

Aian nuppard explains why Britain is anxiously awaiting the outcome of Friday's vote for the 2004 Games

Greek odyssey or Roman scandal?

BY A BIZARRE coincidence, next Friday's vote to decide the destination of the 2004 Olympics will be conducted on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the blackest moment in the history of the Games. It was on 5 September 1972 that Israeli athletes were slaughtered by Palestinian terrorists in the Munich massacre. On that day Israel lost 11 souls; subsequently the Olympic movement seems to have forfeited its own.

Whether the International Olympic Committee will mark the occasion with even a minute's silence is not known. The probability is that the date hasn't even registered with the 110 members who will gather this week on the shores of Lake Geneva to decide whether Athens, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Rome or Stockholm will follow Sydney as the host city for the second Games of the new Millennium.

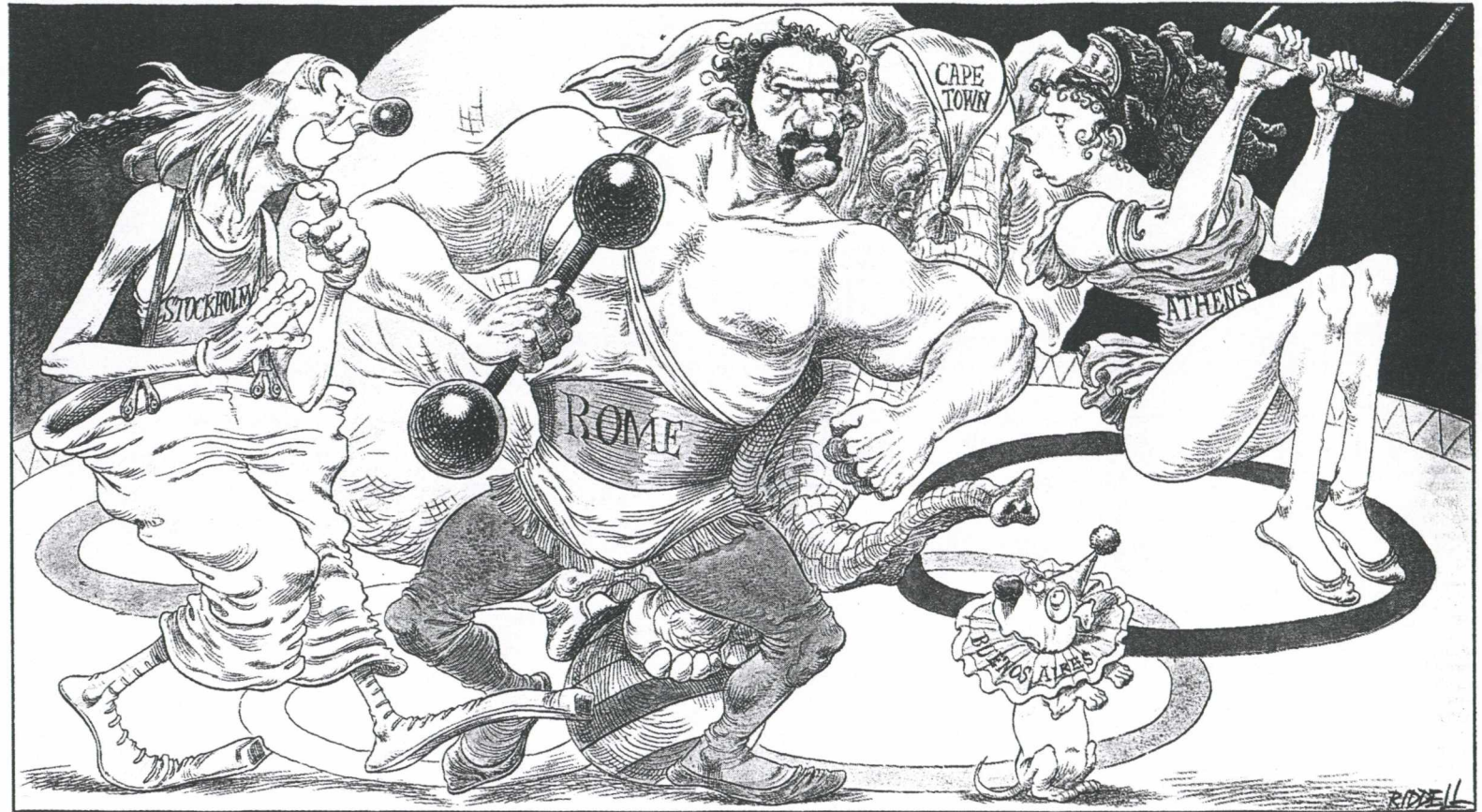
In the quarter of a century that has elapsed since that terrible day in Munich, the Olympics have become less of a celebration of the human spirit and more of a cynical market-place for human greed and fallibility. This was graphically reflected this time eight years ago when delegates shunned the claims of Athens, the city to whom they owed the very existence of Olympism, and plumped for the commercial delights of Atlanta for the Centennial Games, an event which surely belonged in its birthplace. It was a decision they came to regret.

Now they have a chance to make amends, but will they? Betting on this quadrennial five-ringed circus closed last week, with late flutters on Cape Town pushing the first-time South African contenders above Athens as second favourites, below odds-on Rome.

However, unless President Nelson Mandela can sprinkle sufficient personal stardust on proceedings in the Grand Ballroom of Lausanne's Palace Hotel during Friday's final presentations it will turn out to be a no-holds barred Greco-Roman wrestling match.

Of the other two candidates, Buenos Aires are mere ballot-box ballast and will probably suffer a first-round ko, while memories of Munich have surely scuppered Stockholm's chances following bombings at the national stadium and threats by an extremist group opposed to the Games to turn the Swedish capital city into a war zone should they win.

But whatever happens in the ballroom of Lausanne's Palace Hotel will have significant ramifications internationally and in Britain. For if the Games go to Rome or Athens rather than Cape Town, then the likelihood is that Mandela's Rainbow Nation will throw their resources into a bid for football's World Cup in 2006, much to the delight of Fifa, who yearn to stage their showpiece in Africa. This would be the kiss of death for England's aspirations to hold the event (and Germany's too). However, a shock Cape Town victory in



Lausanne would almost certainly mean a European city hosting the subsequent Games in 2008, much to London's consternation.

Plans are now being laid for a future London bid, but it is doubtful whether the capital could get its act together before 2012, when the competition could be even stronger.

So there is much to mull over in the moments before IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch rips open the buff envelope at around 5.30pm on Friday. The election itself will be a laborious process, with each candidate having up to 40 minutes for a final presentation.

There could be up to four rounds of voting by secret ballot, in which the city with the lowest number of votes is eliminated until one has an overall majority.

Leaving aside any antipathy towards

Italy's machiavellian international athletics chief Primo Nebiolo, whose cynical undermining of the Greek efforts during the recent world championships in Athens might yet rebound on him, it must be acknowledged that Rome's bid is an excellent one, probably the best on technical merit.

But should this be the only criterion? Athens, surely, would score highest on artistic impression. Tradition, atmosphere, history and sentiment count heavily in their favour, and they are said to have the personal backing of Samaranch (no doubt suffering a pricked conscience after seeing how the Coca Cola citadel of Atlanta botched what should have been the Glory Games of 1996). But unfortunately he doesn't vote — unless there is a deadlock.

The decision will be made by an oli-

garchy which still has a third of its voting membership over the age of 70: nobles, nabobs, knights, counts, rajahs, moguls, political chancers and a mere handful of ex-Olympians (including a redoubtable princess from Britain named Anne). Who HRH and Britain's other IOC delegate, Craig Reddie, chairman of the British Olympic Association, prefer has not been declared, but my guess is that it will be Athens, switching to Rome if the Greeks go out.

Although the bids are far more professionally assessed now than in previous years, only about 25 per cent of the IOC membership has more than a nodding acquaintance with the realities of modern sport. They'll make their decision on merit: the others can be either swayed or sweet-talked. The hope is they can no longer be bought. Samaranch, to his

credit, has made strenuous efforts to eliminate the bungs and backhanders which once prevailed in the form of assorted expensive freebies, from gash first-class airlines tickets to sexual favours.

But what he hasn't been able to eradicate is the political chicanery and backscratching which remain very much part of the game to get the Games. And nobody kicks sport's political football more adeptly than Nebiolo, who is unashamedly determined to get the Olympics back in Rome, where they were previously held in 1960, rather than Athens, who haven't had a sniff of this century.

Should Nebiolo prevail, it will not be the first time that the Greeks have been railroaded by the Romans over the Olympics. Historians will recall that at the end of the fourth century (AD 392 to be

precise), when Greece was part of the Roman Empire, Emperor Theodosius I officially banned paganism which, among other things, brought to an end 1,000 years of the Olympic Games (regarded as a pagan festival) until they were resurrected 101 years ago by Baron Pierre De Coubertin.

Greek odyssey or Roman scandal? The heart says Athens, but when the hard-headed Mr William Hill offers odds of 4-5 on Rome, it suggests this is the way to bet.

Yet if the Olympic road does indeed lead to Rome, one can't help feeling the IOC are about to take another wrong turning. Surely the Greeks should be allowed their belated lap of honour in this most ancient of sporting theatres. And Munich's victims can rest in peace in the knowledge that morality still has a place on the rostrum.

How they

Athens (Greece)

Population: 5 million

Buenos Aires (Argentina)

Population: 2.5 million

Cape Town (South Africa)

Rome (Italy)

Stockholm (Sweden)

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