President, Olympism, of which athletics is one of the mainstays, is going through a difficult phase of its existence. Important questions were asked at the 89th Session of the IOC on the 1st and 2nd December in Lausanne. One of them concerned the new threat posed by boycotting. Do you believe that sanctions should be taken against National Olympic Committees who withhold participation in the Games ?

Mr. Nebiolo : The Association des Fédérations Internationales des Sports Olympiques d'été, of which I am the President, took up a position against such sanctions. However, on the other hand, we must also find a way of guaranteeing effectively the universal nature of the Games. We must find a way of persuading the National Olympic Committees to enter into a moral commitment not to boycott them.

Q: But isn't the matter already out of the hands of the National Olympic Committees when a decision is made to stage a boycott ? Isn't the

decision to boycott a matter of political and governmental authority, and aren't the NOCs forced to submit to something which is out of their hands ?

Mr. Nebiolo : Certainly, but the NOCs should put up a fight. In 1980 when the Italian government decided in favour of the boycott and forbade us to go to the Moscow Games, the National Olympic Committee did not obey. Italy participated fully in the Games.

Q : Another large issue which has been under discussion within the Olympic family for some months now is the plan to hold the finals in major Olympic sports such as athletics, gymnastics and swimming, in the morning at the 24th Olympiad in Seoul in 1988. Would you like to clarify your position on this matter ?

Mr. Nebiolo: Within the IAAF, we have held discussions, first of all among our one hundred and seventy-four members, then within the Board, consisting of twenty-one members. We have heard

Dr. Primo Nebiolo (ITA), President of the IAAF, has been awarded "la Grande Médaille de vermeil de la Ville de Paris". The honour, a rare achievement, was bestowed on Dr. Nebiolo, by the Mayor of Paris, Mr. Jacques Chirac.

the views and opinions of important nations in the field of athletics: the United States, the USSR, the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, Great Britain, France, China, Italy, Spain. They all spoke in favour of retaining the conventional timetables. We wish to offer our athletes conditions which will enable them to achieve the best possible results. All the statements of trainers and athletes which we have collected represent the view that finals in the morning would not allow the athletes to realise their optimum potential.

I should like a decision of this kind to be properly interpreted : we are governed by the interest of the athletes. We are also very concerned to avoid providing any excuses or pretexts for criticism, or any incidents which could diminish the credibility of the Games. Let there be no mistake: we have always taken a clear line in support of the Olympic Games in Seoul, and our action in this case is in keeping with this line. We are supporting the IOC. There may be no doubt as to the position of the IAAF: This international governing body for athletics is the partner of the IOC. We have faith in the IOC, in the Olympic Games and in the common interests we represent.

I would like to insist very firmly on this. Our Federation has always made a contribution towards the IOC. The first President of the IAAF became President of the IOC, just as Avery Brundage had been Chairman of the Technical Commission of the IAAF. Lord Exeter, our second President, was Vice-President of the IOC. Finally, as far as I myself am concerned, as long as I remain at the head of the IAAF, the commitment, the partnership will endure.

Q: Have you learned any technical lessons from the Games in Los Angeles which could be of benefit to you in Seoul ?

Mr. Nebiolo: Yes. First of all, we would like our Federation to participate in the organisation of the Games. This is the first point. I do not see why the Federations should not take part in the preparation of competitions which concern them a great deal.

Secondly, in Los Angeles, we convinced the organisers to conclude the Games with the marathon. We think that was an excellent decision. In the future, the marathon should continue to bring the Games to a close. But this is one thing which may be called into question. The organisers in Seoul

have other ideas: they would like to hold the marathon on the penultimate day of the Games.

The marathon, quite apart from the great effort it requires, is not an event like all the others. It is THE Olympic race, the symbol of the Games. In Los Angeles, on marathon day, not only was the stadium jam-packed, but the streets of the marathon course, too, were lined with people. What other competition can do that, mobilise an entire population ? The interest was truly tremendous, and at the finish, the emotion of the public reached a terrific level. However, the Americans were expecting one of their runners to win. But when it became apparent that the Portuguese, Lopes, had won, the ovation which greeted him was of truly triumphal proportions.

Q : What lessons did you learn and what food for thought did you gain from the athletics events in Los Angeles ?

Mr. Nebido : The Federations want to provide ever greater assistance in the organisation of the Games, and to follow up this assistance in a consistent manner, in order to help the organisers avoid falling into any traps and offering any excuses or pretexts for the NOCs who are ready to withhold their participation over the least little thing.

The organisation came under criticism in Los Angeles, and to avoid a repetition of this, we could send regular technical delegations to the site during the preparation phase. We could also help to clarify the accreditation system. Similarly, anti-doping checks should be carried out with the participation of the International Federations under the supervision of the IOC. It also seems to us that all the athletes should participate in the opening and closing ceremonies, even those who are not called upon to march in the procession. As you know, that was not the case in Los Angeles.

Finally, we could help the IOC in choosing the right city in which to hold the Games. Political and social situations cannot be ignored in making this choice simply for the sake of the technical quality of the facilities. All the large Federations, because they are constantly involved in organising international meetings and championships, have a great deal of experience in finding places with a calm atmosphere which makes them suitable hosts for the Games. We should not be under any illusions : there have always been and will always be some countries which are more propitious than others. And the success of the Olympic Games is inevitably linked with the peaceful nature of the location.

Take for example the decision of the athletics authorities to organise the World Indoor Games in Paris and the cross-country Championships in Lisbon, two of the world's most peaceful cities. The World Marathon Championships will be held in Hiroshima, a city where, forty years after the explosion of an atomic bomb, we may be sure everyone will arrive in a spirit of peace. We do not anticipate any problems in the organisation of the final of the Grand Prix in Rome or the World Cup in Canberra either. It seems to us that these are all judicious choices.

I do not wish these remarks to be misinterpreted : the Federations do not claim any special merit or particular competence. We simply wish to work for the Olympic family, that is all. We have enough satisfaction on our own ground, without having to seek it elsewhere.

Q : Athletics has greatly developed its programme in recent years. Will it be continuing along these lines in years to come ?

Mr. Nebiolo : If athletics wishes to increase its popularity, it must put itself in the public eye. In the past, athletes were trained for eight or nine months for two or three competitions, in the course of which they achieved extraordinary results. The public did not really have time to take an interest, to catch on to athletics. Today, we are trying to add a winter season, based on indoor competitions and cross-country, to an open-air season which spills over from the summer into spring and autumn. That is why we have put together a full and interesting programme made up of fairly new competitions: World Indoor Games, Marathon World Cup, Junior World Championships.

It is our ambition to combine all these great events in a logical progression, an integral programme which will culminate in the 1987 World Championships in Rome. These competitions should also raise revenue, according to our plans, which will benefit athletes in all countries. This redistribution should provide aid to the development of sport throughout the world. That was the idea I had for raising money and using it to benefit the athletes and federations, and that is the aim we are pursuing.

Q : How are the athletics leaders around you reacting to this great plan for world solidarity ?

Mr. Nebiolo : I think it is making them more determined and more enthusiastic in their work, because they have a sense of experiencing a special moment in the history of athletics.

Q : You are also the President of the Federation Internationale du Sport Universitaire, a job to which you are attached. Let us talk, if you would, about university sport.

Mr. Nebiolo : I have a confession to make. The FISU is undoubtedly the most impecunious International Federation in the world. But with our practically non-existent resources, we in the FISU organise some very important events. The World University Games constitute the second largest multisports meeting after the Olympic Games. I am sometimes surprised at the number of countries in the world which want to organise the University Games, and do so at a very high level. For example, in Edmonton in 1983 we had an excellent reception. For the University Games of 1985, Kobe, the host city, has made extraordinary efforts ! The city has constructed an athletics stadium with 65,000 seats, two sports centres with 12,000 seats each, a tennis centre with sixteen courts, a village for the athletes to accommodate eight thousand people and an underground railway line to link the athletes' village with the sports centre. Kobe has agreed to spend more on the University Games than Los Angeles on the Olympic Games. The University Games of 1987 will be organised by Zagreb and we have some ideas for a site for 1989, perhaps Indianapolis or Changhai, two of many candidate cities which have agreed to spend enormous sums on the University Games.

I would like to say again that I dare not even tell you the budget on which the FISU operates, so ridiculous does it seem in comparison. But this Federation is inspired by the university spirit, which makes such a useful contribution to sport by the ideas and the leaders it provides.

Q : We have dealt with a number of current problems. Would you like to conclude by telling us something you see as essential ?

Mr. Nebiolo : I would like, as I am addressing the "Olympic Review", to repeat that the International Federations are very attached to the IOC and to the Olympic Movement. I appreciate what is being done by the IOC and its President, Mr. Samaranch, who has brought dynamism and a spirit of managerial activism to the leadership of this body. I should also like to conclude by wishing President Samaranch all the satisfaction he deserves.

