



The journey of a great President

The universal popularity of sport began in Europe and the Americas following World War I (1914-1918). The first celebrations of the Olympic Games in Athens, Paris and St Louis – which only had twenty participating nations at the Games in London in 1908 - were covered only by the media, more specifically the press, which devoted a few lines to sports news; commentaries on sport were something out of the ordinary. Households and families had yet to open their doors to the new education that sport was bringing to the world.

As a result, the Samaranch family – like the rest of society – did not begin to experience sport until the twenties, the very year that a son was born to the family, Juan Antonio, future President of the IOC. This was despite the fact that his father, Francisco, was a billiards and pelota (or jai alai) enthusiast and a follower of the football matches fought out between the two Barcelona teams, RCD Español and the former “Barça”, FC Barcelona.

Juan Antonio was the third son in a family of six, two girls and four boys, who discovered the attractions of competition and sport during their college days. Their mother, Juana, was a tall, slim lady, kind-natured with a strong attachment to good works – she was chairwoman of the Barcelona maternity hospital. She took an intense interest in the upbringing of her children. The future Olympic President was a pupil of Barcelona’s German College, where the main focus was on gymnastics and athletics. There was a strong sense of cohesion and solidarity among the Spanish

by Andrés Merce Varela*



pupils, reflected in friendships that were often cemented by football allegiances, polarized around the two major clubs of the Catalan capital, “Barça” and “Español”.

A restless pupil

A high jump competition was keenly contested at the College, and what was known as the “Lewden style” was beginning to gain a following in Spain. When his turn came to try to clear the rope that served as a bar in the school competition, Juan Antonio, driven by his restlessly competitive spirit, had no hesitation in jumping head first, as if diving into a swimming pool, much to the despair of the *Sportlehrer* at this demonstration of his pupils’ disenchantment with the technique being taught to them.

The beginning of the 1930s saw a great upsurge of interest in sport, both in Spain and elsewhere in the world. The decade began with a major event, the first football World Cup, held in Uruguay in 1930. Cycling events captured the interest of tens of thousands of people in Barcelona, and the

national football championships attracted hordes of spectators, though the city suffered a blow in the failure of its 1931 bid to host the Games of the XI Olympiad in 1936. It was only natural that the College would teach its pupils about the Olympic Games and the Olympic ideal, and tell them about the century or so of historical, archaeological, philosophical and sporting research, excavations and effort undertaken by the German researchers.

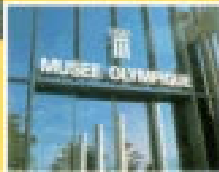
Samaranch lived with his family in the San Gervasio quarter, a sophisticated upper middle-class district of Barcelona. His home was near the headquarters and courts of the “Real Club de Tenis Barcelona 1899”, the city’s first; for the Samaranch family, it was almost an extension of home. The Spanish champion, “Bubby” Maier, and the junior champion Juan Manuel Blanc were friends of Juan Antonio, using the same courts and coaching facilities despite the differences in age and training.

On Sunday afternoons, Samaranch and his schoolfriends usually went to one of their houses in Plaza Eguilaz, which was close to the RCD Español football ground at Sarriá. The garden of the house offered a very convenient place from which to watch the matches, which could then be enthusiastically relived in conversation for the rest of the week. Naturally enough, Samaranch and his fellow pupils were supporters of the ground’s owner, Español.

Rink Hockey

In 1936 came the outbreak of the Civil War, bringing with it all the impositions, upheavals and disasters





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that were to leave their mark on Spanish society. When the war ended, the group of schoolfriends got back together. The two factors that cemented their friendship were their love of sport and their enthusiastic attendance at Español's home games. Some of the group were successful skaters, and they formed a rink hockey team affiliated to their beloved Español football club. The team soon distinguished itself by producing players like Trias, Más, Rubio, Nadal and Soteras, who ten years later, in 1950, formed part of the Spanish national team that won the world championship.

Samaranch remained loyal to Español but found himself taking on a managerial role, and when it was invited to compete in the Nations Cup at Montreux, Switzerland, it was under his leadership. This marked the beginning of his acquaintance with Ryeckewitz, the president of the sport's international federation, Sofflé, president of the Belgian federation, IOC Chancellor Otto Mayer, FISA president Gastón Mulleg and other leading figures in world sport.

A sporting politician

Samaranch's aspirations, powerfully driven by the need to develop sport in his country, made him swiftly aware of how little interest was taken in sport at that time by Spain's rulers. This situation had to be remedied. With that aim in mind, Samaranch agreed in 1953 to stand for election as a town councillor to the *Ayuntamiento* or city council of Barcelona. His platform was exclusively a sporting one, based on promises to build new facilities, improve existing ones and revitalize the sporting life of the city.



The future IOC President and his brothers surrounding their mother Juana. (left to right) José Luis, Juan Antonio, Augusto and Francisco.

At the same time, he also became a member of the *Diputación*, Barcelona's regional council, and took up the duties of provincial deputy responsible for sport. The *Diputación* was less tied down by bureaucracy than the *Ayuntamiento*, and provided Samaranch with a more effective forum for his efforts: when his term of office ended four years later, in 1959, every one of the 309 towns, large and small, in the province of Barcelona, and its 4,706,000 citizens, had at least one sports facility, a network unmatched in any other region of Spain.

The II Mediterranean Games in 1955

But Samaranch's greatest success, which projected him into the forefront of world sport, was the organization of the II Mediterranean Games in 1955, which had been awarded to Barcelona at the time of the I Mediterranean Games, held in Alexandria (Egypt).

The organizer of the Games, which follow the same formula as the Olympic Games, must be a member

of the city council of the host city. Barcelona at that time was bereft of a serious, solvent sports organization. All that changed with the organization of these Games. Samaranch, who had joined the council a few months before the opening, was appointed Secretary General for the event, responsible for setting up the organizing committee, structuring all the necessary work, planning the competitions and setting up the press, protocol, accommodation and transport committees. In short, getting the entire organization up and running.

The city still had the facilities that had been built for the 1931 Olympic bid: an athletics stadium (35,000 spectators), a 50-metre pool (3,000 spectators), two football stadiums (65,000 and 30,000 spectators), plus other small facilities. In the space of a year, the stadium and pool were refurbished, a new sports centre was built (for gymnastics, basketball, boxing, etc.), and additional smaller facilities were provided for the other sports taking place – shooting, equestrian,



Samaranch, goalkeeper during a rink hockey match in tribute to the former player Mateu Vilella, in Barcelona in 1967.

water polo, fencing, rowing, cycling, hockey, wrestling and sailing. The Games were a success, and at the closing ceremony IOC vice-president Armand Massard made an official public announcement to the effect that, in the light of the Mediterranean Games, Barcelona had the capacity to stage a brilliant Olympic Games, providing all the necessary guarantees. I was standing with Samaranch at the time, and he shot me a glance of complicity, both surprised and happy. That was the biggest success the future IOC President had enjoyed up to that time.

Difficult times for a journalist

Samaranch's sensitivity to all sporting events made him acutely aware of the various aspects and problems of the sporting scene. Thus, in addition to his demanding business interests in the Spanish textile industry, he had to find time for his political work and his efforts in sports administration (he was President of the Spanish Skating Federation), while at the same time taking an especially keen interest in the media without which sport would be unable to achieve the popularization and high profile essential to exert an influence in modern society.

He therefore began to work for the Barcelona evening paper *La Prensa*, for which he covered the Games of the XV Olympiad in Helsinki in 1952 and major football encounters in the Spanish Championship. One of these – an extremely keenly contested one, being a highly politicized cup tie – was a game in Madrid between Spain's two top teams, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. The Catalan team had won the first leg 3-0, but for the return match the media orchestrated a campaign with strong political overtones, producing a confrontational atmos-



phere between fans of the two teams. Before the game began, the chief superintendent of police visited the Catalan team's dressing room, warning them that any irregular or illegal activities by the Barcelona team would be dealt with severely by the police. The match was played in an alarmingly tense and dangerous atmosphere. But the shock of Real's 11–1 victory demonstrated just how abnormal the situation was. It was no easy task to describe such an event in a Barcelona newspaper. Samaranch was able to do it without glossing over the unpleasantness of the atmosphere, the pressure under which the Barcelona team had played and the general lack of normality that marked that day. The account of the match was a true test of professionalism, even without the additional pressures being brought to bear on the Catalan press.

A memorable personal adventure

One of the happiest adventures of my life was the opportunity to share my great Olympic dream, over the course of fifty years, with the man who rebuilt the future of Olympism and overcame the serious hidden dangers that had threatened the Olympic Games in recent decades.

Juan Antonio Samaranch experienced his first Olympic Games at Helsinki in 1952. He could not have picked a more auspicious moment. It was these Games that saw the first true outbreak of "Olympic fever" – the genuine sporting spirit and fervour and sense of spiritual communion that sport can create. It was after Helsinki that I first came into contact with Samaranch. It happened in Geneva, on the occasion of the final of the International Field Hockey Tournament. Juan Antonio,



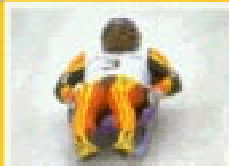
Samaranch (right) on the ropes, winner over Garcia who gave up after the second round, at the Catalan Amateur Boxing Championship on 28 September 1941.



Samaranch, then president of the Spanish Rink Hockey Federation, at a reception of the Municipality of Geneva on the occasion of the International Rink Hockey Tournament, on 25 September 1955.

as President of the Spanish Rink Hockey Federation, joined the Mayor of Geneva, the Spanish Ambassador and other dignitaries to welcome the two teams. I played in that final, and after the game Samaranch and I had dinner together. I said to him. "It seems a shame that a man like you,

with your vision and energy, your resources and enthusiasm, doesn't become involved in the Olympic Movement." He immediately said, "But I am in charge of Spain's rink hockey, and we are the world champions." "Yes," I said, "but the Olympic Games are the summit, the



On 22 November 1956, Samaranch raises the Olympic flag at the Montjuic Stadium, the day of the Opening of the Games of the XVI Olympiad in Melbourne, boycotted by Spain. On his right, Andrés Merce Varela.

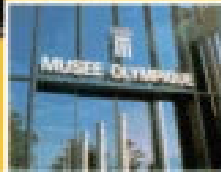
synthesis of all sport. They are definitely going to be the major event of the century.”

Since then, I have had the good fortune to share with him 22 Olympic Games, 60 IOC Sessions, 10 football World Cups, travel all over the world, and the greatest moments in world sport during the last – packed – half-century. His cousin, Francisco Torelló, who died in 1997, used to speak with Samaranch every day to follow, as I did, his activities. He provided him with moral support throughout his life. All this has given me the opportunity to become acquainted with some of the important qualities that have earned Juan Antonio Samaranch the title of the “rediscoverer” of Olympism.

1. His outstanding vision of **modern Olympism**

He understands that it has to be interpreted by those who participate in it – the athletes – and that they have to be given a sense of responsibility and turned into leaders of contemporary Olympism. As a result, of the 124 active IOC members, 38 (30%) have participated in the Olympic Games, and 19 of those have been Olympic champions. He eliminated the concept of “amateurism” among competitors: today there are only “sportsmen and -women”.

2. Another thing that makes him stand out is his **belief in team spirit**. Back in his rink hockey days, the Spanish team won its first world title under the leadership of a “band of brothers”, whom Juan Antonio Samaranch bonded together with his sense of leadership, his expertise and his ability to infuse his “team-mates” with his own qualities.



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3. **Energetic action** is another of his qualities. The immediate disqualification of the Canadian Ben Johnson in Seoul in 1988 after the final of the men's 100 metres was a clear demonstration of this. The President stood up robustly to the unusual revolt by the media that followed.
4. His **generosity** is an innate part of his work: generosity that is not only material but also mental and psychological, almost intuitive. The scope and resources of Olympic Solidarity owe much to him.
5. Another of his qualities is his **memory**. His lively mind can recall facts, dates, people and events. During his years as the IOC's head of protocol, his memory came to the rescue in many awkward situations.
6. His **emotional side** is another of his notable characteristics. On 16 July 1980, in Moscow, he achieved the great dream of his life: the Presidency of the IOC. Despite that, as at the Opening of the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona in 1992, his appearance before the United States Senate and other occasions, Samaranch was able to control his emotions and conceal his moments of joy, emanating calm and dominating the situation. Acting as a President should.
7. **Olympism first** has perhaps been the most important facet of Juan Antonio Samaranch's character. After the Olympic Movement had been directed for nearly a century from the uncertainty of Brussels, the remoteness of Chicago and the wilderness of Dublin, Juan Antonio Samaranch successfully



Samaranch (right) starting the 1st Vintage Car Rally from Barcelona to Sitges, on 8 February 1959.

8. moved his headquarters to Lausanne, far from his family, work, background and friends, to run the IOC with a single energetic hand and hold it on a true and steady course.
8. Olympism needed an **Olympic ethic**. Juan Antonio Samaranch established that ethic and maintained it steadfastly. That was clearly evident during the crisis of 1999. His ethic was driven by his friendship and affection for his colleagues and friends, and his ability to get on well with them. It has been repeatedly demonstrated, too, in his fight against doping and the creation of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).
9. **Political vision**. His term of office was marked by the political sense of his Olympic mission, from as long ago as 1966, when he was first elected a member of the IOC. His fortitude in standing up to the media campaigns against his administration, his firmness in confronting the United States

Senate and at the IOC Session in Lausanne that same year, were the measure of Juan Antonio Samaranch's political stature.

10. **His confidence in women**. After eighty-five years, during which female athletes had been ignored, Juan Antonio Samaranch, at his first session as IOC President in Baden-Baden in 1981, proposed and successfully carried through a motion to have women appointed to the Olympic governing body. There are now 14, among whom one honorary member and an IOC first vice-president.

Those, among others, are the ten important qualities of the IOC President.

This brilliant career comes to an end on 16 July 2001 in Moscow, during the 112th IOC Session. But I have no doubt that Samaranch will continue to be "somebody in the Olympic Movement", even beyond this date.

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