

# JOAN ANTONI SAMARANCH

THE OLYMPIC GAMES ARE ONCE AGAIN THE WORLD'S GREATEST SPORTING EVENT. THIRTEEN CITIES COMPETED FOR THE 1992 OLYMPICS, FINALLY CONCEDED TO THE FRENCH TOWN OF ALBERTVILLE (FOR THE WINTER SPORTS) AND BARCELONA (THE SUMMER SPORTS). THE GAMES ARE ATTRACTING UNHEARD OF WORLDWIDE INTEREST, AND SPONSORS AND MONEY ARE POURING IN. EVERYONE POINTS TO SAMARANCH AS THE MAN WHO HAS MADE THIS CHANGE POSSIBLE. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE HISTORY OF THE OLYMPICS, THE PRESIDENT OF THE IOC IS DOING HIS JOB LIKE AN EXECUTIVE, TAKING DECISIONS AND CONTROLLING EVENTS.

XAVIER VENTURA JOURNALIST





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**J**oan Antoni Samaranch i Torelló was elected president of the International Olympic Committee on 3 August 1980. He is the sporting organization's eighth president. Samaranch was born in Barcelona on 17 July 1920 into an upper class Catalan family. An industrialist and politician (he was national delegate for sport and president of the Barcelona provincial deputation), his rise within the olympic movement started along the unlikely paths of the world of roller-skating hockey. He joined the Olympic Committee in 1966 and was made head of protocol two years later (1968). He became a member of the Executive Commission in 1970 and was vice-president of the IOC from 1974 to 1978. In 1977, Spain resumed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, and Joan Antoni Samaranch was named ambassador to Moscow. There, in the Soviet capital, this Barcelona-born diplomat achieved his ultimate goal: the presidency of the International Olympic Committee. One could hardly say it was the organization's best moment. The olympic movement, presided over for some years by the indecisive Irishman Lord Killanin, was going through a bad period.

The 1972 Munich tragedy, in which a group of Palestinian terrorists assassinated eleven Israeli athletes, was the first of the serious problems that was to lead to modifications in the approach to what until then had been a festival of sport and peace for the youth of the whole world. After that, the problems got worse. Four years later, in 1976, the Montreal Olympic Games were boycotted by the African countries, because of the presence of New Zealand, which maintained sporting contacts with racist South Africa.

When Samaranch took over the presidency of the IOC, the movement's situation had got even worse. In the 1980 Moscow Olympics, only 81 countries and 5,353 athletes took part—the lowest figures since 1956 and the end of the Second World War respectively—, because of the boycott by countries of the capitalist block, which was not followed by Spain or Italy, amongst others. Only one city, Los Angeles, showed any interest in holding the 1984 Olympics and, furthermore, it imposed its own conditions on the International Olympic Committee. Yet another boycott took place, this time organized by the communist countries and those of eastern Europe, with the exception of Romania and Yugoslavia.

Now, almost eight years later, the situation has changed radically. The Olympic Games are once again the world's greatest sporting event. Thirteen cities competed for the 1992 Olympics, finally conceded to the French town of Albertville, for the winter Olympics, and Barcelona, for the summer Olympics. The Games are attracting unheard of worldwide interest, and sponsors and money are pouring in. Everyone points to Samaranch as the man who has made this change possible. For the first time in the history of the Olympics, the president of the IOC is doing his job like an executive, taking decisions and controlling events.

—Senyor Samaranch, what do the Olympic Games mean for a city?

—*The best thing that could possibly happen, and not only as regards sport. The Games could be called the great festival of youth, of peace, of friendship and of sport. And, at the same time, a fabulous way to promote the host city.*

—Do you think it's normal that the Olympic Games should be used as an excuse for the city to change its appearance? Is there any limit as to how far you can go in this sense?

—*It depends on the city and the country. But the IOC has never tried to hide its satisfaction at the fact that a lot of host cities have a "before" and "after" purely as a result of the Olympic Games. Tokyo's an obvious case, the 1964 Olympic city. Every city that has held Olympic Games has carried out massive work because of them. This is one of the great virtues of the Olympics, what makes them the most important event in the world.*

—When you get into such extensive projects, not just for sports installations but also for reorganizing the whole city, don't you run the risk of changing the whole meaning of the Games, which should really be a sports festival?

—*No. This is one of the advantages of the Olympic Games, they're a stimulus; a city can get its normal investments brought forward 25 or 30 years. For example, in Barcelona's case, the city will have done everything that was needed to be done between now and the end of the century in four or five years.*

—Is there any chance that the IOC, which already limits the amount of money candidate cities can spend on their campaign, will do the same with the cost of organizing the Games?

—*It's true that the candidates for the 1992 Olympics overdid it a bit in their long hard struggle for nomination. We've put restrictions on this. Now, what a city does in organizing the Games is nothing to do with us; we won't get involved in it or lay down any rules. We only establish certain*



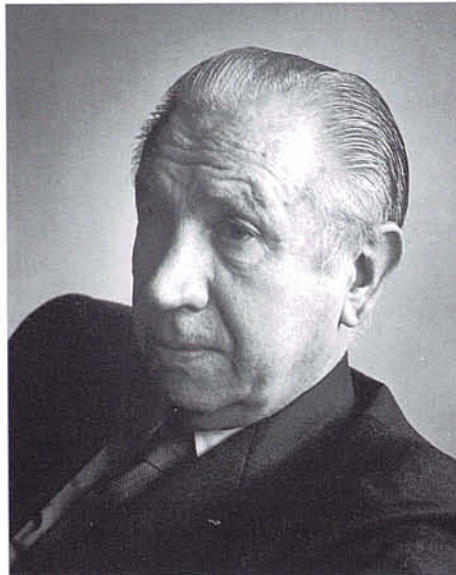


*conditions: that the sports installations come up to the standards demanded by the International Federations or that the Olympic Village be well planned and built. But if a city wants to build 10 or 15 ring roads or whatever, it's free to go ahead.*

—In that way, the Olympic Games seem to depend more and more on economic and political factors, when the organizing is so complicated and important changes need to be made and building work done, especially in the city. The Games belong to and are the responsibility of the International Olympic Committee. Don't you see a danger in the possible dependency? —*These improvements in the city are valid. It's a question of taking advantage of the Games to bring forward investment 15 or 20 years. Obviously, there's a price to be paid for the importance the Olympic Games have, and sometimes the price is the economic or especially the political implications. If the Olympics weren't important, we wouldn't have the problems we have today. But this is normal, too: these political organizations run the country and the cities. All the IOC asks for is that they be supported by the inhabitants of the city, that the Games really be wanted by them.*

—Is there giantism in the Olympic Games?

—*So far as the sports installations are concerned, no. Olympic Sport is intended to be seen live by a few and on television by millions. Economic giantism, maybe. The cost of organizing the Olympic Games now is much higher than it was. But the financial returns are much higher as well. And you have to remember that there are two things that have to be kept separate: the Olympic budget itself and the money spent on things as a result of the Olympic Games. For example, you can't count improving an airport like Barcelona's in the Olympic Games budget.*



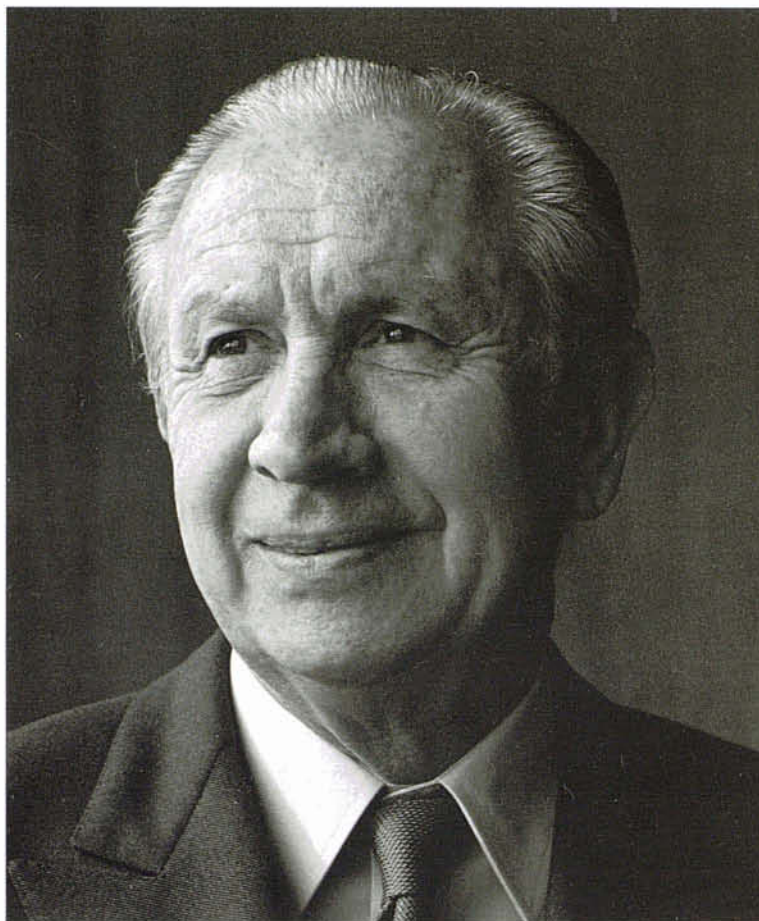
—Do you think the inhabitants of the host city should pay part of the expenses? —*It's only normal. They're going to benefit, both in sports installations and in infrastructure and services. It's natural that they should finance part of what it costs to organize the Games, the same as the regional and state governments. Now, I want to make it quite clear that the taxpayers' money should go towards the general expense of the work the city wants to carry out and not to the organization of the Games themselves. That should come out of the takings.*

Another of the questions hovering over Barcelona '92 is that of the Catalan nature of the Barcelona Games. Several people have publicly expressed their concern about a possible disrespect towards Catalan on the part of the organizers. The president of the *Generalitat* himself, Jordi Pujol, said quite clearly: "We want Catalan to be taken into account, not to be forgotten, now that we still have time to avoid possible mistakes".

—As president of the International Olympic Committee, what do you think of these questions? Could the language of Catalonia be discriminated against?

—*I don't think there'll be any problems. The IOC always uses the language of the city or country that holds the Olympic Games, as well as English and French, the two official languages of the organization I preside. The fact is that there are two official languages in Barcelona, Catalan and Castilian, which, I'm sure, will be accepted jointly. So at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, we'll be working with four official languages and not three, as we have until now. Also, I think the IOC's integratory attitude has been made quite clear with actions and not just words.*





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—If the Olympic Games are to change the appearance of the city, revive its sport and publicise the reality of the country they're being held in—in this case Catalonia—, aren't we asking too much of them? Can they carry out all the duties that are being imposed on them?

—*They're a unique opportunity that can't be overestimated and mustn't be missed. In the next few years, the name of Barcelona, of Catalonia and of Spain will be pronounced millions of times, they'll attract the attention of the whole world. We must take advantage of this opportunity, that turns up at most once in a hundred years, and sell the image of the city and of Catalonia, sell our culture and our national character, explain what Barcelona and*

*Catalonia are now and what they want to be in the next few years.*

A new movement has also appeared: a group of people who are demanding the creation of a Catalan Olympic Committee. Its leaders have organized demonstrations, have given press conferences and have insisted we make the most of this "historic opportunity", as they call it. The idea has not yet reached the International Olympic Committee directly. But Joan Antoni Samaranch knows of the project: although he lives in Lausanne (Switzerland), he often visits his home town, where he has his roots.

—Do you know anything, officially, about this move to create an Olympic Committee of Catalonia?

—*I haven't heard a great deal about it. The IOC always deals with the Spanish Olympic Committee, they haven't told us anything.*

—In theory, can an Olympic Committee exist for one part of a state or does it have to represent the whole state?

—*The International Olympic Committee only recognizes one national Olympic Committee per state. For example, in some sports, Great Britain accepts four British federations (England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland) but there's only one Olympic Committee of Great Britain. Also, current Spanish law states that Spain can only be represented internationally by one team, which must be a state team.*



The Olympic Games are, or try to be, the most important sporting event in the world. This presents problems; there are people who feel it should be a mass spectacle and, at the same time, a magnificent business opportunity (the International Olympic Committee's finances are very healthy, thanks to the revenue from television broadcasts of the Games) and therefore open to the best athletes in the world, whether professionals or not. Others, though increasingly less so, still defend a certain purity, summed up by Baron de Coubertin's famous phrase: "the important thing is to take part, not to win." These view the participation of professional athletes in the Olympic Games with some scepticism.

Samaranch is convinced that there's room for all in the Games and that the best must be included. Spectacular progress has been made in this field. Tennis, for example, paradigm of super-professionalized sport, now forms part of the Olympic programme. Even golf, another professional sport, could soon be included.

—What's behind this revision of the Olympic ideals?

—*At present, sport is one of the most important social phenomena there is and, at the same time, a marvellous spectacle. Under these conditions, the idea that only those athletes who receive no support should take part in the Olympic Games is totally outdated. Also, the support that athletes get in the west is similar to that of athletes in socialist countries, although the system is different. In one case private enterprise pays and in the other it's the state. But in both cases, it contributes to the improvement of sport.*

—So, Olympic Games open to all?

—*To all athletes who accept the rules of the International Olympic Committee and are under the control of the relevant International Federation.*

The present president of the IOC is 67 years old, and is in perfect physical shape. Every day he carries out a strict, methodical programme of physical exercises, rest, and meals. He doesn't smoke or drink. He's self-disciplined and always says that "this job is no sacrifice for me. I do it because I want to, and if you're going to complain about your job, you might as well pack up and go home". He's visited 153 of the 167 countries that

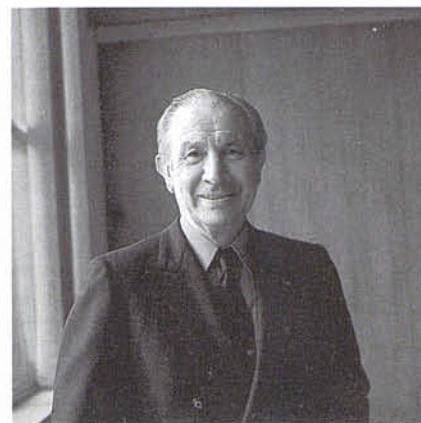
belong to the International Olympic Committee and means to visit them all; he likes to have a first-hand knowledge of things. He's not worried by lengthy discussions. With the questions of the possible boycott by North Korea of the '88 Seoul Games and the proposal of a joint organization representing both Koreas, Samaranch has learnt the eastern approach to negotiation: "endless patience, waiting for things to happen", as he himself says.

He realizes that the olympic movement is at present enjoying extraordinary popularity, that the International Olympic Committee is living the best moments of its recent history, and he is prepared to make whatever changes are necessary for things to carry on like that. He is even prepared to open the doors of the Olympic Games —always allocated to a city, not a country— to new possibilities, like conceding part of the programme for the Seoul Games to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, if this guarantees that the 1988 event will be free of boycotts and threats for the first time in the last twelve years of the Olympic Games.

For all these reasons, Joan Antoni Samaranch is the key man in the Olympic world. In 1989, his term as president expires.

—Have you decided whether or not you'll stand for re-election yet?

—*Not yet. I'll do it at the end of next year.*



—On more than one occasion, you said that what you most wanted was to be elected president of the IOC, which you've already achieved, and to inaugurate the Olympic Games in your home town, Barcelona. Are you going to make this second dream come true as well?

—*I would obviously love to see the Barcelona Games from the presidency of the International Olympic Committee. But the decision as to whether or not I stand for re-election will depend on a lot of things: my health, whether or not I still enjoy what I'm doing and, more than anything, on whether I still have the support of the members of the IOC.*

—Three conditions that seem to be fulfilled...

—*Maybe. But a lot of things can happen in this world. Everything I've done could come to nothing overnight.*

—Considering the almost oriental patience you've shown, and are still showing, in the question of the two Koreas, I'm sure that even a boycott of the Seoul Games wouldn't affect your personal prestige. It might affect the two countries and maybe the future of the olympic movement, even if only slightly. But not that of Joan Antoni Samaranch.

—*We'll see about that in October next year.*

The Seoul Olympic Games end on 2 October 1988. Even the cautious Samaranch, this universal Catalan, president of the International Olympic Committee, is convinced that the olympic movement is once again gathering momentum. Largely thanks to his work and his decisions. ■