

'Great survivor' who left tainted Olympic legacy

By Andrew Jennings

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Juan Antonio Samaranch, who has died aged 89, led the International Olympic Committee to its greatest prosperity and its worst corruption scandal. He took control as commercial sponsorship turned to sport for new marketing opportunities and reoriented the games into a marketing vehicle for the world's best-known consumer products.

He held power for 21 years, becoming the second-longest serving president after the IOC's founder, Pierre de Coubertin.

Samaranch was the great survivor. Probably the last of his generation of European fascist politicians to remain active in public life, Samaranch reinvented himself to the degree that his supporters proposed him as a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Born to a prosperous Barcelona textile family, in his teenage years - as General Franco raised the standard of rebellion against the Spanish republic - Samaranch rushed to join the youth fascists.

In the 1950s he entered politics via Barcelona city council, later joining Franco's rubber-stamp Cortes, Spain's upper house of parliament. In the last years of the dictatorship, Samaranch was appointed political chief of Catalonia, wearing fascist uniform and

giving the right-arm salute until Franco's death in 1975.

As late as 1971 he told a local paper: "I'm a man loyal to all that Franco represents. I'm a man of the Movimiento and of course I'm going to remain loyal for the rest of my life."

From the mid-1950s, he sought an alternative career. He became a sports official, signing his letters to government officials: "*Siempre a tus ordenes te saluda brazo en alto*" - "I am always at your service with my arm raised."

A place was found for Samaranch on the IOC in 1966 and he climbed the ladder. On becoming president in 1980, he called an Olympic convention and pushed through opening the games to professional athletes, which increased the value of the TV and marketing contracts - the latter going to his patron Horst Dassler's ISL company.

Revenues soared and Samaranch ensured he gave his IOC members a five-star lifestyle, flying first class and staying in top hotels.

The high point of his Olympic career should have been the Barcelona games of 1992 but his image was damaged when two British reporters revealed his fascist record and alleged corruption within the IOC.

Four years later, in Atlanta, the American HBO network screened pictures of Samaranch in fascist uniform with Franco.

By the end of 1998, Samaranch's reputation hit rock bottom as evidence emerged some IOC members had taken cash and other favours to give their votes to Salt Lake City for the winter Olympics of 2002.

Every accusation of corruption from the 1980s through the 1990s was met with Samaranch's mantra: "My members are clean and I trust them 100 per cent."

For a decade, he claimed the IOC was waging "a war" against performance-enhancing drugs. Few believed him. A BBC *Panorama* programme alleged he was involved in the suppression of lab tests showing positive results at the games.

For all the apparent success of his last Olympics, in Sydney, Samaranch's legacy was drug-fuelled elite sport that many fans could not trust.

His wife, Maria Teresa Salisachs-Rowe, died in 2000. He is survived by two children, Juan Antonio and Maria Teresa.

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*The writer is author of *The Lords of the Rings*, 1992, *The New Lords of the Rings*, 1996, and *The Great Olympic Swindle*, 2000*

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