

THE NEW LORDS OF THE RINGS, 1996.

Chapter 21: Death In Paris

THE OLYMPIC CHARTER calls for a congress to be held in principle every eight years. Samaranch had avoided calling a congress since the rubber-stamp convention of 1981 when sports officials from around the world travelled to Baden Baden to be told the Olympics were being handed over to the multi-national sponsors.

There had been plans for a congress in 1990. By the mid-1980s committees and commissions, all with their own budgets, had been set up to plan a convention in Tokyo. The IOC persuaded China to delay the opening of the Asian Games scheduled for that year and agreed that the congress motto should include the word peace. That decision was taken the same day they resolved that their "clear objective" in hiring American spin doctors was to procure the Nobel Peace Prize. But Samaranch became unhappy; he'd discovered that this celebration of himself and his committee was to be staged without subsidies from Japanese taxpayers. Instructions were sent to Tokyo; the Leader would be there in two months time and he expected handouts.

The Japanese government caved in and guaranteed a chunk of the \$8 million budget and the IOC graciously

pledged \$100,000 of its own money. But as the Nobel campaign grew, Samaranch's enthusiasm declined. A congress in 1990 ruled out another one in 1994 when the combination of their centenary, the Lillehammer Games and the Olympic Truce provided a triple whammy with which to clobber the Norwegians. So Tokyo was abandoned, the money already spent was written off and a "Congress of the Century" planned for Paris 1994. Samaranch told his closest colleagues it would be "very prestigious."

But there were good reasons to convene in 1994. There was the committee's hundredth birthday to celebrate in Paris where the movement began. Grandiose speeches could be made about the Olympics' contribution to world peace and delegates could talk until they were exhausted about the future of the games in the next century. The low-ranking sports officials from around the world would surely feel that Samaranch was listening: lately he had made vague noises about the long-overdue democratising of the Olympic movement.

It was a disaster. Nelson Mandela said he was sorry but really too busy to make the trip to Paris; French President Francois Mitterand stayed home in the Elysée Palace and Placido Domingo cried off. The guest list at Samaranch's most important ever Olympic event was beginning to look a

bit thin. Then the UN general secretary, the boss of UNESCO and the prime minister of Norway all sent their regrets. The front row of the VIP box at the centenary congress of the Olympic movement was going to be full of empty seats. This was Samaranch's last big public push of 1994 for the Nobel, the bill was already at \$16 million and rising and now he had nobody to make world headlines.

The absence of his star names focused attention on the agenda, little more than a celebration of the longevity of the Olympic committee, and media coverage was universally hostile. The delegates found themselves and their contributions sidelined in debates that never questioned the commercial exploitation of the Olympics, the increasing power of television and what the IOC does with all its money. At the end of a week of hot air, the movement had no idea how it was going to progress into the twenty-first century. But Samaranch wouldn't be around then so it didn't matter.

THE centenary was milked for all its worth. Paris wasn't hit once, but twice. Pierre de Coubertin and his aristocratic friends had announced the revival of the Olympics on 23 June 1894, and so a century later Samaranch and his Olympic club turned up at the ornate Great Amphitheatre of Paris's Sorbonne university to make self-congratulatory

speeches. But there was a problem: their credibility with the media had diminished since the manipulations nine months earlier that had nearly given the games to Beijing. The sulky hacks kept asking how the IOC reconciled their open to professionals Olympics with Coubertin's amateurs only Games. "This is a very superficial approach," said chief Olympic bureaucrat Francois Carrard, reassuringly. "A man with his vision would understand what is being done."

Two months later in August they returned to Paris for the money-no-object congress. The IOC announced that "two thousand people from all parts of the international Olympic movement will meet to consider the future of the Olympic games." It was as much a class-ridden occasion as the one a hundred years earlier. The IOC and its important friends enjoyed the best functions "by invitation only," as the schedule revealed. For the rank and file there were public spectacles. Oxford and Cambridge university rowing teams raced on the Seine, sky-divers with parachutes in the blue, yellow, black, green and red colours of the five rings dropped in at the Eiffel Tower with the Olympic flame.

Samaranch's original plan was for a grand centennial dinner at the Palais de Versailles (by invitation only) but this was later altered to a less ostentatious ceremony at the Sorbonne (again, by invitation only).

Without his big stars, Samaranch seemed confused. "I leave the stand to President...er...Prime Minister Balladur," he mumbled at the opening ceremony. The Olympic visitors promptly took a back seat as Balladur made his pitch for the forthcoming French presidential elections. "I am personally keen for France to host large-scale and top level sporting events," said Balladur, adding that he hoped to see the Olympics in France early in the next century. Rival presidential hopeful Jacques Chirac followed up with "The people of Paris are deeply moved by the IOC's decision to choose this city to celebrate solemnly the anniversary," a coded repetition of the Parisian politicians' desire to stage the Games.

Samaranch then set out his agenda. "Our duty is to be at the service of the athlete," he said. He then completely contradicted himself. "The IOC must listen to all opinions ... it will then be up to the IOC Session to analyse the consequences and take the necessary decisions." In other words: you talk - we decide.

THE congress was staged well away from central Paris, way beyond the Arc de Triomphe, beyond the end of Avenue Charles de Gaulle, across the Seine in the La Défense business quarter. This ugly sprawl of tower blocks, the home

of Esso, Citibank, Fiat, Hoechst and a host of other multinational companies was entirely appropriate for Samaranch's new Olympic movement.

Riot police with clubs and guns guarded the entrance to the convention centre and its huge concrete dome. Once through the doors, delegates found themselves in what seemed like a hangar fit for a Zeppelin, faced by a carpeted walkway striped in the Olympic colours, disappearing into the far distance. More security guards checked every accreditation and, denied admission, I sat for the next four days outside the Café de la Place, taking notes, watching the dealmakers muttering over their café au lait, and waiting for sympathetic reporters to bring me spare sets of documents.

Hundreds of volunteer hostesses in red waisted jackets over peek-a-boo blue mini-skirts ushered very important Olympic committee members to and from their limousines. Behind the fixed smiles they weren't all happy. "It's all about marketing but we're not being paid," one of them told me. "I'd rather be at the Olympics."

Scattered around the dome were free-standing video monitors endlessly playing the IOC promotional film. Sponsor's logos were superimposed over shots of Olympic champions and the parade ended with Samaranch's tribute to his paymasters. "Every act of support for the Olympic

movement promotes peace, friendship and solidarity throughout the world," he claimed. For those who hadn't got the message Samaranch concluded, "For helping keep the flame alive, we thank the Olympic sponsors."

The Olympic committee had stumped up \$6 million from their reserves towards the \$16 million bill. The city of Paris tossed another \$5.4 million in the pot and the French government chipped in \$4 million. A further \$600,000 came from sponsors Adidas, Hermes, Credit Lyonnais, Air France and Renault. All Samaranch could say when a reporter asked him to justify the cost was "I think it is worth it."

Working the floor were father and son double act Artur and Goran Takac. I shook hands with Goran and congratulated him on his health. "I look tanned because I have just been on holiday," said the well-rewarded Olympic bidding consultant. Mickey Kim and his entourage of sharply dressed black belt instructors wandered the huge hall looking like an ageing rock band: Dr Kim and the Limb Disjointers. They'd everything to smile about; at the end of the week Samaranch would confirm that taekwondo would be in the Sydney Games and their cash registers would overflow.

Many of them remained in the Café de la Place rather than attend the discussion on the Olympic Movement and International Understanding. Mickey's daughter was in town

as usual; Kim Hae Jung is a pianist and frequently performs at Olympic functions. The previous year the Berlin 2000 committee had arranged a gig for her with the Berlin Philharmonic and she was now giving a recital in the Grand Amphitheatre of the Sorbonne for the greater pleasure of the guests of the congress, part of what they called the "Cultural Programme for Accompanying Persons."

I buttonholed one of the IOC's directors who immediately demanded anonymity, told me the IOC is much more democratic under Samaranch, insisted that Spaniards "love" Samaranch, admitted he knew nothing about modern Spanish history and then gasped when he saw executive board member Dick Pound glaring at him. Information director Michele Verdier scampered around as usual with her bundles of files while her new boss Andrew Napier massaged the hacks during the day at the congress and at night in the bar of the Mercure hotel. Napier would have been unaware, as he pushed the party line, that within six months Samaranch would have ejected him from his job in Lausanne.

AROUND the big players ebbed and flowed the lowly sports administrators from around the world, many of whom had never seen the IOC at play before. These officials, the

backbone of world sport who struggle to find the funds to organise sport and training for their young athletes, were looking forward to earnest and useful discussions and decisions. Instead, they discovered the agenda had been stitched up a year before to showcase the IOC leadership. Many looked quite poor in rayon suits and cheap shoes and most of them clutched the white plastic briefcases distributed to all delegates.

These folk are never on the sumptuous gift lists taken for granted by Olympic committee members. Inside their cheap goody bags were an Adidas tie, an XL size T-shirt with the congress logo, a zipper bag with pens, pencils, a portable hole puncher, sticky tape, glue, scissors, staple remover and a bottle of eraser fluid for blanking out residual Olympic idealism.

To cheer them up as they tried to make their allowances stretch to cover the cost of meals delegates also got a declaration on fair play, a set of Paris postcards and the annual report of the Olympic museum. In case they still had daft ideas that there might be any voting at the congress there was a special brochure reminding them that Pierre de Coubertin had wanted the movement to be free of "electoral uncertainty" - the IOC's standard defence for its lack of democracy.

These two thousand administrators were shipped in to make up the numbers, a few of them allowed to make supportive speeches about the Olympic committee. They were scattered in neighbourhood hotels. Next up the pecking order were the rank and file Olympic committee members - and they weren't too happy either, despite staying in the Grand Hotel with its magnificent foyer decorated with chandeliers and paintings.

"The IOC footsoldiers were not having a good time. The public thinks they are at the centre of power - but they know they are cosmetic, just window dressing" said a friend of mine who was also staying in the Grand. "Stuck in a separate hotel, they couldn't even lobby their own leadership. Some of us complained to them that they were hogging the chance to speak, popping up at the podium four or five times. They rounded on us saying, 'This is the only chance we get to speak!'"

The congress generated an estimated six million sheets of paper and more than four hundred speeches were delivered. How the time was shared out says all you need to know about the priorities of Samaranch's modern Olympic movement. His committee, then of ninety-odd members, the international sports federations and the national Olympic committees were each allowed ninety-two speeches, totalling

six hours and thirty-five minutes per group; just over four minutes each. Out of the couple of thousand congress delegates, only one hundred and twenty were athletes and they got just forty-nine speaking spots, totalling two hours and thirty-nine minutes; a little over three minutes each. There was no open invitation to the world's competitors; they were hand-picked by Lausanne.

Just about everybody present - except for the IOC - thought it urgent to discuss the future of the Olympics, how to stop doping, getting control over commercialism and being given more money from the swollen accounts in Lausanne. Delegates who'd come half way round the globe wanted to hear constructive criticism and visionary approaches to the problems besetting the movement.

What did they get? Four nebulous themes: The Olympic Movement's Contribution to Society, The Contemporary Athlete, Sport In Its Social Context and Sport and the Mass Media. Not a lot for \$16 million. The IOC's leaders claimed this would produce a blueprint for the Olympics in the coming century but many muttered that these were irrelevant debates. "I think these meetings have much more value than you can perceive at the time," insisted IOC director general Francois Carrard. "We are expecting very precious results."

THE important speakers got more than three minutes. You could tell which ones they were because their oratory was printed on pink paper. Speeches from ordinary delegates were shovelled out in piles of white, mostly never listened to or read. One of the few pink contributors, on Sport in its Social Context, was Mr John Hunter. Does his name ring a bell? Did he win gold somewhere, sometime? No; he makes gold out of the games. Mr Hunter's an executive VP of Coca-Cola. Delegates had to put up with a sugar drink hustler taking centre stage in their Olympic discussions, in Paris to tell everybody that "To sponsor is to believe."

Mr Hunter said that Coke "cherish the same values, the same principles and the same beliefs as the Olympic Movement." I understood that bit, even if it isn't true. He talked so much about belief that I half expected him to start baptising delegates in a font of the fizzy brown stuff - but then he got to his real message. "Just as sponsors have the responsibility to preserve the integrity of the sport, enhance its image, help grow its prestige, and its attendance, so too, do you have responsibility and accountability to the sponsor."

Another pink paper proselytiser wore what looked like the most expensive suit in Paris. Inside it was of course Professor Anwar Chowdhry, president of international amateur boxing, at the congress to give a lecture on Olympic

morality, a subject he knows more about than most. His impenetrable speech included references to historical dynamics, humanist personality formation and ethical normatives. I wondered for the sake of Mr Chowdhry's mental health whether he'd actually written this. The only words I'm confident were his own were "Our movement reflects the present state of moral sense ... the decisions of the judges and juries are respected." He said nothing about the Seoul boxing results.

The IOC's Judge Keba Mbaye spoke on the same theme as Chowdhry, announcing that "The Olympic movement remains the supreme moral authority in sport" and insisting, "A long cherished dream has come true; the establishment of an Olympic Truce." Fellow executive board member, China's Zhenliang He revealed, "The Olympic movement is holding high the banner of international understanding, peace and progress" and the Congo's Jean-Claude Ganga said that few other organisations have such "respect for democratic values and human rights." He was speaking of the committee whose leader tried to give the Games to Beijing and which is still accountable to no-one but the Coca-Cola company..

This was all good knockabout nonsense. Then it turned sinister. Former Adidas lawyer and Olympic committee

member Thomas Bach suggested that the IOC should stop selling television rights and instead produce its own pictures and sell them. "The production of television images as well as their transmission under the sole responsibility of the IOC," said Bach, "could be helpful for sponsors, for television stations but above all for sport and the Olympic Movement itself." This would be Samaranch's ultimate; no troublesome journalists and television producers making their own decisions about what the world should be allowed to see.

Where Thomas Bach led, Mickey Kim was quick to follow. "The evolution of sport and of television must remain under the control of institutional sports authorities," he suggested. The IOC should "co-ordinate and control media traffic," was another idea, straight out of the Korean spooks manual. It was backed by fellow IOC member, banker Richard Carrion from Puerto Rico. He also advocated the IOC keeping "sole control of its own product." Reuter commented that these proposals would restrict media coverage to the level permitted by totalitarian regimes. "Fortunately for the media and for the Games," said their reporter, "few delegates seemed to take them seriously,"

ALTERNATIVELY, there was Australia's Mr Clean from the executive board. Kevan Gosper's pink paper was littered with

the word COURAGE, always in capital letters. Courage was needed to stop entertainment taking over the Games and elite athletes driving out competitors from the developing world, and to liberate a few more seats in the Olympic stadium currently owned by the corporate sponsors.

A flutter ran around the press corps; this was revolutionary stuff - for an IOC member! Was it his coded bid to displace Dick Pound in the Samaranch succession stakes? Wasn't he knocking the Leader's greatest achievements? Not in the opinion of the *Los Angeles Times*. "Gosper, fearing he had been too blunt, went to the press room to inform reporters that he was merely tossing out some suggestions, that he was not sure when or even whether the IOC should act on them and that what really bothered him was 'extravagant, unrelated' entertainment at sporting events. He was unable to describe what he was talking about but he presumably knows it when he sees it."

One critic who did know what she was seeing and wasn't happy with it was French sports minister Michele Alliot-Marie. "Let's not forget that the ancient Olympic Games died of these evils: money, corruption and cheating," she said. "I believe the abuses that one finds in sport are due in no uncertain measure to the relationship between sport and money." Never before had a keynote speaker at an Olympic

convention described the ancient Games as evil. And then criticising Samaranch's greatest and only achievement, selling the Games for cash. That was her Olympic Order down the tubes.

There weren't many dissident voices in Paris and those that were spoke mostly to half-empty halls. Norwegian green campaigner Olav Myrholt said the IOC talked about protecting the environment but he felt its "action seems to lag behind." Professor Bruce Kidd from Toronto called for real gender equality in the games; not just in the events but also among the officials. Les McDonald of triathlon had been reading the official book of the congress, *For a Humanism in Sport*, and noticed it had only one reference to women. Former Olympic Hurdler Ed Moses pointed out that athletes have little or no say in most of the sports federations, the national Olympic committees or the choice of Olympic host cities.

The saddest conversation I had in Paris was with Norwegian skater Johann Olav Koss. "I am here to suggest that you keep the flame alive for Olympic Aid. The torch should be handed over to the next organisers of the Olympics," he pleaded with delegates. "There should be an Atlanta Olympic Aid and a Nagano Olympic Aid. It should be a permanent feature of the Olympic movement." After his

speech he told me, "My appeal has had no immediate response from the IOC and Atlanta does not want to know. Nagano do appear interested. But, Nagano wants to pick up the mantle from Atlanta. When I spoke only twenty-five per cent of the chairs were occupied."

A year later Atlanta did respond. Together with the UN they plan to raise \$7 million to provide medicines, counselling and education for the estimated twelve million children who've lost their homes and often their parents in regional wars in the last decade. "Because of its direct connection to the Olympics ... we saw not only a perfect but a beautiful fit," said Billy Payne, citing the Olympic Truce.

Koss wasn't the only person speaking to empty chairs. Samaranch's soporific agenda had driven many delegates out into the autumnal sunshine of the La Défense plaza. At one session there were only sixty-three people in a room with five hundred chairs, reported one of my spies, and by the last day only one hundred out of two thousand delegates were still down in the basement, of whom many had fallen asleep.

A rising star of the Olympic committee, say its cheerleaders in the press, is Belgian surgeon, Jacques Rogge. His test came in Paris. The congress had been prevented from doing

anything positive, had avoided all the issues confronting the Olympics and couldn't even bring itself to review the creaking sports programme in the Games. How could the delegates who'd travelled such distances be fobbed off, rendered brain dead before being dispatched to the airport?

"When the IOC president announced in 1990 that a major change in the Olympic programme would be decided during the Paris session," said Rogge, adopting the role of anaesthetist, "the world of sport and the press reacted with emotion."

Unlikely, but how could Rogge explain away the lack of action in Paris? "As the games are a success, their programmes could not be bad," said the man tipped for the top. As delegates slipped into a coma Rogge continued, "it is recommended not to intervene on topics about which a decision was already taken by the IOC." Which should have raised the issue of democracy in the Olympics - but that had also been promised and then reneged on.

Rocked by the earlier furore in Lillehammer about the lack of democracy and accountability within the IOC Samaranch had improvised, "We are going this way," he claimed. "The Congress in Paris may be a good way to modernise our organisation." A mere eighteen days earlier he had been interviewed in Lausanne by one of America's

big three television networks. Then he had taken a different view.

He was asked, "Will the IOC come under pressure to democratise?" Samaranch replied, "We think that a democratic system was invented by our founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin. For one hundred years we are applying the system and the results are not bad. We will follow the system in the future." After the interview his press handlers put pressure on to stop the transmission - and succeeded. Whatever the reasons for cancelling a film the editor had passed for transmission, Samaranch managed to keep this indiscretion private. I worked on the programme and still have a transcript of the interview.

FOR many of the delegates, the Olympic congress in Paris was a throwback to a cruel history they had left behind. The South Africans, the East Europeans and other delegates from countries which had achieved free ballot boxes in recent years discovered that the Olympic movement had the hallmarks of the totalitarian societies that had scarred their lives: No free votes or elections and aloof, all-powerful leaders.

The Olympic committee tastelessly rubbed it in: On the last day it announced that, retrospectively, the event would

be known as "The Congress of Unity." Were these echoes of Brezhnev and Franco? Not at all. "We are very pleased by this decision. I think it shows that the re-baptised 'Congress of Unity' is not just a word in the air," burbled Francois Carrard. "Samaranch declared the theme of the Congress would be unity and then gave no one a chance to disagree," concluded the *Los Angeles Times*.

The congress over, the Olympic committee staged its own private, annual convention. Now the IOC footsoldiers, who had seethed at their own impotence through the week, took a mild revenge on Samaranch. The control freak who thought he had the whole Olympic movement buttoned down announced that he wanted the unchallenged right in a year's time to nominate ten new members to the committee, all presidents of sports federations, without consulting his members.

After what was said to be a stormy debate, more than a quarter of the membership signed a petition demanding a secret ballot. Samaranch responded fast, to see off the threat of an embarrassing defeat. The compromise was that Samaranch could make the nominations but members would have the right to vote on them.

Primo Nebiolo, who can expect to benefit from the admission of some of his malleable fellow presidents crowed,

"I think it's a good decision which will strengthen the unity of the Olympic movement."

The committee had no stomach for further challenge to Samaranch and meekly nodded through a dozen new members, taking them up to the magic figure of one hundred members in their centenary year. After three years of stonewalling America, down to one member since the abrupt departure of Robert Helmick, Samaranch finally chose James Easton, president of international archery and also president of a \$100 million a year family firm, making archery arrows and baseball bats.

Britain also got a new member: in came Craig Reddie, a financial advisor who'd been president of international badminton. His fellow member Princess Anne wasn't present to congratulate him; sensibly, she hadn't wasted time on Paris. Italian Olympic big shot Mario Pescante was admitted, with a caveat; Pescante, together with Nebiolo, was awaiting trial on corruption charges relating to the huge overspend on refurbishing the Rome Olympic stadium for the 1990 soccer world cup. It was agreed that if convicted, he would quit the committee. All defendants have since been cleared.

Alex Gilady, for long NBC's sports vice-president in London and New York became Israel's first member. NBC gave him the new title of International Olympics Liaison

Officer. Gerhard Heiberg reaped the reward of organising the Lillehammer Games. Boris Yeltsin's tennis coach, former Russian Davis cup player Shamil Tarpishev, replaced an old Stalinist who had quietly been removed from the committee. Valery Borzov, winner of two golds in the Munich sprints and now Ukrainian sports minister gave Samaranch the opportunity to claim that, "Maybe in the near future more athletes can come in."

There was also a vacancy for a new member from Indonesia. The last member had been deputy prime minister and defence minister under the cruel régime of president Suharto who has held power since the late 1960s. Would Samaranch make a gesture for peace and against the Jakarta dictatorship? Might he select the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer nominated for a Nobel prize but whose work is banned in his own country?

Not likely. Samaranch chose one of Suharto's close personal friends, Mohamad "Bob" Hasan. Hasan heads the association of Indonesian timber growers who log the rain forests. He is probably a billionaire, with around one hundred private companies ranging from forestry and construction to banking and insurance. Described as closer to Suharto than most of his cabinet ministers, Hasan plays golf with the dictator. He also heads the country's athletics and gymnastic

federations and sponsors long distance road races with fabulous prize money.

Hasan coexists amiably with a régime under constant criticism from the UN. Suharto's annexation of East Timor in 1975 and subsequent murderous occupation has cost 200,000 lives in a population of only three-quarters of a million. Human rights group Amnesty International regularly highlights the abuses of the Suharto régime. The anti-subversion regulations, known as the "rubber law" because they're flexible enough to trap anyone critical of the government, crushes attempts by the ill-paid workforce to create free trade unions and jails journalists seeking a free press.

As "Bob" Hasan set off for Paris and admission to the IOC, the régime cracked down on the media, closing publications critical of the government. The founders of a free journalists association, set up without government permission, have since been arrested. Hasan runs a weekly news magazine *Gatra* which has not fallen foul of the censors.

ENDS

© Andrew Jennings 1996