

PAN-AMERICAN GAMES: GOING BACK TO THEIR ROOTS



By our special correspondent in Mar del Plata

The first Pan-American Games were held in 1951 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, with a handful of countries and sports.

Forty-four years later, 42 countries and nearly 7,000 athletes celebrated this return to their roots, even if the host city was different: Mar del Plata, situated on the Atlantic coast, a 30-minute flight from the capital, Buenos Aires, which with its 47 km of beaches, lagoons and bays, it is said to be Argentina's favourite tourist centre.

And so it was inside a packed stadium that the Head of State, Carlos Saul Menem, declared open the 15th edition of the Pan-American Games, in the presence of the IOC President, Mario Vázquez Raña and Antonio Rodríguez, respectively presidents of the PASO and ANOC, and also IOC members in Mexico and Argentina. The guests included several IOC members and IF presidents: João Havelange (FIFA,

Brazil), Agustín C. Arroyo (Ecuador), José Vallarino Veracierto (Uruguay), Ivan Dibos (Peru), Anita Defrantz (United States of America), Fidel Mendoza Carrasquilla (Colombia), Willi Kaltschmitt Lujan (Guatemala), Carol Anne Letheren (Canada), Sergio Santander Fantini (Chile), Austin L. Sealy (Barbados), Aldo Notari (IBA), Sergio Orsi (FIC), Hein Verbruggen (UCI), René Roch (FIE), Yuri Titov (FIG), Erwin Lanc (IHF), Mustapha Larfaoui (FINA) and Paul Henderson (IYRU). The new Brazilian sports minister, Edson Arantes Do Nascimento, alias Pelé, was also there, apparently quite at ease in his new function.

The part of the opening ceremony which most delighted the public was the gymnastics display by small children accompanied by their parents. The sight of 320 children, wearing a uniform the same colour as mummy and daddy's, performing in the stadium was extraordinary.

The parade by Argentinian athletes who took part in the first edition of

the Games in 1951 was also greeted by thunderous applause. In the procession, the United States Olympic Committee president, LeRoy Walker, was also to be seen, not at the head of his delegation, but in the midst of his athletes. At the end of the day, LeRoy is happier on the field with his athletes for whom he has worked all his life than in meeting rooms. But it is my Press Commission colleague, Steve Powell, who would have got angry if he had seen the photographers stop the torch bearer, Nora Alicia Vega, for a series of shots and then accompany her up to the cauldron.

34 SPORTS ON THE PROGRAMME

The Mar del Plata Games comprised 34 sports, eight of which are not on the Olympic programme. The largest delegation, composed of 1200 people, was from the United States of America, worthy of inclusion in the Book of Records. As usual, the Americans, Cubans and Canadians dominated these Games which, a year before the

Centennial Games in Atlanta, allowed all the NOCs to assess their preparations.

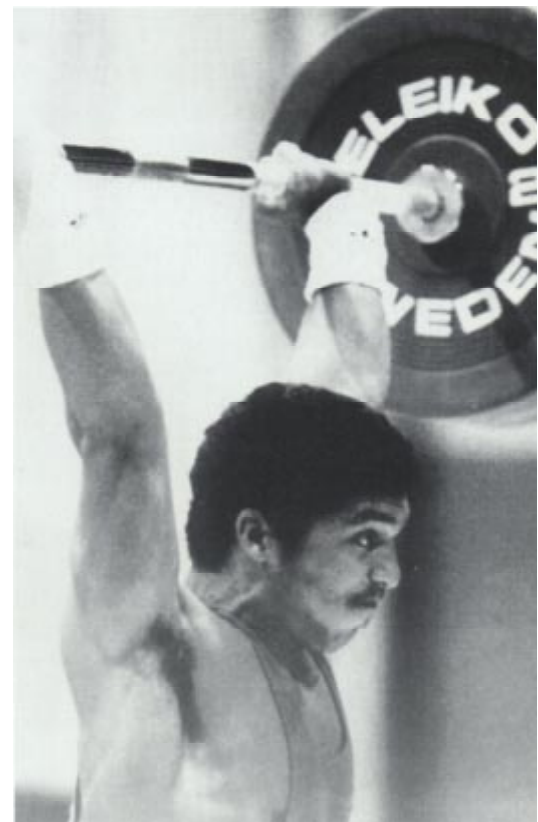
The fact that there were 34 sports and 1,343 medals at stake inevitably provoked discussions about the size of the Games. The proliferation of games with various titles and the use of the same athletes for all of them, especially by countries without major resources, seem to be causing concern. The organizing committee is nevertheless to be congratulated on allowing free access by the public to the archery, badminton, bowling, canoeing, fencing, Basque pelota, racquetball, shooting, water skiing, squash, taekwondo, table tennis, triathlon and sailing events, a way of promoting these sports.

And it is true to say that, because of the sporting powers which take part, the Pan-American Games are still the best of the regional games.



Fékrou Kidane

Volleyball match...



and weightlifting in Mar del Plata.