

LORD KILLANIN

1915 - 1999

SEVENTH PRESIDENT OF THE THE INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

An Obituary by John Rodda

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Lord Killanin, the seventh president of the International Olympic Committee, passed away on April 25, 1999 in his home in Dublin at the age of 84. He was a journalist, soldier, film maker and businessman, but above all, an Olympian the world came to admire and respect for his integrity and humanity.

His eight years as president of the International Olympic Committee from 1972 to 1980 were its most torrid; yet during that time the Pickwickian figure with the white hair, half moon glasses and pipe, shaped the Movement into one ready for being truly world wide and fit for the twentieth century.

He bridged the gulf between the autocracy of Avery Brundage, the staunchest defender of amateurism, and Juan Antonio Samaranch who has used the world of marketing and television to bring the Olympic Movement enormous wealth.

Killanin saw the need for extending Olympic opportunity to anyone with sporting talent and dedication, but he was uncomfortable about the move

towards professionalism. He had seen its evils first hand in his years as a Steward of Irish Horse racing.

He was elected IOC president on 21 August 1972, five days before the Opening Ceremony of the Munich Games, and 16 days before the Olympic movement's darkest hour when in the early hours of 5 September the 'Black September Movement'

terrorists stormed the Olympic Village, holding the Games to ransom and murdering eleven members of the Israeli team.

The following year, Denver, hosts to the Olympic Winter Games of 1976, had opted out of their responsibility, and the huge saga of crisis and corruption was unfolding in Montreal where the Games of the XXI Olympiad were to be staged.

The Olympic Movement grappled and survived those problems under

Killanin's stewardship, only to find that a single city; Los Angeles, wanted to stage the Games of 1984 at the price of imposing a new commercial philosophy on the Movement. Then came Killanin's greatest challenge, the boycott of the Moscow Games led by the United States government after the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan in the final days of 1979. Hardly a day until the Opening Ceremony on July 17 passed without him being involved in the struggle to keep the



celebration alive; 62 of the 142 National Olympic Committees decided to stay away.

At his final press conference in Moscow, after the Olympic baton had been passed to Juan Antonio Samaranch, Killanin told the media that the biggest danger facing the Olympic Movement was drug abuse. Nineteen years later, just over two months before his death, the IOC held its first World Conference on the subject in Lausanne in what many saw as an admittance that the problem was not only enormous, but hopeless.

Killanin looked a loveable Lord, a gentle gentleman saving a touch of pomposity to go with his presidential position, though his impishness was never far away. In his years before becoming president he liked nothing better than to finish his days at annual IOC sessions by having a drink with journalists - whose ways and work he understood more than most members.

Micheal Morris succeeded to the title Baron Killanin at the age of 13 on the death of his uncle. Educated at Eton, the Sorbonne and Magdalene College Cambridge, he boxed, rowed and played rugby at school but his greatest sporting love was horse racing. At Cambridge he became president of the university's dramatic club *Footlights* and literary editor of the publication *Varsity*. After university, he joined the *Daily Express* newspaper in London and, having been sacked, moved across Fleet Street to join the *Daily Mail*. There he made a big impact reporting the Chinese-Japanese war of 1938 and then on his return to London, took up the post of a political and diplomatic correspondent of the *Mail* and its sister paper the *Sunday Dispatch*.

As the clouds of war loomed in 1938, he volunteered for the King's Royal Rifle Corps and as a Brigade Major took part in the Normandy landings for which he was awarded the MBE (Member of the British Empire). By what must be an extraordinary coincidence, the woman he was to meet and marry the

following year [1945], Sheila Dunlop, was working with the British team deciphering German codes and for that contribution she also was awarded the MBE.

After the war, Killanin divided his time between the family homes in Spiddal (Galway) and Dublin. He moved into film making,

working with the American film director John Ford on *The Quiet Man*, and among his other motion pictures were *The Rising of the Moon*, *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Gideon's Day*. He was always part of Ireland's equine world and membership of the Irish Turf Club from 1971 was among his numerous positions in the sport.

His first encounter with administrative sporting discontentment came in the early 1950s, when he was president of the Olympic Council of Ireland. Apart from the North-South divide there were further taxing problems among the duplication of sporting bodies in the South claiming to represent the country. Here Killanin used his diplomatic skill in the sporting sphere, something which was to be valuable in the years ahead.

He became an IOC member in 1952 and realised that the man who became president that year, Avery Brundage, had little understanding of the changing sporting world. While Brundage wanted the Olympic

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Movement to remain entrenched in the amateur ethos created by the Victorians; Killanin, believing in the value of amateurism, saw that changes had to be made in order for Olympic opportunity to be open to all sportsmen and women who were worthy of selection.

When Killanin moved for Olympic office promotion came swiftly. He became *Chef de Protocol* and Chairman of the Press Commission in 1965, and when he became a member of the Executive Board in 1967 he was soon having members pressing him to oppose Brundage in 1968. He declined on the grounds that he was not a wealthy man and could not afford such a position. After the Games of Mexico City in 1968, when revenues from television underpinned the security of the IOC, rule changes permitted the president's expenses to be met and so Killanin became the favourite to replace Brundage who stood down in Munich.

Killanin worked positively to show his fellow members what he believed was necessary, persuading Brundage that closer ties were needed with the National Olympic Committees and the International Sports Federations.

At the same time he worked on trying to ease the Olympic rules on training camps and other assistance so that the rest of the world could at least try to catch up with the socialist countries whose system allowed them to pay lip service to the Olympic Charter.

That Brundage was out of touch with reality and had long overstayed his time as president can be shown in the drama of the Israeli murders. On that day,

Killanin and some other colleagues were attending the yachting competitions at Kiel. When they heard the first news, their launch sped back to the harbour where they found a message from Brundage saying that there was no need for them to return to Munich since he was handling the situation - this to the man who would take up presidential responsibilities once the flame had been extinguished. Moreover, Killanin had further cause to rebuke Brundage, when in his address at the Memorial service to the eleven Israeli members, Brundage linked that event to the exclusion

of Rhodesia through pressure from other African countries opposed to apartheid.

This was the backdrop to the stage on which Killanin occupied centreplace. There was much to do to drag the Movement in to the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, his eight years were pock marked with crises which meant that many of the changes he sought to make, he had no time to achieve. He ran the presidential affairs from his home in Lansdowne Road, Dublin, with a phone, fax and secretary as his link to Lausanne, which he visited about once a month.

Montreal proved to be Killanin's first Olympic

nightmare as costs overran and construction workers put a gun to the collective heads of the Organizing Committee with their demands for more money. From November 1975 until he left for the Games in the following July, Killanin spoke every Friday night with a Quebec government minister Victor Goldbloom, who detailed progress of that week's work. As the North American winter set in, the scenario became bleaker and so depressing that Killanin and a few of his IOC colleagues met secretly

Highlights of Lord Killanin's Olympic career.

- 1950 Elected President of the Olympic Council of Ireland
- 1952 Elected member of the International Olympic Committee
- 1965 Chef de Protocol
Chairman of the Press Commission
- 1967 Member of the Executive Board
3rd Vice-President of the Executive Board
- 1968 No change
- 1970 1st Vice-President of the Executive Board
- 1972 President of the International Olympic Committee
- 1975 Chairman of the Tripartite Commission
Chairman of the Council of the Olympic Order
- 1980 Retired as President of the International Olympic Committee
Elected Honorary President for Life of the International Olympic Committee
Awarded the Olympic Order in gold.

in Amsterdam to set down plans for alternative competition in the Ruhr if Montreal withdrew. Killanin was keenly sensitive to the aspirations and hard work that potential Olympic competitors undertook and saw the need for an alternative competition, come what may.

Six days before the Games were to begin, Canada finally said no to the participation of/by Chinese Taipei at the prompting of a non-member country - the Chinese Republic. Grain contracts between the two countries had much to do with it. Killanin had been aware of the explosive problem for several months and he knew that had it come out into the open, the United States would have reacted vehemently to Chinese Taipei's exclusion and probably would have mounted a boycott. Thus in the Executive Board meetings and the Session in Montreal, he conducted a filibuster, so that only at the last moment was Chinese Taipei excluded.

Sadly, while this was going on Killanin failed to address the protests from African countries over New Zealand's rugby tour of South Africa,

and on those grounds 22 African countries withdrew from Montreal bringing Killanin one of his more painful Olympic moments. He fought diligently to keep South Africa out of the Olympic Movement until apartheid was gone - leading the first IOC fact-finding committee to the country - and as Honorary Life President, was at the Games in Barcelona to see that country's return.

His handling of the Moscow boycott might be criticised when compared with the way the Olympic movement operates today. He was a part-time president, earning a living in the business world as he

coped with this high-political drama. A greater urgency in meeting with President Carter and Secretary General Brezhnev immediately after the IOC members took their stance in February 1980 to go ahead with the Games in Moscow, arguably might have helped. He preferred a lower profile, working through diplomatic channels in Dublin and London, rather than making a presidential tour as Juan Antonio Samaranch tackles such problems today.

When he was elected president he talked about his desire to get the whole of China in the Olympic Movement; it was in fact a passion, because Killanin saw it as manifestly unfair that a large slice of the world's population was denied the opportunity of participation. But the political scenario and the powerful backing for Taiwan - Chinese Taipei in Olympic language at that time - was difficult. He tried to persuade the members when they met at Montevideo in 1979, but they rejected his formula, which meant Taiwan changing their flag and anthem.

He revived the scheme in a slightly altered form at an Executive Board meeting and

it was bulldozed through with the members agreeing in a postal vote. That, Killanin believed, was his single most positive contribution through his years of tribulation. Chinese competitors first took part at the Games at Lake Placid.

He had a droll sense of humour, which he used sometimes to deflate situations where people were becoming too intense. But it got him into mild moments *of* trouble on occasions, most notably at the Moscow Games where, in answer to a question at a press conference, he said that he thought the Americans would have been there had baseball been on the Olympic programme, a remark which infuriated the few American journalists present.

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Killanin was hugely popular in Ireland; he chaired a national commission on thoroughbred horse breeding, was chairman of the National Heritage Committee and even declined the presidency of his country, when the position was an appointment. His books included *Four Days*, an account of the 1938 Munich crisis, *The life of Sir Godfrey Kneller*, the seventeenth century painter, the *Shell Guide to Ireland* (with Michael Duigan) and three editions of *The Olympic Games* (with this correspondent).

Killanin was the man who opened the door wider on the world's biggest sporting event, shed a little light, a lot of hope and tried to fend off crises in Montreal and Moscow; yet was frustrated by these demands to bring about more positive changes in the Movement. He spent his final years amidst his books, pictures and Olympic memorabilia fighting Parkinson's disease. He is survived by his wife Sheila, three sons Redmond, Michael and John and a daughter Deborah.

Note by the Editor.

John Rodda was the obvious choice to write this obituary on Lord Killanin. After all both of them were co-authors of that magnificent publication: *The Olympic Games: 80 Years of People, Events, and Records*, which was Published in 1976 and followed up in 1980 with: *The Olympic Games 1980: Moscow and Lake Placid*.

Some of our readers might wonder about John Rodda's sentence, in which he referred to Killanin "having cause to rebuke Brundage about his linking the exclusion of Rhodesia to the memorial speech in the Munich Olympic Stadium, he held on the occasion of the tragedy in the Olympic Village, when eleven Israeli Olympians were killed by Palestinian terrorists."

In his book: *My Olympic Years*, Killanin himself described this unusual episode as follows:

"Standing in the centre of the arena to pay his tribute to the dead, he decided for some reason to make a pointed reference to the African countries who had threatened to withdraw from the Games if the Rhodesian team took part.

As he spoke I could sense the wrath not merely of the Africans but of the spectators and IOC members of all sorts. I remonstrated with him immediately he returned to the box,

deploring his speech and regretting his insensitivity, which indeed I found truly amazing and out of character, and no sooner had we arrived back at the hotel than representatives gathered from the African countries, led by President Ordia (Nigeria) of the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, and Jean-Claude Ganga (Congo), the Secretary-General.

It was not what he said that was objectionable in itself, but the occasion on which he said it. He himself was quite adamant that he had said nothing out of place, but the Executive were unanimous in considering him at fault. We agreed that he had introduced into a solemn memorial service something of a highly political nature, quite unconnected with the circumstances of the present tragedy. We therefore summoned, for the same afternoon, a meeting of the Executive. President Brundage opened the meeting by reading a statement, which ran:

The reference to Rhodesia in my remarks this morning was deliberate. It was intended to fortify the African sports leaders in their efforts to become free from their political masters. The reactions to the Rhodesian decision in mail and cables and the press of the world is about 500-1 against the political intrusion into the sports world, and the African politicians should know it. You will remember this sentence elicited the most applause from the spectators of the morning. There was no intention to tie this with the criminal terrorist action.

This exceptionally naive statement merely added fuel to the flames. Both I and my Soviet colleague Constantin Andrianov felt particularly strong that the President's speech further alienated the African countries, who were known to be holding a special meeting that evening to discuss the matter. We had enough problems on our hands without this one being added, and it was agreed that Arthur Takac, the IOC's Technical Director, should attend the meeting of the African countries and tell them that the President would be willing to speak to them and clarify his statement if they so wished. I knew quite well, however, that they would find this quite unacceptable as Brundage was completely persona non grata with all the African states."

From: *My Olympic Years*, by Lord Killanin, pages 95, 96.