

# Samaranch and History

## ... an inheritance very different from the one he received

By Harry Gordon



For the surgeon who has just taken charge of the International Olympic Committee, the prognosis looks rosy. The movement over which Jacques Rogge now presides suffered some punishing setbacks a couple of years ago, but it has come through them well. Thanks partly to the Sydney Games, it is now in better shape than at any time in its 107 years of history.

It is pertinent to reflect just now on the state of affairs that existed exactly 21 years ago, as Rogge's predecessor Juan Antonio Samaranch assumed the leadership in that city of Olympic destiny, Moscow. Samaranch had taken over from the Irishman Lord Killanin (born Michael Morris), an indecisive and rather frustrated president, and the inheritance was very different.

The three most recent Games until then --- at Munich (1972), Montreal (1976) and Moscow (1980) --- had done little to enhance the image of the Olympics. Boycotts were bountiful, Cold War politics dominated sport, the threat of terrorism had spooked the movement since Munich, drug-taking was largely unchecked, South Africa was an outcast. Aggressive amateurism reigned, to the degree that it was distorting the spirit of Olympism. The costs of staging an Olympics were daunting enough to frighten off most potential host cities.

The bad news didn't end there. Through its then 86 years of existence, through six presidents including the revered creator of the Modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, women had been largely ignored --- both as athletes and administrators. The IOC, while not broke, didn't have the money it needed to assert real authority. It had been run, in the kitchen-table style that used to characterise amateur sport, from presidential home towns like Brussels, Chicago and Dublin.

Killanin found it hard to cope with the villainy of Munich, the African blackmail boycott of Montreal, the tuggish politics of Moscow, and was glad to surrender the

leadership after a single term of eight years. At least he had exceeded the prediction of his predecessor, Avery Brundage, who claimed when he left office in 1972 that the movement would not survive another two Olympic Games.

Brundage had been in charge of the IOC since 1952, but his era of dominance in fact began in 1936, when he prevented an American boycott of Hitler's 1936 Berlin Olympics --- a boycott that would have changed the course of history. Brundage saw himself as a guardian of Olympic principles. He was obsessed with amateurism, and possible violations of it, and he now looms through Olympic history as a something of a caricature, a cowboy shooting at all the wrong targets.

The explanation for all that was wrong when Samaranch took over in 1980 sounds devastatingly simple now. The world had changed, but sport hadn't. The people in charge were anachronistic: they represented other times, other values, when the economy of sport could support a leisure class that could afford to compete in games for enjoyment alone. They were righteous, sincere and unenlightened.

What the Olympic movement needed was a revolution, and Samaranch gave them one: very quietly, very diplomatically. He is the reason for Jacques Rogge's sublime inheritance. He had what showbiz people call a bad press there for a while, but it is my belief that history will look with admiration at his 21-year term in the most important job in world sport.

This is just some of what happened under his regime. Amateurism died, and with it a great deal of hypocrisy. Women's participation in the Olympics increased to 40 per cent. The IOC admitted its first two female members in 1981, and by 2001 had 14 of them, including a vice-president. The boycotts ceased (after one tit-for-tat exercise in Los Angeles in 1984). The movement prospered, with

world-wide sponsorships and huge television audiences. The IOC was run like the giant corporation it is, with headquarters in Lausanne. Far from being financially fearful of holding the Games, prospective host cities jostled to bid. Athletes were given a role in running the movement through the Athletes' Commission and the IOC itself. No fewer than 40 former Olympic competitors took seats on the IOC, and arrangements were made for another seven to come on board in mid-2001. The IOC led the way in tackling the problem of drugs.

Obviously, future historians will need to weigh the achievements of Samaranch against the fact that the IOC, under his presidency, was stained by the 1999 Salt Lake City corruption scandal, an affair that resulted in the expulsion of 10 members. In any final assessment, though, he ought to win some credit for the vigorous manner in which he tackled the task of reform.

Rogge is a practical man who has some poetry in him. He talks with feeling about the purity of the Olympics, about their role as a purveyor of dreams. He sees the drug problem as an expression of mankind's frailties. He feels it's essential to protect the Games from gigantism. He is keen to rejuvenate the IOC, to make it more transparent. He seeks to encourage greater representation of women, not just in the IOC but in sports administration generally. He wants to live in the Village. He is the right man.

His two great tests, though, lie straight ahead. For different reasons, Athens and Beijing both represent risky enterprises. The first, which symbolises the Olympic past, needs all the organisational help it can get. The second involves global hopes for the future, and more democratic faith than has ever been invested in a totalitarian regime.

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