

A talk with Lord Coe

London's bid for 2004 Games hinges on transport and athletes' welfare

Former recordholder in 800, 1,500 meters and mile grants interview

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KATHIMERINI ENGLISH EDITION

Sebastian Coe, now Lord Coe, needs no introduction to even the most casual follower of sports. He was one of the top 800- and 1,500-meter runners for nearly a decade, from 1977 to 1986. He set records in both events; in fact, he was the first athlete to simultaneously hold the world record in the 800 and 1,500 meters and the mile. His 800-meter record of 1 minute 41.73 seconds, set in 1981, held for many years.

Coe competed in two Olympics, at Moscow in 1980 and Los Angeles in 1984, sadly both diminished by successive boycotts. He was prevented from winning the 800 meters, first by his compatriot and archrival Steve Ovett and then by Brazil's Joaquim Cruz. In contrast, he won the 1,500 meters twice, the only athlete to ever successfully defend his title in the event.

Elected an MP with the Conservatives in 1992, Sebastian Coe served as minister for sports before losing his

seat in the 1997 Labor landslide.

Now a member of the House of Lords, Coe has remained close to the sport in another capacity, as a councillor in the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF). Currently, he is trying to bring the Games back to London for the third time and the first since 1948. His selling point: a compact, athlete-centered Games that will leave the biggest new urban park in Europe in the last two centuries, along with several sports venues, as a lasting legacy to the city.

Last Tuesday was the 20th anniversary of Coe's earning his second gold in the 1,500 meters in a time of 3 minutes, 32.53 seconds, an Olympic record that stood until Sydney. Kathimerini English Edition caught up with Lord Coe just before that anniversary, in a nice house that serves as the local headquarters of the British Olympic Association.

Of course, the five bidders for 2012 — London, Madrid, Moscow, New York, Paris — are officially barred from selling their bid to International Olympic Committee (IOC) officials (wink wink, nudge nudge, say no more...). The winning bid will be decided in early July 2005, in Singapore.

When was the London bid conceived?

The British Olympic Association (BOA) decided to sit out a couple of bidding processes and it recognized, as I had many, many years ago, that London is the capital city. We are a relatively small country and I did not genuinely think that, however good these bids were, that the IOC would support any bid from the UK that wasn't London-based. So the BOA discussed the situation and decided that, when it got back into the table, that it had to be London. I had sufficient conversations with IOC members to be absolutely sure that, if London put their hat in the ring, under the right circumstances and the right coordination, that they would stand a pretty good chance. But the BOA has been discussing with the government for a year and a half, or two years, before the bid was officially announced in June 2003.

The bid

Were you involved in it right from the start?

No. The original president, Mrs (Barbara) Cassani, was appointed in June 2003. I was asked to join the board toward the end of that year. I became one of three vice chairmen and then Barbara decided [to step down as chairman] because we were going to refocus the bid after May 18 (2004, the date the five finalists were announced) specifically into sport and the welfare of athletes and we knew international relationships were going to be very important after that date. Up to that point, we had built a structure, we had got to the table with the other four cities but, after that point, we realized we had to go off into more specific areas and that is when we swapped the roles.

Were you appointed because of the fact that you are an Olympic champion?

Well, it's not a disadvantage. I do have the advantage of knowing about Olympic sports; I have competed, I have worked as a member of several IOC commissions during the Games and, up to this point, I was an Olympic broadcaster. There's not a lot about the process of an Olympic Games that I feel I don't understand.

Do you feel that a great part of the bid hinges on your personal popularity?

Of course, any bid president has to persuade the [IOC] membership that they're competent, are able to deliver the Games, have a vision for those Games, feel comfortable with those people. No one person wins or loses a bid. You have to have a vision, you have to have structure, you have to have very good people around you. I can't get to everybody, I can't get to every event between now and Singapore. What I can do is make sure I've got a team around me which is fully focused, confident and very structured.

Is the bid structure now in place?

Entirely. I needed to make a few changes when I became chairman, it

was inevitable. I needed to refocus, we needed to move more obviously into a sporting context. I don't believe people are going to get excited about the Olympics for reasons other than sport. There are other underpinning things you've got to get right: We've got some exciting ideas about [power] generation, transport, the compactness of the Games and adopting a transport policy for those, about the welfare of the athletes... Instinctively, the people that came out about six weeks ago to watch the Torch Relay go through London — a million of them on the street, over 80,000 at the Mall in Buckingham Palace to celebrate a pop concert — came out because they want the Olympic Games in London. They see the connection between the torch going through London and the possibility of that being their own Torch Relay in 2012.

That's why I think it was right to shift the focus to sport; also, to make a real virtue out of the transport plan we have. Comments were made about transportation in London in the IOC evaluation in January. To a certain extent, I can understand why they evaluated it that way. Actually, they are now beginning to understand, as do the international media, that our transport plan is the best of any Olympics, ever.

The question I asked myself immediately when I became chairman is: "Can I produce a transport plan for London, for four weeks, in August of 2012, that allows athletes and spectators to move about the city in the best possible way? And the answer is: "Yes, I can. Do I have 240 trains going into the Olympic complex every hour? Yes, I do."

But, setting apart transport for the moment, it is the compact nature of the Olympic Park that makes it such a unique prospect. There are 17 venues in this park, all of them within 15 minutes of the Olympic Village, which is located in the absolute center of the park.

Athlete-focused Games

I have to say that, when I talk about an athlete-focused Games, I have more resonance than most other people because I have lived in a village, I know what the difficulties are if you don't have the athletes at the center of your thinking. And we have had Olympics that did not have the athletes in the center of their thinking.

Such as?

Atlanta. Atlanta was a classic example of a Games that was put together with very little consideration about the athletes. Actually, I understand, better than anybody, what it means to be in an Olympic arena. I cannot, by conscience, put together a transport plan, or a venue construction that risks unraveling the hard work all those competitors have put into preparing themselves for the Games. What most people, even journalists, don't appreciate, is the sacrifice. Those guys have been there for 10, 12, 13

years. I am not going to bring somebody to an Olympic Games for all that hard work to unravel because I can't put a transport plan together or I haven't cared where the venues are in relation to the village. So, all these issues are very important and I think they make our bid very, very strong for that reason.

You have attended several Olympics, as an athlete, a broadcaster and a sports official. Can you tell us how Athens compares?

Let me tell you what I've been impressed with first. I've been impressed with the village, I've been impressed with the venue design, which has been sensational. I think the atmosphere in those venues has been very good. The ability to get athletes in and out, quickly and safely, which, of course now, sadly, is a very important concept to everybody, has been very good.

At the margins, I think the village has been extremely well-designed. It is a large village; it could have been more compact. I have spoken to a lot of athletes, not only of my own team but also to Americans, Australians and the Kenyan team. But these are marginal points; I think these have been extremely well thought-through Olympic Games.

How about attendance? Have you found it satisfactory?

You know, everybody got excited about attendance. I will wear a different hat for the moment; I am also an IAAF councillor. I have not noticed any problems with attendance in our stadium. Last night, we had a full house. The very first morning, when we had the first events of the women's heptathlon, we had 28-30,000. And, actually, as I've gone about the venues during the course of the first week, some of these venues now are absolutely heaving. I went to the canoeing venue, which was packed out. I went to archery; I don't think archery competitions in any other Olympics have been held in front of 2,000 or 3,000 people. Rowing, you couldn't get a ticket. I met my first ticket touts — rather pleasingly, they were from Britain. When you meet ticket touts there is generally no problem with attendance.

When you presented London's candidacy to the media, you emphasized the city's cosmopolitan nature. There is, however, a flip side to it and it has to do with security. How much emphasis are you placing on security?

Security for every Games has got to be a large part of the budget. London has, mark my words, one of the highest-caliber police forces in the world. Policing in the UK has always been of the highest standard and, actually, very unobtrusive. You feel safe in the city but you don't feel surrounded all the time by a very obvious police force. Peter Ryan, who is running your security (actually he is an adviser with Athens 2004), was a chief police constable in the UK before running Sydney's security operation. London has been dealing with security implications on an everyday basis.



The Horse Guards in London on the site of what will be the Olympic beach volleyball center if London's bid for the 2012 Games is successful. London is promising athlete-focused Games, says Lord Sebastian Coe, a former athlete, now a member of the House of Lords and an IAAF councillor.

How are you going to celebrate the 20th anniversary of your last Olympic medal?

Actually, it was my team that pointed it out to me. There won't be a celebration, but a nice, warm reflection.

What has changed in the Olympics since then?

I don't think that an athlete could have been to two more contrasting Olympic Games. My first Games were in Moscow. These Games were an entirely state-run organization. And four years later, we had the first overtly commercial Games, with no state funding; the Games that introduced, for the very first time, the concept of serious sponsorship. They also re-emphasized the use of volunteers, which was a concept introduced at the 1948 London Games. This was out of necessity; we had no resources, having come out of the Second World War.

Partnerships

So, you asked me what has changed. Well, since 1980, everything has changed. But, with 1984 a lot, but not that much, because the 1984 model, the model that the International Olympic Committee uses for its top sponsorship program, was modeled by Los Angeles in 1984 and, specifically, Peter Ueberroth, the organizer of the Games. Also, relying not on state funding but on partnerships is now a model fully accepted by the IOC. The Games has got bigger and even more commercially viable since then, but 1984 is the model we are still using.

LA was awarded the 1984 Games by the IOC in a session here in Athens in 1978.

Yes, I remember that. Back then, it was the only candidate city...

It was not, initially. There was also Teheran, but they had a change of management halfway through the bidding process. You have to remember that after Montreal, no city wanted to touch the Olympic Games with a barge pole. No political leadership was comfortable with the project after Montreal, but by 1986, which was the year they chose Barcelona, we were back to 13 bidding cities, for both the Winter and Summer Games. So, Los Angeles helped make that change.

For the 2012 Games, it's probably the first time

there are so many heavy-weight candidates...

It is a big competition. I think the International Olympic Committee recognized that very early on when you have a bidding

Deep, deep Olympic history. It has to go to South America eventually and you do not want an Olympics that is seen by billions of people but is open to only a few people to host. There

programs. We are not just talking about the [duration of the Games].

If you take the large corporations, like Samsung, or Coca-Cola, or McDonalds, or whoever else is in there, this, for them, is a seven-year program. They've got programs for young people; they contribute to Olympic Solidarity programs (that sponsor young athletes from countries that lack resources). I think a lot of people tend to overlook this and sometimes I wonder whether the IOC fully gets the message over.

Corporate support

Actually, sponsorship does far more than just be visible during the three weeks of the Olympic Games.

The whole nature of Olympic is underpinned by healthy corporate support. And [corporations] are a very important vehicle for getting Olympic messages out. These are organizations that employ across the world hundreds of thousands of people.

Of course, the IOC is doing its part in spreading the Olympic message but when you have broad-based organizations like [the sponsors], it's very helpful to the process.

process that includes London, Madrid, Moscow, Paris, New York and cities like Rio and Leipzig that didn't make it [to the final round].

Is there a feeling among the IOC that it will be many years before the Olympics go to a country as small as Greece?

I hope not, because the most important thing the IOC can continue to do is maintain a dialogue with the smaller countries and entire continents that have not hosted the Games yet. Eventually, you cannot have a worldwide movement that narrows the field down to half a dozen places. It is important that the Games eventually goes to Africa, it is important that it goes to South America — I mean, South America is a huge Olympic continent.

has to be a better balancing and I know the Olympic movement is aware that this is a dialogue it has to have.

You mentioned Los Angeles as a model of private financing. London would get some state financing, wouldn't it?

Of course, but our bid is the best example of public-private partnership. It is very important that the government underwrites the process. The government is, if you like, the lender of last resort, but it is also important that we come to the table with very healthy corporate sponsorship. It is actually not just about "here's a corporation, here's the Olympics, let's put some money into it." It's very important that those organizations are able to roll out their own Olympic

'Our bid is the best example of public-private partnership'

More green space downtown as Eleftherias Park reopens

More than 200 trees and shrubs planted as construction work ends

Greenery didn't get all the attention it deserved in the sprucing-up that preceded the Olympic Games, but the new look of the long-neglected Eleftherias Park is some consolation.

A large part of the park was out of commission during work on building the new underground wing of the Athens Concert Hall.

The prolonged duration of the construction period led to concerns that the park might never be restored to its original state, and the felling of trees only

heightened the anxiety.

Though the park has not yet been handed over in its entirety, first impressions are reassuring.

The lawn has been restored as has the area surrounding the statue of Eleftherios Venizelos.

New trees have been planted to the left of the statue, while seasonal flowers and various types of plants make a striking multicolored floral carpet to its right and rear.

More than 200 trees and shrubs re-

presenting 20 species have been planted.

Plant selection and planting times are under the supervision of Professor Ioannis Chronopoulos of the Athens Agricultural University.

The park is being extended behind the Athens Concert Hall to the site of a demolished apartment block and an outdoor car park.

In the meantime, the link between the Athens Concert Hall and the nearby metro station is approaching completion.



The new look of Eleftherias Park upon the completion of underground construction work at the Athens Concert Hall's underground extension.



Work is in progress in Beijing on the site of the 2008 Olympic Games aquatic center. Beijing will take over the Olympic flag this Sunday as the Games in Athens come to an end.