

Athens plays loyalty card in attempt to win Olympic race

If style could ever win the right to host the Olympic Games over content and facilities, we would be reliving the error the International Olympic Committee (IOC) made in transporting the Olympic movement to the soulless city of Atlanta in 1996. Yet, with many of the 105 voting members still undecided before each of the five countries made their presentations in Lausanne yesterday, style, personality and perseverance were key factors.

Gianna Angelopoulos, presiding over the Athenian bid, was quite magnificent; her grasp of the Olympic ideals, her precise, almost dominating attention to detail, her sophisticated approach, actually upstaged the briefer appearance during the morning of Nelson Mandela.

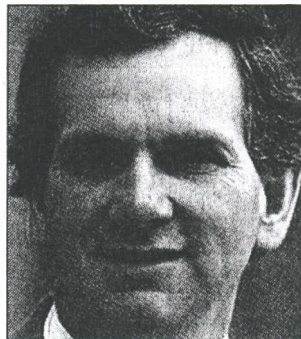
How dare we reduce a 3,000-year-old ideal to personality? Whatever the cynics say, the Olympic Games, involving almost 10,000 athletes, remain the best forum for human kind. The taking part remains relevant, the acceptance of common rules crosses all boundaries of race, culture or creed. And Angelopoulos, a lawyer, a politician and a mother of three, understands that perfectly.

Her ultimate appeal to the still mainly male membership of the Olympic committee centred on the word loyalty. "We are here because we are not discouraged," she said, referring back to the expectation that Greece would have been given the 1996 Games to mark the centennial of their rebirth near Mount Olympus.

Backed by the Greek government, she said that Athens had absorbed the previous Olympic rejection, and had set about the task of ridding the city of chronic pollution, of traffic congestion, almost of an old civilisation resting too long on its laurels; it was rebuilding, she said, principally because of the latent desire to take the Games back to their heritage.

Before her, Stockholm and South Africa had made their pitch. They, too, almost hinged the presentation on a single word; Stockholm's was

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in Lausanne

"trust", South Africa's was "hope". The Stockholm presentation, built as expected around clean air and the will of athletes from around the world to speak on their behalf, featured Carl Lewis, arguably the most successful Olympian living, who stated: "You know what you get with Stockholm, a city where athletes can compete... you are not going to have a flea-market Games there."

But would it be peaceful? Stockholm had a surprise in store: Olof

Time to dance to Olympic tune

BALLROOM dancing, in its guise of dance sport, was last night on course for a place in the Olympic Games after being granted full recognition by the International Olympic Committee at its three-day meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland (Ruth Gledhill writes). Provisional recognition was given two years ago. Rudi Hubert, of the International Dance Sport Federation, said: "We are very happy." He said the next step would be to aim for a place in the full Olympic programme.

Stenhammer, president of their Olympic bid, produced, as if out of a hat, the bomber who had bedevilled the serenity, the impressive organisation and the inviting climate that made Stockholm a powerful bid.

In his speech, Stenhammer said: "We never expected to have to deal with violence but last night the police captured in Stockholm the loner responsible for this violence." Indeed, the Swedish police caught a man attempting to place another explosive device at the foot of a statue.

Then came South Africa. Theirs was a bid articulated through Thabo Mbeki, the Deputy Head of State, and enshrined in the meaning of the Cape of Good Hope. He did everything except guarantee that Cape Town could be made secure from its crime problem. Later, in answer to a question from Prince Albert of Monaco, an IOC member, Mbeki said that crime was a problem the whole country was confronting.

South Africa produced two athletes on their platform. Josia Thugwane, the 1996 Olympic marathon champion, spoke in his own tongue, Ndebele, saying: "Please forgive me, I am only now learning to read and write." He credits the lifting of apartheid and the gift of the Games for changing his life. He stood beside Penny Heyns, also a product of post-apartheid.

Carlos Menem used the first 15 minutes of the Buenos Aires bid to make a political speech, the like of which the Olympic Games must remain separate from. That was followed by a travelogue that received full marks for artistic impression, few for the purpose of staging the most complex show on earth.

As Menem departed, so Luciano Pavarotti swept in. He had 15 television crews falling over themselves as he entered the auditorium. "Rome is already waiting for the Games," he said. "It will be super-ready in 2004. I remember the Olympics of 1960, and it meant so much. Music and sport are two positive messages for the world."