

## **The Athletes in Baden-Baden 1981**

### **Peter Tallberg's Speech at the Baden-Baden Anniversary Celebration**

During the Olympic Congress 1973 in Varna, Bulgaria, a decision was taken, that in the future, the athletes, who are the backbone and core of the Olympic movement should be granted a platform and a voice within the organization. It was agreed that to the next congress, which most likely would take place in the early eighties, athletes representatives would be invited and also be given the right to speak during the sessions.

This would then be the first time in Olympic history when the athletes who form the most important pillar today within the movement would be granted the opportunity to have a voice.

The three other already existing pillars being, the IOC, the NOC:s and the IF:s  
Juan Antonio Samaranch was elected president of the IOC in 1980, a year before the congress that was scheduled to take place here in Baden-Baden.

President Samaranch told me later that he had already for some time been interested in finding a workable formula for getting the athletes involved in the decision making process of the IOC.

And soon after his election to presidency he started to plan and act.

His decision to invite 38 active medal winning athletes, of whom 8 were women, to Baden-Baden was both correct and significant – and this was repeatedly stated in the course of the congress.

Headlines in the newspapers applauded the President's visionary decision to include the athletes.

It was considered to be a signal and an obligation of the IOC, the NOC:s and IF:s to finally include the athletes in the Olympic Family as full members. ►►►

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The athletes who had been invited to Baden-Baden understood the importance of their role and immediately realized that this was THE moment for them to show what an important, new and vital partner of the congress they formed.

At the Olympic Games athletes are admired and celebrated but they naturally want more, they want to cooperate and contribute to the development of sports. The athletes fully realized that the international sports organizations are necessary bodies whose function towards the athletes themselves is of assistance and guidance. The structures in the Olympic movement exist in the first place for the athletes. A simple fact is that with no athletes there would be no games.

The main concept of the athletes in Baden-Baden was that they do not want to be used as vehicles of any organization, or of officials of such bodies for purposes of human inadequacy or for biased third party interests.

In June 1981 President Samaranch called me and asked whether I would accept to chair the group of 38 invited athletes plus a number of invited coaches.

He told me that his reason for proposing me was, that I at that time, was the only IOC member who whilst being a member had participated in the games.

Of course I accepted the invitation to serve as the chairman for the athletes, nothing could have suited me better at that time.

The age structure both inside the IOC, but also in the NOC:s and the IF:s, was in the early eighties quite different from what it is today.

I felt that I had been given a fine opportunity as a junior IOC member, both age and protocol wise, to bring forward fresh and unbiased messages discussed in a group of clever, dynamic and very capable world top athletes.

I travelled to Baden-Baden and met with my group of athletes and coaches, and before the meetings I was also given guidance by the President of the German NOC Willy Daume and by Walter Tröger and Jürgen Schröder.

I was also pleased to find that lovely swimmer Donna de Varona had been summoned to help our team.

She turned out to be a key person during the sessions by building up the right atmosphere in the group.

After the two first meetings I realized that there was quite a difference between the participants, depending on sport-nationality-language skills-gender-and whether there happened to be a coach from the individuals sport or nation in the meeting room.

I had a meeting with President Samaranch, he understood the problem with the coaches and they were removed from our meetings.

In order for me to be able to chair the meetings, I kept a list of the participants in front of me, and every time when a delegate asked for the floor I ticked her or him off on my list.

So soon I was able to spot the most active and efficient participants.

We decided unanimously to concentrate our work during the week on only a few important issues.

The group agreed on the topics and we selected 5 headlines to deal with.

At that moment we were still supposed to deliver only one 5 minutes speech to the congress during the closing session.

We soon realized that we will need and must demand more possibilities to approach the audience at the congress, and after some tough and not necessarily pleasant negotiations we were given 5 short 5 minutes appearances and 1 long final athletes statement-speech to be presented during the closing session.

I had fortunately been careful in my recording of the activity and interest shown by the participants, so when we knew that we would have 6 speakers, I simply made a dictatorial decision.

The speakers would be: main final speech, in fluent English, Sebastian Coe, the other speakers would be those who had actively taken the floor and shown a keen interest during our meetings. ►►►

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We however had a small problem, Thomas Bach and Irene Epple would both have qualified as speakers, but I felt that with so many excellent top athletes present 1 German speaker would have to be enough. So I decided in favour of Thomas who had more ticks in my paper.

The other more questionable and complicated issue was a completely different one.

I was summoned to the President's office by Annie, his secretary, there I was told by Samaranch that IOC member Adrianov had seen him and insisted that in order to avoid turbulence there must be a Soviet athlete who delivers a message from the athletes group.

We arrived at a good compromise and decided that Vladislav Tretyak would be one of the speakers

Vladislav was already a legend in the winter sport world.

Donna de Verona and a small inner group wrote a nice speech for Vladislav, non political, and referring to National anthems and hoisting of flags.

The work done by the English speaking in the group under the supervision of Donna and language guidance by Seb Coe was simply amazing, many nights they worked almost round the clock.

They polished the speeches, resolutions and statements, there were numerous rehearsals and I think I must have heard the speeches a hundred times before the core group gave them the final O.K.

In November 1981 after the successful contribution by the athletes here in Baden-Baden President Samaranch called me and asked me to come to Lausanne, there he told me about his final decision to create an Athletes Commission and that he had nominated me as the chairman of this new commission.

The first members that were nominated to the commission were those athletes who had been delivering speeches in Baden-Baden: Sebastian Coe, UK, gold medalist in athletics, Ivar Formo, Norway, gold medalist in cross country skiing, Svetla Otzetova, Bulgaria, gold medalist, in rowing, Thomas Bach, Germany, gold medalist in fencing, Kip Keino, Kenya gold medalist in athletics and Vladislav Tretyak gold medalist in ice hockey.

The commission was then subsequently enlarged by athletes representing the host cities of the 1984 Games, Edvin Moses served as liaison to Los Angeles and Bojan Krisaj to Sarajevo.

The IOC sports director has also been an ad hoc member from the very beginning. The start of commission work was not easy because of the unbelievable opposition towards the involvement of athletes in the sport structures.

The message that I got, over and over again, was to forget and change "the hastily made decisions by Samaranch", decisions that only would harm the work of the IOC, the NOCs and the IFs.

"Please do not involve the athletes, they are only interested in throwing, running, jumping and performing on the field of play. They are not interested in, and will never be interested in, any administrative work or to be part and members in decision making bodies".

The campaign and the actions were unpleasant and also very personal.

It was not an easy situation, but I was confident, because I had full support by President Samaranch all the time, and we met regularly during those difficult years in order to streamline our efforts.

Let me now give you a few examples of how wrong our opponents were in those days: Sebastian Coe where is he today 30 years after Baden-Baden? He is head of the London organizing committee and one of the big boys at the head of IAAF.

Thomas Bach, today IOC vice president and President of Deutscher Olympischer Sport Bund.  
Kip Keino today president of the Kenyan Olympic committee and an IOC honorary member.  
Svetla Otzetova today vice president of the Bulgarian Olympic committee and a high ranking official of the International Rowing Federation.

Vladislav Tretyak is President of the Russian Ice Hockey Federation and today fluent in English. The sixth member at the start, Ivar Formo, unfortunately passed away some years ago in a tragic accident.

During my time as chair of the commission I had two long time serving vice chairmen. ►►►

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In the eighties Pal Schmitt, Hungarian gold medalist in fencing, and well, today President of his country.

Another vice chairman serving from 1989 to 2008 and several wintergames participant in bob sleigh Prince Albert of Monaco is today ruler of his country and married !!

Don't you all agree that the initial group of athletes who developed the basis on which the athletes involvement in IOC and other sport structures has been built was a pretty successful bunch.

Today, 30 years after Baden-Baden, we look at a different Athletes Commission from the one we once created.

I personally had the privilege to serve for 21 years as chairman and during those years I also had the opportunity to learn to know and to work with, the most famous athletes of this world.

And from the bottom of my heart I can say that, apart from being fascinating personalities, everyone has also been easy and positive to work with.

The longer I have been involved in the commissions work the more I have realized what a tremendous source of knowledge, power and social potential there is hidden in the active athlete.

30 years of structured work has slowly led to a number of successful achievements. There are no gender verifications carried out today.

There are elections of Athletes Commission members by their peers during the Games, and the elected members will also be elected IOC members by the session.

The chair and vice chair of the commission are elected by "the elected" commission members only.

There is an annual budget that the chair has agreed upon with the IOC.

The commission has got representation on all relevant IOC commissions, on Wada, on the court of arbitration for sport and on the World Olympians Association.

The commission meets annually with the IOC Executive Board and visits the Olympic Village with the EB during the Games.

The commission has an office in the village during the Games and today also a permanent member on the Executive Board.

An athletes forum is organized every second year.

Nowadays commission members can attend the Games, be they summer, winter or youth games.

Members may attend important sport meetings and competitions when considered meaningful at the discretion of the chairman.

More and more athletes commissions have been formed within the NOC:s and also IF:s are establishing commissions in a growing number.

The everyday work of the commission is handled by the sports department in Lausanne. The international "Athletes career program" is developing very well in cooperation with the IOC and Adecco.

When Thomas Bach asked me to come with a short 15 minutes long contribution here today, he told me to concentrate on the historic part which I have tried to do.

I feel that the commission has been in good hands since Sergey Bubka was elected chair after me in 2002 and after him Frank Fredericks in 2008.

Frank is doing a fine job with a task for which the solid base was laid here in Baden -Baden 30 years ago.

Finally, I am so proud of all our fine work together through the years and I am full of gratitude for having had the chance to see this beautiful seed grow into a mighty tree, I thank you all. ◀◀◀