

I CANNOT SAY ANYTHING ELSE BUT THE TRUTH!

INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT
OF THE INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE
H.E. JUAN ANTONIO SAMARANCH,
MARQUÉS DE SAMARANCH,

BY WOLF S. LYBERG

A look in earlier editions of the Swedish *Olympiaboken* showed me that the books had contained some fascinating reading under the title: “A day during the Games with the IOC President.”

When the editor of the *Olympiaboken* this last spring asked me for “something like that title” for the 1996 edition, I immediately understood that this would be an almost impossible mission with the current President, since he is always on the go and full of energy to meet with other people. I was quite sure that, although we knew each other since 1952, he could never have time for an immediate contact. I therefore asked him to make the time available for an inter-view, either in Atlanta or later in Lausanne. As usual I received a very quick answer from him, setting the time for August 8th, 1996, at 1530 hours.

To tell the truth, I still expected to receive a fax informing me to come another day at another time, as the President invariably is very busy and things constantly pop up which need his attention. That could certainly be expected in view of what he had to endure during the month in Atlanta. But there was no such message and with the list of questions I had sent him well in advance in my hands, I met with the President in his office in Lausanne. He looked very relaxed and received me without a tie and a coat, and I must say that he looked much better than during the days in Atlanta. And to think he had just arrived home from Atlanta only the day before.

“Well, that is how I feel. I am much better now than after

the adventure in Atlanta,” he confirmed.

And so the interview started. Very informally.

LYBERG: How is it possible that You after all these meetings, speeches, lunches and perhaps 200 days of travel each year, with differences in time, and not to mention all the press conferences...?

SAMARANCH: It isn't so difficult. The secret is that I really love what I am doing. Furthermore, I take care of myself and in principle I try to go to bed around 2200 and wake up around 0600. I start each day with 30 minutes of callisthenics. Well, it happened that sometimes it got as late as 2330 in Atlanta and it even happened that I lost a complete night because of the ‘bombing’, when we had to attend several meetings and where I had several telephone calls-among others with President Clinton. But my “job” is so changeable and I meet all the time so many interesting and new people, who are worth listening to.

LYBERG: Of course, it is no secret that all the people attending the closing ceremony or looking at the TV were awaiting Your final words. Were You going, once again, to say that the Games “were the best ever,” like in Seoul and Barcelona?

SAMARANCH: Didn't you hear what I said? That these Games had been “the most exceptional” and than it is up to

everybody to interpret that, however he wishes to. But this time they were not really “the best Games ever!”

LYBERG: The Atlanta press considered these words to be such an insult against the ACOG that they thought that Mr. Payne should have given You a real haymaker. And the day after the Games, President Clinton said that the Games had been “the best ever”.

SAMARANCH: Of course, Clinton had the right to say so. But I cannot say anything else but the truth. Maybe Clinton is right and that in American eyes they were the best Games ever, thinking about the very big crowds attending and the very good results from the American team. But there were many-too many-mistakes made, many of them perhaps never openly seen.

LYBERG: When You took over the IOC, there were 22 sports and 203 events on the program of the Summer Games. Now we have 26 sports and 271 events. Have we reached the end or will the evolution continue?

SAMARANCH: It will continue. Already in Sydney, we will have triathlon and taekwondo on a test basis. There are many new sports which are loved by the crowds and there are more and more National Olympic Committees (NOCs). But we have set a limit for the number of participating athletes. The figure 10,000 is holy for us.

LYBERG: Looking back at Atlanta, and the new sports (softball, mountain bike and beach volleyball), have these come to stay? I myself considered mountain bike as very, very dull!

SAMARANCH: I can understand your hesitation regarding these new sports, but just remember that we had 35,000 paying guests at the mountain-bike event. Beach volleyball was also a very big success with large crowds. As for softball, that is a sport for women. We need more such sports on the program. We wish to have more and more events for our women.

LYBERG: In different interviews you have said that “sports of less public interest” are going to disappear. Greco-Roman wrestling, fencing and modern pentathlon have been reported as being such sports. If these sports disappear from the Olympic program it will mean that they are more

or less finished. In Sweden there will be no more wrestling, as freestyle wrestling is considered to be uninteresting.

SAMARANCH: If a certain type of sport disappears only for the reason that it is not on the Olympic program, then it is indeed not worthy to figure on the program. Personally I think that these sports will remain, but perhaps restructured. We consider such problems all the time and have a working group dealing with the program for Sydney.

LYBERG: Golf has been mentioned?

SAMARANCH: I think not. As far as I know, the organization in charge of the professional players is not interested. And as you know, we absolutely wish the best athletes to participate.

LYBERG: Why has a so common and popular sport as orienteering never been considered?

SAMARANCH: Is this a recognized Olympic sport? [Yes, since 1960. W.L.]. If so, I must really try to travel to some competitions and see what it looks like.

LYBERG: You have also said that sports without public interest should not be on the program. How then can yachting, which in itself is a very fine sport, be allowed to remain? Just a very few privileged

people can follow the regattas, although the match-racing in the soling-class is a step forward. But practically every Games, the organizers state that in yachting they had zero spectators. When thinking about all the technical possibilities, wouldn't it be possible to have the Organizing Committees build a provisional stadium for 2000-3000 spectators and then show the races audio-visually?

SAMARANCH: That is a brilliant idea! I shall ask the Working Group to think about this idea. It is true that too few spectators watch the yachting events. Perhaps it could be possible to use such camera's as in the formula-one race cars? Of course it is a matter of costs, too!

LYBERG: As an old NOC man, I was from the beginning strongly opposed to the International Sport Federations' (ISFs) new quota systems to keep the number of athletes down. I now accept this as a necessity. But as You already know, in 1920 it was decided by the IOC that only the NOCs had the right to enter participants. The truth is that the rules of participation of the NOCs are many times harder than those of the ISFs, and the national sport federations take it

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for granted that the athletes are qualified if the ISFs say that they are qualified. This means that the NOCs have a very difficult position to say 'No' if athletes are not qualified conforming to their rules?

SAMARANCH: Let there be no mistake: only the NOCs have the right to enter athletes. Perhaps there must be better information on that point. Only in one case the rules for qualification of the ISFs prevail over those from the NOCs and that is in the so called team sports. There the NOCs, before the start of the qualification-tournaments, have to decide whether or not to participate. Once they have accepted an Olympic start, there will be no return - then the teams shall have to participate. But the athletes are still to be entered by the NOCs, of course.

LYBERG: It has always been stated that all athletes should be taken into the Olympic Village. Now the athletes seem to have so much money that they can afford to live in luxury hotels, instead of in the Olympic Village.

SAMARANCH: We are well aware of this growing tendency. However, I hope that the NOCs never pay the costs for such rooms. To live in the Olympic Village is unique. I heard that the Swedish tennis pros had been very skeptical in advance, but that they afterwards were very happy that they had not succumbed to the temptation to live in an hotel.

LYBERG: Is it not the time to do something about the Opening Ceremonies? It cannot be very good to have a ceremony so late in the evening, that the athletes and spectators can not be home until the small hours of the following day. Shouldn't there be some new rules to diminish the parade of athletes, which took 93 minutes in Atlanta and in fact was a constant break of the IOC rules on this occasion?

SAMARANCH: I agree that the opening march of athletes was something like a catastrophe. But I am sorry that we have no way of taking away athletes or try to reduce them to just a few per nation, or just have one person representing each sport in each nation. But I think that it was a good move of the ACOG only to have the flagbearers of the nations to participate in the Closing Ceremony. I am sorry to say that the Closing Ceremony has deteriorated more and more in the last couple of Games.

LYBERG: If I am correct, the IOC now has 112 members. Well, in fact there are 113, but the FIG President Yuri Titov is not any longer qualified because he was not re-elected in his capacity of President and thus has to be deleted as a member. The number of IOC members is increasing all the time and soon we will have reached the limit, which was once proposed by Andrianov. He wished to have both ISF, and NOC Presidents as members. And like most of his proposals, this was then thoroughly rejected. At that time the

IOC had 65 members. Will a continued increase of the IOC membership not include that the costs of the IOC will also increase and that it will become even more difficult to organize the Sessions?

SAMARANCH: Let us say that the proposals of Andrianov were not "appropriate" for that time. Many of these have later been accepted. We have to follow the evolution and for that matter just imagine, how many more ISFs and NOCs have come into being in the mean time?

LYBERG: Following a late IOC decision, it is planned to have 10% female IOC members by the year 2000. Can you really manage that? Those elected or co-opted must, beside being a woman, also be a very clever sports official.

SAMARANCH: Already in 1997 there will be more female IOC members. Of course, we pick these for their qualifications within the Olympic Movement and their knowledge of modern sport. A fine example is no doubt your compatriot Gunilla Lindberg. We are very happy to have her among us and you, who have worked with her during almost 20 years, must be well aware of her qualities. We will have much use of her knowledge and efficacy. We need more women as active as she is, and we will find them.

LYBERG: You may remember that throughout the years, I have always spoken warmly in favor of the co-option of a new member for Iceland. There has never been a replacement of Waage since he died in 1967. Will Iceland ever have a new member?

SAMARANCH: It is impossible for me to promise Iceland a new member. There are so many new NOCs, and we must remember that the IOC does not consist only of Europe. Many think that Europe already has too many members.

LYBERG: Then please let me inform you that after the session in Budapest in 1995, Europe had three members less, than they had in 1970 and that the other parts of the world had increased with 22 members. In 1920 the European membership was 67%, but that percentage has come down to 42 right now.

SAMARANCH: Is it really possible that these figures are correct? [Yes, they are, was my answer. W.L.]

LYBERG: Would it in the future be possible to have the media follow certain parts of the IOC session via internal television? Wouldn't this strengthen the position of the IOC with regard to the media?

SAMARANCH: It would be a possibility, but considering the fact that we already have three to four press conferences each day, I am sure that the media receive all the information they need.

LYBERG: You have always been eager to see to it that the IOC has a perfect archive and that history will be docu-

mented as well as possible. But if we look at the organizers of the Games in our current times, they are very negligent in their Official Reports many times. Complete results, correct information on the athletes and on the attending spectators are missing in the reports. Shouldn't the IOC in the contracts or agreements with the Organizing Committees see to it that there is a specific description what the reports should contain in information? Just imagine, when after 50 to 60 years, researchers should wish to find something and that they are not going to find what they wished to know about the most important part of the Games: "the athletes!" On the other hand, really insignificant and inessential information covers page after page.

SAMARANCH: That is not a bad idea. [The IOC President produced a memory notebook and wrote this down.] As you are especially interested in these matters and an 'insider' on them too, please assist us in due time.

LYBERG: Pierre de Coubertin once upon a time was very doubtful to have ISF presidents as IOC members because he was afraid that the IOC would lose its independence. How do you regard this problem now?

SAMARANCH: It is true that De Coubertin was afraid to have women and ISF members in the International Olympic Committee. But both categories are now necessary ingredients in the Olympic Movement. That is my only comment.

LYBERG: Have the Olympic Games become too much "big business?" The man in the street is thinking that the IOC is rolling in money. The truth is that only a small part of the money is flowing into the IOC vaults.

SAMARANCH: Perhaps we should inform the public better. So far, the Organizing Committees have had the rights to 60% of the TV revenues. Well, it was even up to 66% earlier. But from the year 2000 onwards, they will receive only 49%. The remaining money (after certain specified deductions, like, for instance, the payments of the ISF judges and referees) is divided into three parts, between the IOC, the NOCs and the ISFs. This means that the IOC will receive 13%. But only a few years ago, the IOC income from the so called TOP program and other marketing programs was bigger than our share of the TV revenues. But the main part of the TOP program now goes to the NOCs. Why did we change the percentage? Because we think that future host-cities should not benefit from the money which is coming from organizing the Games to build facilities and thus have a free ride on money belonging to the sports. Furthermore,

if there should be a profit, such shall be returned to the sport. Future organizers of the Olympic Games now know in advance what revenues they can expect of the television. For the year 2004 these will be around \$700 million.

LYBERG: Many people claim that the IOC is not very much interested in the matter of doping.

SAMARANCH: This is completely wrong. We started our first doping tests in Grenoble 1968 and have been fighting this poison ever since. But the real truth is that the IOC cannot disqualify an athlete for doping. We can exclude athletes who have tested positive from participating in the Games. But to punish them is a technical question. It is up to the ISFs to punish their athletes and to decide for how long the punishment will last.

LYBERG: Is the IOC satisfied with the agreement with the ISFs about the same punishment for doping in all sports?

SAMARANCH: Generally speaking everything is going fine, but I regret that some of the ISFs do not look at the problem like we do. This is an irregularity in our combined work.

LYBERG: The Athletes Commission wishes that all athletes who test positive should be disqualified from further participation in the Olympic Games and even be banned for life. What is your view on this issue?

SAMARANCH: That is absolutely impossible and contrary to everything we stand for in our modern society. Those who have served their punishment have paid their debts and should be free. But at the same time it must be quite clear that if someone is caught doping a second time, the punishment should be much more severe!

LYBERG: Has the prestige of the IOC been damaged because its Juridical Commission, through its judgment in certain doping cases in Atlanta, went against the decision of the Medical Commission, which had stopped certain athletes who had used the substance of bromantan?

SAMARANCH: No, not at all. The Tribunal Arbitral du Sport [Court of Arbitration for Sport] (TAS) is an organization of independent lawyers with extremely high qualifications. It is true that the IOC finances its work, but it is an organization to which athletes can turn when they have problems and think that they have been treated wrongly. In this case TAS was represented by three extremely high-qualified lawyers. They met for eight hours, with some of the leading experts on medical products and with the

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Medical Commission too. As it was absolutely impossible to verify that the substance named bromantan was ameliorating the results of an athlete, it was considered better to give the athletes concerned the benefit of doubt. I think this shows internal strength and above all independence vis-à-vis the IOC and perhaps it could lead to the possibility that athletes, and the sports in general, take their cases to the TAS in the future even more.

LYBERG: Isn't it alarming that of the five doping cases in Barcelona 1992, four of them came from women, and in Atlanta 1996 there were also quite a few women who tested positive?

SAMARANCH: We are well aware of this trend. But it also shows that women take a more intense look at their sports career, and that the rivalry among them is getting stronger and stronger.

LYBERG: Are You not afraid that the athletes will, through their managers, ask to be paid for participating in the Olympic Games? The managers are becoming more and more aggressive and may even threaten that some of their athletes shall boycott the Games, when they are not paid.

SAMARANCH: I am not afraid of such an evolution. For any athlete an Olympic medal means much more than any other normal title, because the Olympic Games only take place every fourth year.

LYBERG: But collisions between the managers from these athletes and the national federations are happening more often and are getting more common. Just before Atlanta, we had the problem with Keino and his fight as an Olympic official with the manager, who sent the Kenyan athletes to highly paid competitions in Europe, instead of being present at the training camp that the Kenyan NOC had arranged.

SAMARANCH: Such cases are rare and mostly a storm in a tea cup. It finally was only one athlete who missed the Olympic Games...

LYBERG: You are pointing at the Danish Kenyan?

SAMARANCH: Yes. I want to stress the point that the IOC did everything it could to find a solution, as Kipketer without any doubt was the best BOO-meter runner in the world. But he had the option to start for Kenya, if he so wished. But he made his own choice to start for Denmark. But there they kept exactly to their rules for obtaining Danish citizenship.

LYBERG: The matter of citizenship is getting to be a problem, as many nations, (such as Austria, Germany and Spain) use very short periods of residency in order to give people new citizenship. Other countries use four- to five-year periods and even longer ones. In Atlanta there were a

score of athletes from former socialist nations, who started for a new nation. Some nations even make it a sport to "buy" stars for their teams.

SAMARANCH: In this case the International Olympic Committee can do nothing whatsoever. If a nation is willing to accept a new citizen, we cannot object.

LYBERG: Is there anything left from Pierre de Coubertin's ideas, after the first 100 years of modern Olympic Games?

SAMARANCH: I wish to declare in absolute honesty that we are following the original ideas of the Olympic Movement and that not much has changed in the most important of these. Also de Coubertin wished that the best athletes should participate and with that in mind we have succeeded. I think that more sports will follow. Which? I cannot say now.

LYBERG: In the past people saw the International Olympic Committee as an institution that should be discussed every fourth year.

SAMARANCH: This is a completely outdated thought. Ever since 1969, my idea has been to make the International Olympic Committee an organization, which shall coordinate the world of sports. We shall also need to have good contacts with political organizations. We should never try to rule over other organizations, but only support these. We have done just that. Just look at the Sport for All and the Sport for the Disabled.

LYBERG: Everybody says that today in our modern society sport and politics are a natural combination. Can the IOC even think of having political links, both with and within different organizations?

SAMARANCH: It should be considered normal that the International Olympic Committee, with the best intentions for the athletes in mind, shall have to take up political contacts all the time. We have to do a lot of lobbying in order to achieve important solutions for the problems we encounter.

LYBERG: Do You think it possible that the United Nations would proclaim a boycott action against the sport, without contacting the IOC first?

SAMARANCH: Absolutely not. This also shows how well we have succeeded in our work.

LYBERG: Can You see anything at all that could cause trouble within the Olympic Family which is, at least for this moment, very unified?

SAMARANCH: There are always some persons who are not satisfied. Personally, I can see no reason whatsoever for an imminent revolution within the Olympic Movement.

LYBERG: What is in your opinion the most important thing that you have achieved during your Presidency?

SAMARANCH: To create unity.

LYBERG: Is there a possibility that the International Olympic Committee will be so dominating in its international role that other camps will be envious of the IOC and will try their utmost to discredit the IOC and the Olympic Movement?

SAMARANCH: This could happen. Certain tendencies in this direction have already been seen.

LYBERG: Some time ago the FIFA [International Football Association] decided to let Japan and Korea divide the football world championships between them. Is this a good way to have cooperation between neighboring countries? Would the International Olympic Committee ever think about dividing the Olympic Games between two countries?

SAMARANCH: There is, in fact, already such a possibility concerning the Olympic Winter Games. As to the Games of the Olympiad, I don't think that it could ever happen. Anyhow, not as long as we have so many candidate cities as at this moment. The amount of candidates is still growing every time.

LYBERG: We have lately seen a government taking decisions that indirectly concerned the Olympic Movement. Is that really something which a government should deal with?

SAMARANCH: Each government has its full right to implement a decision it thinks necessary. We then can do nothing. But we do encourage our NOCs to respect any decisions taken. I don't think that there is any reason to fear new boycott actions during the upcoming Olympiads. I even think that we shall have 200 NOCs competing with their teams in Sydney 2000.

LYBERG: Can You compare Your years as an ambassador for Spain in Moscow, with Your time as President of the IOC?

SAMARANCH: There are absolutely no resemblances, but the 30 months I spent in Moscow were very useful for me personally. I learned to listen carefully and above all not to rush my decisions.

LYBERG: What differences are there between Your IOC Presidency and those of Avery Brundage and Lord Killanin?

SAMARANCH: The differences are enormous. All three of us are different personalities; with a completely different

view of a world that changed incredibly during the last decades.

LYBERG: What advice would You like to give to Your successor-whoever it might be?

SAMARANCH: No, I do not want to give any special advice to him or her. One thing will be absolutely necessary, My successor must live in Lausanne and be a full-time President. You cannot lead the International Olympic Committee from another country or city. The function to make decisions then disappears into thin air. We have had some bad experiences with this within the IOC. And that must not be repeated.

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The time passed very quickly. And for once we were not interrupted by surprise and unannounced visits from other IOC members or other VIP's. The interview lasted 75 minutes. It had only been interrupted every now and then, when we were talking about mutual old friends and discussing the brochure with facts, which the President had asked me to produce about his Presidency since 1980.

And I finished with the query: And now, I suppose, you will take a couple of weeks for a holiday?

President Samaranch looked at me and with an amused smile said: Calm? Absolutely not. I will be leaving for Barcelona in two hours and stay away over the weekend. But August 14th, I will be leaving for Atlanta. I have to open the Paralympics...!

So there is no rest. No peace...

This article was translated into English by Mr. Lyberg, and is reprinted in the Journal of Olympic History with special permission from the chief editor of the Swedish Olympiaboken, Mr. Ulf Pettersson.

[See also the Journal's book review section.]
