

A REVIEW OF THE CENTENARY OLYMPIC CONGRESS

by Herb Weinberg

In a manner of speaking, the world convened in Paris, France, late last summer. The event was the Centenary Olympic Congress celebrating the 100th anniversary of the creation of the International Olympic Committee in 1894 by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, a French nobleman. The first Olympic Games took place two years later, in Athens, when less than 300 athletes from 14 nations took part. It was a successful attempt to emulate the better aspects of the ancient Olympics.

The IOC Charter contains a recommendation that the Olympic “family” occasionally hold a Congress, which for the most part has taken place about once each decade for the purpose of reviewing and discussing the Olympic Movement’s problems and possibilities.

Therefore, in Paris during the last four days in August and the first three in September, more than 3,000 delegates from the almost 200 Olympic nations gathered in the French capital to discuss, if not debate, those issues facing Olympism. With a \$3 million budget, more than 400 speakers gave brief, three-minute speeches in addition to a few longer orations on the part of prominent Olympic officials within the IOC, the international sporting federations and the National Olympic Committees. There were presentations by scientists, historians, journalists, philosophers, physicians, scholars, athletes, and educators.

This, the Twelfth Congress of the Olympic Movement, spoke to four primary themes: 1) The Olympic Movement’s contribution to modern society; 2. The contemporary athlete; 3. Sport in its social context; and 4. Sport and the media.

The number and brevity of the presentations provided a kaleidoscopic effect that reflected opinions and attitudes common within the literally thousands of members within the Olympic family. Though such numbers created repetition, a picture emerged of all the facets of Olympism: politics, philosophy, banned drugs, the size of the Games, eligibility, the dilemma of whether Faustian bargains are being contracted with merchandising, commercialism, and television contracts. Professor John MacAloon of the University of Chicago stressed the importance of keeping Olympism close to its philosophic roots, while Anita DeFrantz, an American IOC member, spoke to the connection between success on Olympic fields and the financial rewards possible through such success. Can they hold to the Olympic standards of integrity in the midst of managers who think more in terms of money than any sense of idealism? Questions were presented, but the lack of time for debate provided few answers.

Kevan Gosper, the IOC Vice-President from Australia called for a taking stock of sorts: is there a creeping element of “show business” attaching itself to the Games as the media increasingly emphasizes and concentrates on star athletes from the more successful Olympic nations, to the detriment of developing nations?

IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch sought “unity” within the organization he administers, which not only involves such a range of issues but whose personalities also come from a myriad of social systems, languages, and customs; all that Olympism represents, particularly within a world where so many nations are in the midst of democratizing

themselves. At the final press conference President Samaranch expressed the belief that he and the Committee had succeeded in achieving that goal.

Emphasis was placed on the need to have Olympism, the Olympic Movement, and the Olympic Games serve as tools of education within the development of humanistic goals: fair play, integrity, sportsmanship, the involvement of sport within the community, and the use of the media to spread Olympism's peaceful message,

Following the Congress the IOC met for two days during its 103rd Session. They increased their self-elected membership from 88 to 100, a figure appropriate to the Olympic centenary. The new American member to compliment Ms. DeFrantz is James L. Easton, a Californian and President of the Fédération Internationale de Tir à l'Arc (FITA - archery). The Committee also granted Samaranch the privilege of nominating ten additional members as opposed to the tradition of limiting the nominating process to NOCs (*Editor's Note*: not exactly the way the IOC members are chosen), the purpose being to give him the means of adding more members from the sporting federations, believed to be under-represented in the IOC.

The IOC also discussed codifying penalties, within all federations, for athletes caught using banned drugs. And in light of their difficulty in limiting the Games to 10,000 athletes, they are considering the elimination of sports which no longer meet IOC international qualifying standards. At the same time, the IOC is being pressed for admission by sports that are growing in world-wide popularity.

Over the first century of its existence, the Olympic Congresses have occurred about once each decade and have served to document the evolution of what may be the world's most inclusive and widespread organization. For example, at the 10th Congress in Varna, Bulgaria in 1973, the Committee provided the impetus to break the males-only standard that had held forth on the Committee since its inception. Similarly, in Baden-Baden, Germany in 1981, the 11th Congress created the Athletes' Commission that has since infused competitors attitudes into almost every Olympic policy decision, both nationally and internationally. At that same session the Olympic door was opened to professional athletes, depending on standards set by each international federation.

In Paris, late last summer, at the Centenary Olympic Congress, that process of evolution continued.