

Flaming passion that brought the Games back to Greece

The distance from London to Olympia is 1,500 miles. But each morning, as the three Angelopoulos children start their day, they can almost feel the pulse of Greece in their Chelsea home. They live off the King's Road in a regally appointed old rectory. On the first floor is the "Red Room", filled with memorabilia from the 1½ years that their mother, Gianna Angelopoulos, campaigned and won the fight to bring the Olympic flame "home" to Greece in 2004.

"As you can see, it is next to the breakfast hall," Angelopoulos said. "Passing through our Red Room is like starting the family's blood circulation. We have a life ahead of us, but these photographs reflect the most exciting period: campaigning for the Olympic Games is something in the Greek soul."

"I tell my children that anything you achieve comes through effort, through striving and ability — above all through creating human relationships. From April 1996 to September 1997, I practically left my family behind, even my husband, Theodore, who is very possessive, because the campaign filled my life."

Angelopoulos, 42, mother, lawyer, partner in her husband's shipping and industrial company, gave up membership of the Greek parliament to lead the bid to return the Games to Athens for the first time since 1896. Her charm, her grasp of languages, of politics, power and emotion are surely, in this season of giving laurels, worthy of woman of the year.

In Lausanne, where the 107 members — most of them male — of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) voted, Angelopoulos first demonstrated that Athens, by pledging £2 billion to projects attacking its pollution and transportation horrors, had learnt the lesson of its rejection by the IOC in 1990.

She then made the IOC members feel they were improving the air that the next generation of Athenians will breathe, and challenged them by saying that Athens was loyal to the Olympics and requested reciprocal loyalty.

It was a devastating appeal. She spoke, in French and English, with a fluency and a voice of controlled passion and her delivery shaded the emotion Nelson Mandela brought to Cape Town's bid, the blatant politics Carlos Menem wielded on behalf of Buenos Aires, the combined presence

ROB HUGHES



meets a contender for woman of the year

leading Olympic athletes gave to Stockholm and the combined weight of Luciano Pavarotti and Primo Nebiolo put behind Rome.

Angelopoulos dealt with them. Nebiolo, the godfather of international track and field athletics, had ignored sporting protocol by rubbishing Athens's organisation during the world athletics championships last summer. There came only the sound of silence from Angelopoulos and her 70-strong team. "From the first moment our Prime Minister asked me to lead the bid," she said, "I never was negative about the others."

Greece had failed in 1990 because we were arrogant in our assumption that we had a right to renew the Olympic Games in the centenary year. We accepted what the movement were telling us, to improve the city drastically before we represented ourselves. Nobody dared to criticise. Our strategy was to believe in ourselves, always to be constructive to the members of the IOC — and Dr Nebiolo is a member."

There is notable defiance in her dark eyes. "Today? Now I have the privilege, after we got the Games, to say that Dr Nebiolo helped us, his criticism opened our eyes."

Self-help, however, is also in Angelopoulos's vocabulary.

As the Red Room walls show, she was honoured a month ago in Johannesburg by President Mandela, who not only bowed to the victor, but assisted in the process. In Lausanne, on the eve of the vote, Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the IOC, had arranged a meeting between Mandela



Angelopoulos celebrates Olympic victory in Lausanne with the mayor of Athens

and Angelopoulos at which it was agreed that if either bid dropped out before the final round, they would persuade their backers to support the other. Ultimately, Athens defeated Rome 66-41, which included 14 of the votes previously cast for Cape Town.

She says she has retired from politics, although a re-

Indeed, her presentation centred on a 12-year-old child, Alexis, striving for athletic achievement in an Athens suburb. "The bid had to be powerful, and it had to be gentle. It had to be attractive, but it had not to be showy. I think, through Alexis, we have the dream."

The Angelopoulos boys, Panagiotis and Dimitris, have the privilege of private schooling at the Hellenic College of London; their sister, Carolina, competes on the playing fields of the American School of London because Theodore and Gianna Angelopoulos feel that London offers the best lifestyle and business base.

Yet, it was a family outing to Athens that galvanised Angelopoulos into action. "We were there when the 1996 medal-winner came home," she said. "The people were so honoured, so proud. The whole of Athens waved laurels from the trees, and my sons, less than seven years old, said they want to be Olympic champions."

"I believe I am a winner. I don't like to lose, but I try to tell my children it is not only about victory — in real life there is a scale, a bottom line, a medium line and the very top."

Raised on the island of Crete, Gianna and her younger sister both became lawyers. Their father, Prixos Daskalakis, made his own fortune through economics and fruit trading; their mother Marika, though educated, was content in motherhood.

"She is happy being a sweet grandmother," Angelopoulos said, "even if she is proud that

I achieved at Harvard, after which I was a real performer in the penal court and parliament."

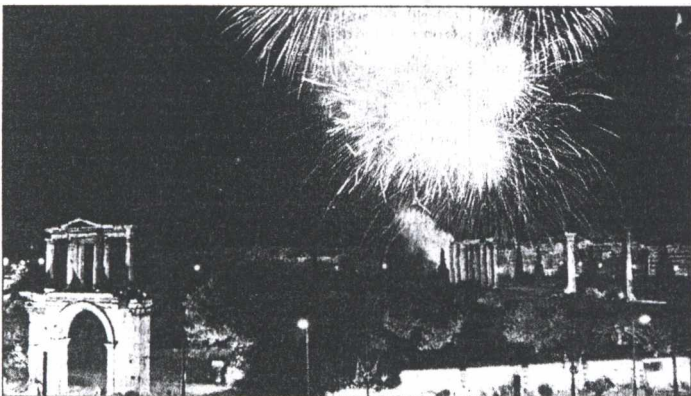
Angelopoulos believes in "catching the opportunities", and that this has less to do with womanhood than with human capability. "It's true. I was offered to lead the bid at the time Hillary Clinton was in Greece," she said, "but I am never the type to say women must have this or that percentage of representation. Life is effort, ability and you have to drive and you go after what you want to do. The Olympics? My God, I wanted to do it! I needed to do it! And I'm so very proud, so satisfied to have done it."

The final speech, the performance Angelopoulos calls it, was a promise, implied but unspoken, to restore Olympic ethics to a now gargantuan circus, sullied by the soulless commercialism of Atlanta. "I was propelled by an incredible responsibility," she said. "Wherever I went, people said: 'We trust you, Gianna, you can do it.' Today, even if I am alone in this house, I can feel thousands of people with me, their enthusiasm."

And will she now oversee the organisation of the Games, the acceleration of making Athens civilised again? "I completed my task," she said, "now I am full with half-finished jobs and responsibilities." It is not, she acknowledges, the answer her people are waiting for and she is not yet ready to say, publicly, if she can now leave the baby she delivered on September 5 for others to bring to maturity.

'I was never negative about the other bids'

cent opinion poll suggests that three-quarters of Greeks would vote for her as the next Prime Minister. "I don't think I will go back to that kind of politics. For me, the Olympic bid was an opportunity to do something for the whole of my country, and winning it offers something really unique for the younger people."



Fireworks over the Temple of Zeus mark the award of the Games to Athens