

A CENTURY AND A HALF OF SPORT IN BARCELONA



THE CELEBRATION OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN BARCELONA
IN 1992 MARKS THE CULMINATION OF A LONG PERIOD OF
CONTINUED HARD WORK.



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A city like Barcelona, open to the Mediterranean, accessible to all the civilizations of the old world, and with its fertile Latin imagination, could not help but respond to the call of sport, and now to that of the Olympics. The peoples who dominated the ancient world, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, the Germanic tribes, Arabs, Franks and others who left their mark on the different civilizations which ruled the West in the early days of the Christian era, all passed in turn through Catalonia at the peak of their development, and each left our country with the benefits and the evils that all invasions bring with them.

Luckily, the Greeks left the Catalan coast with their sporting concept of education, which transformed the Iberian mentality of sport, replacing the folklore and rivalry which had presided over the events organized by the inhabitants of Catalonia before our era. Empúries was the site of the peninsula's first stadium, first gymnasium and the first palestra, where wrestling matches were held between patricians and invaders. The Greek colony of Empúries was almost certainly familiar with the traditional celebration held every four years in Olympia.

The Roman invasion also introduced the concept of competitive sport to our coast. There is evidence of this in the decorative style of much ceramics, and especially in the splendid mosaic which can be seen at the Archaeological Museum of Barcelona, depicting a chariot race set in Barcelona.

When the modern concept of sport took shape, at the end of last century, it was

quickly understood in Barcelona and to a certain extent over the whole of our country. Before this, there were the isolated cases of sporting events on horseback. There is an example of this sort of medieval competition in the second book of *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, in which Miguel de Cervantes describes a duel between the hero and the "Knight of the Black Moon" on a Barcelona beach which could well be that of Somorrostro.

In the middle of the last century, when the English decided the rules for football, boxing, regattas, athletics and other sports, Barcelona, Terrassa, Tarragona and other Catalan cities soon became acquainted with mounted sports, tennis, football, sailing, rowing and other events already characterized by distinctly British regulations; while athletics had, for us, a Germanic origin, fencing and cycling arrived from France, and other sports were imported by Catalan travellers, tradesmen or students.

The early editions of the Olympic Games (1896-1912) found fertile ground in Catalonia. Some Barcelona newspapers — "La Vanguardia" — published reports on the Athens Games in 1896, and the Paris Games, in 1900, were covered by this and other publications. At the London Games, in 1908, and in Stockholm, in 1912, there were people from Barcelona who had gone to experience the unrivalled thrill of the four-yearly event at first hand.

Athletes in Barcelona followed those early Games with great excitement, but when Picornell, Witty, Gamper, Vila, Elias

and others were looking ahead to the 1916 Games, the First World War broke out, and all hopes were dashed for the time-being. But the seed had fallen on fertile ground, and detailed preparations were made for the 1920 Games in Anvers. The bulk of the Spanish team was made up of footballers and swimmers. In swimming, representation was almost exclusively Catalan, since the chance to take part had arisen on the Barceloneta beach, at the Barcelona Swimming Club, where the waterpolo players who formed the basis of the team were trained. Football had already caught on here on a massive scale and produced names like Josep Samitier and Ricard Zamora, who were to leave their mark for ever on the history of our sport.

When the Olympic athletes of 1920 returned to Barcelona, enthusiasm for the Games spread like wildfire, and a carefully prepared campaign presented Barcelona as a candidate for the 1924 Games, based on the breakwater swimming pool (Barcelona Swimming Club 1923), the Fuxarda stadium, the ground at Les Corts and the decision of the Barcelona City Council and the government of the *Mancomunitat* to support the Games. The candidature presented by Paris, the home town of Baron de Coubertin, which was anxious to erase the poor image left by the Paris Olympics of 1900, was more successful than Barcelona's proposals, though these had aroused great expectations in the press and the city in general. Barcelona was not put off by the disappointment of 1924 and, spurred on by the *Exposició Internacional* of 1929, built a



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stadium on Montjuïc which dazzled the world of sport. The 50 metre pool was the first in Spain to be built to Olympic standards and, until the sixties, the only one. Basketball and handball courts (the former an Olympic sport as from 1936) were also built on Montjuïc, while the city's sports facilities were completed with the grounds at Les Corts and Sarrià. Barcelona aspired to the 1936 Olympic Games and the host city had to be decided in 1931. It was arranged that that year's session of the International Olympic Committee be held in Barcelona, so that the members voting could get to know the city, its sports facilities and the general atmosphere. But eight days before the meeting, on 14th April 1931, the Republic was proclaimed in Spain, and in some cities churches were burnt and there were public disturbances that were much talked about abroad. Many

members of the Committee did not come to Barcelona and the meeting failed to reach the necessary quorum for the decision to be taken. This was a serious blow for Barcelona's Olympic aspirations. The special postal vote which was requested, conditioned by political events, gave the 1936 Games to the city of Berlin. The leading figures in sport in Barcelona saw the 1931 disaster as just another reason for trying again, and Barcelona was once more put forward for nomination, this time for 1940. Amongst other cities applying for Olympic designation were Tokyo and Helsinki. The decision had to be taken in Berlin, at the International Olympic Committee meeting at the start of the 1936 Games. Yet another political upset—the Spanish Civil War—prevented Barcelona's representatives, the Spanish member of the I.O.C., Baron de Güell, the mayor, Carles Pi-Suñer, the president of

the Spanish Olympic Committee, Dr. August Pi-Suñer, and the executive members, Messalles Estivill, Santiago Garcia Alsina, Ricard Cabot, and other figures, from travelling to Berlin to give Barcelona their official support. Tokyo was nominated but was unable to organize the Games because Japan was at war with China, and in 1938 they were assigned to Helsinki, which also had to forgo the opportunity, because of the war with the U.S.S.R., and that edition of the Games was never celebrated.

With the recovery of Catalan sport after the war, Barcelona's Olympic vocation was not forgotten. In 1951, it was nominated to host the II Mediterranean Games, and in 1955 the city lived the greatest sporting event of its history. In his closing speech, the vice-president of the I.O.C., Armand Massard, said that "Barcelona now deserves to organize the Olym-



pic Games". Such a categorical statement spurred on the team headed by Joan Antoni Samaranch and the dream began to take shape. The City Council of the time was not much in favour of accepting the challenge of organizing such an important event, but a detailed study was made and the promoters were finally given the go-ahead for the 1992 nomination campaign. The decision had to be taken in Rome in 1966 and the candidatures had to be presented in Lausanne before 31st December 1965. But on that date, while Samaranch and his team were in Sydney, the Spanish Olympic Committee, the only organism authorized to support the application by a city in Spain, presented a hybrid, Madrid-Barcelona proposal, which involved the Spanish capital as the Olympic seat and aquatic events —rowing, sailing, swimming, waterpolo and diving— in Barcelona. The

I.O.C. turned it down and Munich was elected for the 1972 Games. The determination of those behind Barcelona's candidature did not diminish. Work started in 1978 with the 1992 Games in mind. According to the established order by which successive editions of the Games were held in different continents (Europe, America and Asia), after Moscow 1980, the next chance for Europe would be in 1992. Barcelona City Council and its leader, Narcís Serra, had no doubts whatsoever and the Generalitat supported the undertaking from the very first moment. The sports federations and the Spanish Olympic Committee also gave their support. The work was done in groups and carried out exhaustively and efficiently, and in October 1986, the eighty members of the I.O.C. chose the Catalan city in the third round of voting, followed by Paris, Belgrade, Amsterdam

and Brisbane. The mayor, Pasqual Maragall, the president, Jordi Pujol, the head of the government, Felipe González, the Catalan government's delegate to the COOB'92, Josep Miquel Abad, and all the authorities and all sectors of Catalan society without exception were in Lausanne that 17th October 1986 to live one of Barcelona's most gratifying moments. In Barcelona, in Catalonia, and also throughout the rest of the state, there were celebrations like never before to mark this important date for our country. Now, the job of seeing it through is everybody's. The experts, the athletes, the press, the organizers... but it will be mainly the people of our country who, fully understanding the significance of the Olympic Games, will give them their enthusiastic support. Without them, the Olympic Games would be meaningless. ●