



Amigos para siempre*

Most of the visitors to the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona 1992 will no doubt remember this charming song “*Amigos para siempre*”. We could never hear it too much. Not a complicated and typical Spanish song yet still in a way summing up the typical feeling of Spanish friendship.

Since the end of World War II up to present, Spain has been one of my favourite places to visit and many of my oldest and best friends came from sport circles in Madrid, such as the big ‘bosses’ in the two glorious clubs Atlético Madrid (The Marquis de Florida) and Real Madrid (Santiago Bernabeu and Raimundo Saporta).

It was also thanks to the dynamic Saporta - in his function within basketball - that I first met the rather unknown Juan Antonio Samaranch during the Games of the XV Olympiad in Helsinki in 1952. Visiting the Olympic Village for the communist nations at Otaniemi, just outside Helsinki, I saw Saporta in the dining room where he was having coffee with a few Spanish friends.

“This is Mr Samaranch from Barcelona,” he introduced one of them to me and said I was a good friend from Stockholm whom he had come to know from football. There was not much more spoken... but to my surprise I found Mr Samaranch sitting in the press stand in the Messi-Halli where the boxing took place. We started to talk - he represented “*La Prensa*”, he told me, and had been a boxer himself.

by Wolf Lyberg**



He turned out to be a fan of Ingemar Johansson, who later became a world heavyweight champion. Many years later, rumours were spread (untrue of course!) that he had been a referee in Helsinki and that he was very much opposed to boxing.

Just imagine that this was the start of something which was so elegantly described in the title of the song we heard in 1992.

Forty-nine years have passed - we still see each other, throughout the world, always in connection with our common passion: the Olympic Movement... and of course the Olympic Games!

The unknown Spaniard of 1952, is now one of the most well-known people in this world, admired - and certainly also despised - and received by Heads of States wherever he goes, must have felt the same thing as I did: “An interesting person”.

For almost five decades we have ‘bumped’ into each other. It has not necessarily meant long discussions, but in some ways it seems we have had good contacts. I am bold

enough to call him my oldest friend within sports - I think that he perhaps also considers me as somebody who can be trusted.

It will soon be fifteen years since I started to voluntarily help the IOC with the documentation of its history. This has been the common denominator and the foundation of our friendship which has led me to write “*The seventh President of the IOC – Facts and Figures*”, marking the end of his years in the Presidency.

Many people ask me: “How is Samaranch as a person?” The reason must be that they have read many negative things about him in the media. It is a well known fact that people normally believe what they read - even if experience should have taught them better.

Let me first of all make it clear: Samaranch is a good person. His heart can feel compassion. He likes to help people... and he very often does. It can be individuals, clubs, organizations, even nations.

He has learned to listen and I think listening has helped him a lot through the years. As a diplomat it is a gift which is valuable. Even if he is one of the busiest people, he never seems to be in a hurry. He uses the time, which is necessary. Up to the end of 2000, he has travelled 4,700,055 km on 2,692 flights and spent 6,425 hours in the air or 267 days. He has made 127 transcontinental flights and his travels represent 112 times around the world. With his flights in 2001, he should reach at least 114. Furthermore, Samaranch has attended all the 28



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Sessions and the 108 Executive Board meetings held during his Presidency up to May 2001, plus two Olympic Congresses, and if you count all as an IOC member, the figures are: two Olympic Congresses, 47 Executive Board and 46 Sessions. During all our hundred meetings I have never seen him upset - well, perhaps a slight sign of it once. But let that be a secret of mine.

He rarely gives up - even if he has lost. He carries on - even if he as a boxer certainly knows the saying within the sport ("They never come back"). A loss for him can be temporary. He can accept it, but not for good. He is sure to come back... better equipped.

He is above all a modest man. He is not the man of luxury limousines and of five-star hotels. You can read about his opinion in many minutes. He is not a man of late hours. If possible he retires around 22.00. He eats with the utmost care and he

keeps fit by doing a programme of gymnastics every morning.

He is no gambler when it comes to economy even if he is extremely well schooled in this tempting way of life. Or just because of that schooling!

He is very traditional when it comes to clothing. You rarely see him in other than a traditional dark blazer with a light blue shirt or in a light blue suit with the same type of ties and cufflinks. He seems to like a very low profile.

As a former athlete he always thinks of the best for the athletes and goes to every possible length to find a good solution for them. Very few know that he was a good rink hockey player (a sport practically unknown outside the Latin world of sports).

Confidence in his comrades, friends and staff members is a typical trait of character in him. His disappointment if you cannot live up to his confidence is great. It is also then that

you can find traces of irony and sarcasm in his speech.

This testimony is not intended to be a devoted love song to a friend whom I have very much to thank for in giving me the chance to find out what really has been going on behind the scenes. I am convinced that anybody who had had the opportunity as I had would have come to the same conclusions. I am sure that if (and when) the IOC President publishes his memoirs, he will not misuse the freedom of the word - which he always praised - to strike low blows... of course not as a boxer!

Enjoy your well-deserved retirement... and when thinking of your old friend from the North perhaps remember the Barcelona song of 1992.

*Forever Friends.

**Olympic historian.



Meeting of the IOC Executive Board in Sydney in September 2000.



The IOC members at the 107th Session in Nagano in February 1998.