



“Dialogue with the athletes”

Jacques Rogge is interviewed by Robert Parienté

Jacques Rogge, one of the two IOC members in Belgium, along with the prince de Merode, is president of the Association of European National Olympic Committees; he is also chairman of the Sydney 2000 coordination commission, vice-president of the Medical Commission and a member of the Programme Commission. He was a world sailing champion at the age of seventeen, and an Olympic competitor three times. A surgeon by profession, Jacques Rogge has a pluralist vision of sport and competition. Here, he talks about his main concerns, and the issues that may be discussed at the Centennial Congress in Paris.

Robert Padenté: In your opinion, what purpose does an Olympic Congress serve?

Jacques Rogge: It is a meeting that periodically, every ten or twelve years, gives us the opportunity to reflect on the evolution of sport, irrespective of immediate concerns, to anticipate events to come and to correct errors made in the past. We must not forget, however, that the Olympic Congress has no decision-making power. Its function is purely consultative. The Baden-Baden Congress in 1981 marked the beginning of a real revolution: the Samaranch revolution. It signalled the end of the dogma of amateurism, the appearance of a marketing programme that allowed the IOC to decrease what had hitherto been a total dependence on television rights, and the separation of the Summer and Winter Games, which had been on the cards for some time. Indeed, Baden-

Baden allowed us to catch up with sociological phenomena that sport could no longer ignore. Juan Antonio Samaranch had the rare merit of implementing these reforms in a very short time.

Today the IOC and the Olympic movement are on the crest of a wave. They have enormous financial power and a very high public profile. This Congress should therefore anticipate future events and make provisions.

RR Does the Olympic Movement not run the risk of being over taken by its own success?

J.R: Being able to avoid becoming submerged by external pressures, particularly economic pressures, is above all a question of personality. The Olympic Charter and the agreements that link the IFs and NOCs with the IOC are of a largely technical and organizational nature. The leaders

themselves must therefore be able to say what it is reasonable to accept or to refuse; they must have the courage to say no to giving up certain intangible principles, and, most importantly, to set limits on the power of money, something which cannot be catered for by precise rules.

R.P: What, in your opinion, should the main theme of the Congress be?

J.R: In my view, the Congress should focus on dialogue with the athletes. Our system, based on a hundred-year-old tradition, is no longer suited to the needs of today's champions. Athletes are not the same as they were in the fifties, sixties, even the eighties. Their hierarchical links with their clubs, federations, IFs and NOCs are no longer what they used to be. Other partners, and consequently other influences, have become involved in competition. So the suppliers' and manufactur-

ers' clubs play a very important role for skiers. They even influence programming. In tennis, the ATP, the players' union, governs the elite players and exerts constant control. In athletics, managers are seeking to impose their wishes. Sponsors are also becoming involved in an area where they do not belong. All these elements contribute to setting up contradictory interests, and provoking disputes between athletes and their federations and NOCs. Nor should we underestimate government influences, which, although they are less noticeable than they have been, are nevertheless still present.

I am not a paternalist, nor do I live in the past. I believe we should respond to the new needs of athletes, but champions must also admit that, although they have rights, they also have obligations. Can we tolerate athletes refusing a national team and participating in private meetings? I don't think so. Nothing will work smoothly if we cannot strike a balance. What is at stake today is the authority of sports powers over athletes and their environment. The sports movement has powers of organization and selection, and disciplinary and financial powers over athletes. Today it must share some of these powers, and a happy medium must be found. It must retain exclusive power in the first domain, the essential element of which is selection, since this determines champions' careers. Accordingly, it must oppose any external interference from managers and sponsors. On the other hand, federations' disciplinary power may pose a problem when it is contradicted by national legislation. It is then the duty of the sports movement to endeavour to reduce the differences, in the interests of the athlete. The sports movement is already obliged to share financial power, since athletes receive money from manufacturers and sponsors. There is nothing wrong with this, as long as the principle of the sports movement's authority is respected.

It is time for us to face the facts: athletes are full members of the Olym-

pic Movement. We sports leaders should encourage sports activity at all levels. But are we really representatives of these champions? We organize the Olympic Games for them, but we can no longer achieve this without making the athlete the fourth pillar of the Olympic Movement, along with the IOC, the IFS and the NOCs. Athletes must have a stronger voice, a more representative function, a more important role in our considerations. It is our duty to encourage the recruitment and involvement of former athletes with the necessary knowledge in sports administration at all levels, from club level up to the IOC.

RP: What do you think of the reforms that are to take place within the structure of the IOC?

J.R They will take place gradually. This is one of Juan Antonio Samaranch's key ideas, and it takes account of many opinions. There are a number of possibilities. I would advise a degree of prudence. We must study the principle of co-optation carefully, as it is practised today, and adapt it to current realities. Sport is not governed by the IOC alone; it is governed by the whole of the sports movement. The future composition of the IOC should therefore take into account the IOC-IF-NOC triptych. But in the first instance I think we should make small adjustments, and decide later whether we need to go further. I am for evolution, not revolution, in



this matter. The independence of the elected leaders, disregard for short-term contingencies and the survival of the Olympic Movement should be the predominant factors.

R.P: How do you see the role of the NOCs, particularly the European NOCs over which you preside?

J.R: I have a personal vision, which is not necessarily the one I promote in my official capacity, since as AENOC president I must represent the opinions of our members. Most NOCs wish to be the top sports authority in their respective countries. But not all of them have this ambition, and every national organization has the right to take the decisions it thinks best. I agree that many NOCs want to move away from their historical role, which consisted of selecting, registering and transporting their country's delegation to the Olympic Games, and propagating the Olympic ideal. In many countries NOCs have largely outgrown this role, thanks to the quality of their leaders and the financial resources at their disposal. The best example of this is the CONI. On the whole, NOCs tend to coordinate and provide a meeting ground for national federations; they therefore bring added value to sports organizations, particularly as far as marketing, sports medicine and defence of their common interests are concerned.

R.P: What about the reform of the Olympic programme?

J.R: The Olympic Games are extremely successful. The greatest professional champions; want to take part. If the programme were a bad one we would know about it. Of course, it is probably necessary to amend and adapt it. There are one or two disciplines

that we could question, and one or two sports that may have a chance of being admitted to the Olympic Games. But I don't think a great upheaval is necessary. Taking reform too far would jeopardize Olympic unity and cause complaints and recriminations that we can well do without. There will probably be a few changes here and there; they may even hurt. But it must be understood that we cannot reasonably go beyond the maximum quota of 10,000 athletes for the Games. As NOC representative and a member of the Programme Commission, I think it's time to call a halt. I-et's not bring in any more events. The IOC must be able to resist any inflationary tendencies. The Olympic Games would gain credibility if the number of medals awarded were decreased. I myself am amazed that one champion can have the possibility of taking three, four, five individual and team titles, sometimes even more, in a single sport, when in other sports they can only compete once.

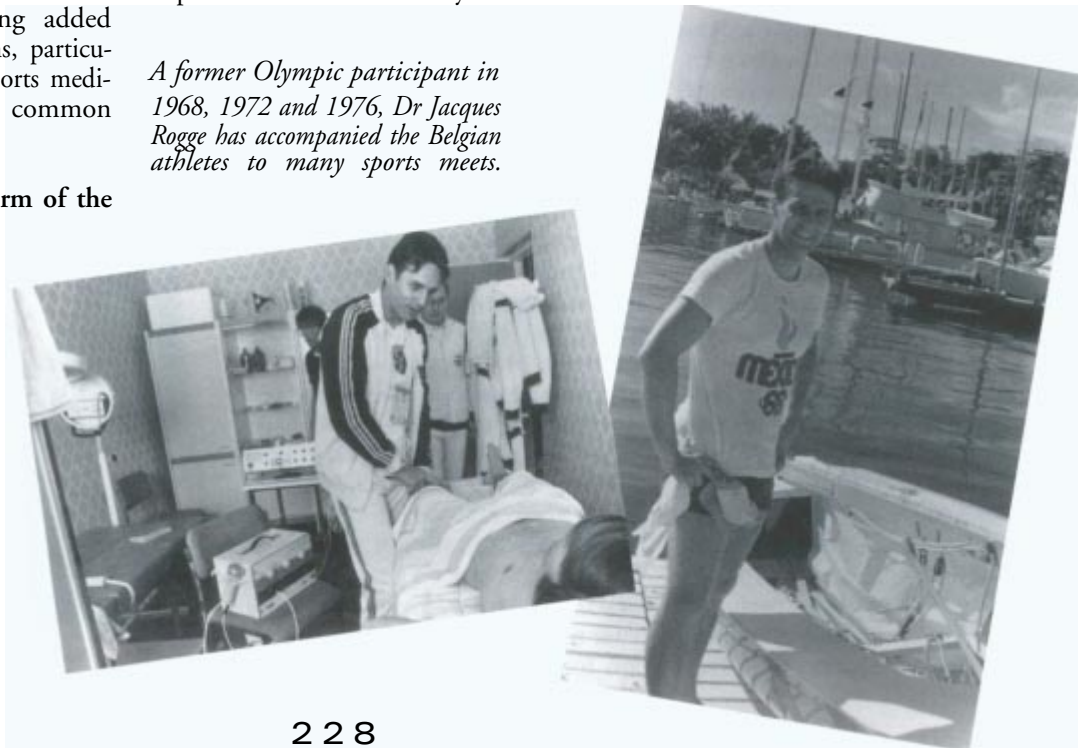
R.P: The Centennial Congress is taking place in France, Coubertin's native country. Is the Olympic vision of this pioneer still a point of reference today?

A former Olympic participant in 1968, 1972 and 1976, Dr Jacques Rogge has accompanied the Belgian athletes to many sports meets.

J.R: At the risk of shocking, I would say no. I have the greatest respect for the work accomplished by Coubertin, in a time that was not conducive to the promotion of sport. But in a hundred years sport has undergone profound changes which have totally modified its nature. However, for one part of his fundamental message, participation, Coubertin remains a reference; this is what I felt as an Olympic competitor. Every individual who participates in the Games finds fulfilment and personal satisfaction. What counts the most for the great majority is not so much to win, but to find one's own limits, to reach them and sometimes even to exceed them. It's exhilarating, and it is a kind of response to the existential anguish that is in each one of us.

R.P: Coubertin wanted sport to be first and foremost a form of education. Is this still valid?

J.R: He wanted to re-mould France. His educational views are still valid. In my opinion, sport is an essential means of individual and collective education. It teaches elements that are



difficult to integrate into what is generally considered a traditional education. In purely academic terms, we acquire knowledge and then we take exams. In sport we provide our own creativity; each individual contributes something other than a transfer of knowledge.

RP: Education means accepting the value of example. That in turn means respect for ethics. Would this be a topic worthy of the Congress?

J.R: I hope so. Ethics are primarily about protecting the individual: they can stop athletes from being exploited or manipulated. Ethics prevent sport from degenerating into a circus. Sport involves a concept of hierarchy that only has a moral value if it is based on ethics and meritocracy: the most deserving wins. This is where ethics meet up with the educational value of competition. If the fundamental rules are not respected sport loses all its justification, all its moral implications. You have athletes cheating, doping themselves, leaders corrupting, you have violence, hyper-commercialization, excessive nationalism, unlimited use of media information, as in the Kerrigan-Harding affair. The fact that Tonya Harding, regardless of whether she was innocent or guilty, could earn so much money after this scandal, is evidence of an intolerable degree of immorality. These constitute unacceptable attacks on ethics.

RP: Other dorms remain in abeyance. I'm thinking of rule unification. What will be done about this in Paris?

J.R: Rule unification refers mainly to the harmonization of the fight against doping, and recourse to arbitration for the resolution of disputes. These are two major problems that involve all the sports family, dangers that threaten the whole world equally. We must therefore find common solutions, taking into account the different

THE AVENUE PIERRE DE COUBERTIN IN PARIS

From now on, the French House of Sport is to be found at number 1, Avenue Pierre de Coubertin in Paris. In this Olympic Centennial year, the city council of the French capital decided to pay tribute to the restorer of the Games by giving his name to the avenue where the headquarters of the NOC and all the French sports federations are located in the 13th arrondissement. The inauguration took place on 23rd March last on the occasion of the presentation to the press of the programme of the Centennial Congress from 29th August to 3rd September.

Many former Olympic champions, such as Guy Drut, Marc Pajot, Jean-François Lamour, Murielle Hermine, Jeannie Longo and Sebastien Flute, were at this inauguration



Paillou, President of the Centennial Congress Organizing Committee; and Mr and Mrs Geoffroy de Navacelle, representing the family of Pierre de Coubertin.

attended by Messrs Juan Antonio Samaranch, IOC President, and Jacques Chirac, Mayor of Paris, to-dignitaries including the IOC members in France; the Minister of Youth and Sports, Mrs Alliot-Marie; Messrs Henri Sérandour, NOC President and Nelson

partners' freedom of action; We must never forget that doping is sport's greatest problem. Let's be realistic: doping will never be eradicated completely, any more than crime has been eradicated from society. I believe that the use of prohibited substances is a problem of delinquency, and we should act both by punishing, like the police and the law, and also by preventing, to ensure that the problem does not spread. I don't deny that I am worried. We are in a pursuit race that is not always in our favour. Methods such as the use of growth hormones and blood screening, which is used to detect the dominant chromosomes and future potential of children and

adolescents, are unacceptable. There is a risk that only the most gifted will be selected and, in the worst scenario, we will look for deviants, particularly among women, who have inherited advantageous genes. Top competition will become no more than genetic manipulation, whereas it can only be justified 'through individual merit.

**Interview by
ROBERT PARIENTE**