

Will Athens Be Ready For Games in 2004?

Doubts Persist, but City Says It Is on Course

By Stephen Wilson
The Associated Press

SYDNEY — As she gazed out the window at the stunning vista of Sydney's Harbor Bridge and Opera House, Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki considered how Athens would measure up four years from now.

"We invited the Olympics to come back home," she said. "We promised to provide the best environment for the games. We will keep our word."

Not everyone is so sure.

After three years of chronic delays and political paralysis, Athens fell so far behind in Olympic preparations that serious questions were raised last spring about whether the 2004 Summer Games should be moved elsewhere. Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, a former bid-committee leader, returned in May to take over preparations for the Games.

She said that attending the Sydney Games along with 130 Greek observers has only underlined the enormity of the challenge for the first woman ever to lead an Olympic organizing committee.

"It's a huge task," she said during an interview at the Athens headquarters in Sydney's Circular Quay. "I don't try to underestimate the extreme urgency of the preparations. Time is the most relevant and limited resource we have."

"I know that Greece lost time. But whatever it will need we will do it. We will deliver what we promised."

Despite the reassurances, speculation persists that the Olympics could be taken away from the country where the ancient and modern Games were born. The buzz in Sydney has been that the perfect place for the 2004 Games would be, well, Sydney. Other Olympic officials have privately mentioned Seoul, host of the 1988 Games, as the most realistic backup.

But International Olympic Committee officials publicly insist that Athens is back on track and that no contingencies are being discussed to move the games.

"That's very, very premature," an IOC vice president, Dick Pound, said. "I think Athens has a long way to go, but they have had a serious wake-up call and I think they are responding to that. There is no contingency plan at this time."

The wake-up call came in March when the IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch, in an unprecedented rebuke to an Olympic host city, said the Athens Games were in jeopardy unless drastic measures were taken. Describing the problem as the worst crisis facing a host city in his 20-year term, Samaranch said

Athens was stuck on the "yellow light" and slipping toward the "red light" danger zone. He now says Athens is still in the yellow, but closer to green than red. Samaranch said he remained concerned whether Athens could complete the construction of venues on time.

"You lost three years," Samaranch told Athens organizers in Sydney. "Now you have only four years for the organization of the Games. That is really very difficult. But we have the confidence you will do it."

Jacques Rogge, the IOC official overseeing plans for the Athens Games, said the Greeks must run a marathon at a sprinter's pace. "Time has been lost in the past, but no time can be lost in the future," he said. "The clock is ticking."

All sides agree that significant progress has been made since the return of Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, a 45-year-old former member of Parliament and wife of the shipping magnate Theodore Angelopoulos. She has brought in her own team and begun cutting through the bureaucratic tangle that was holding up Olympic planning, while Prime Minister Costas Simitis has assumed full governmental responsibility for the games.

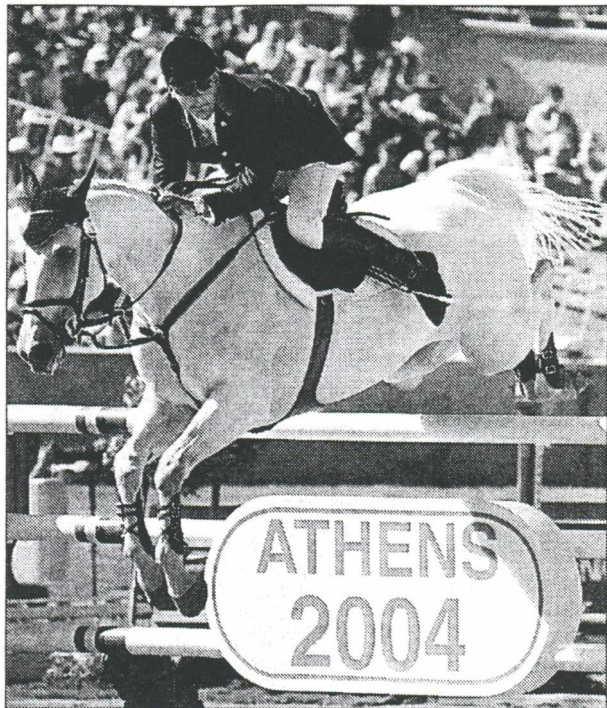
The biggest concern is over construction. Athens maintains that 70 percent of the sports venues are in place, but that is the same situation as three years ago. Completing the other 30 percent — including the Olympic Village — remains an enormous challenge. And existing venues need to be refurbished.

THE GREEK government has set March 2004 as the deadline for completing the work. But the IOC says that is unacceptable, that all venues should be ready a year earlier so test events can be held. Angelopoulos-Daskalaki said she was pushing the government to move up the deadlines, and hopes to have an agreement on that by November.

Some Olympic officials are getting impatient. "It's about time they sent us a picture of bulldozers instead of memorandums of understanding," said Alex Gilady, an IOC member from Israel who serves on the coordination panel for the Athens Games.

The sheer scale of the Summer Olympics — 28 sports, 15,000 athletes and officials, 20,000 media representatives, and all the necessary roads, buses, accommodations and general infrastructure — seems particularly daunting for a small country like Greece and congested city like Athens.

"Every time I go to Athens, I realize



Hopes for the 2004 Athens Games were in the air in Sydney, as gold-medal winner Jeroen Dubbeldam of the Netherlands cleared a jump.

how lucky we were not to get the Games," said Luciano Barra, an Italian Olympic official who was part of Rome's bid for the 2004 Olympics.

Athens is getting a facelift for the Games. A new airport is to open next year, the new metro system carries 400,000 passengers a day and will be extended by 40 percent and a new ring road is due to be completed in March. The Athens organizing committee has a budget of \$1.7 billion, while the government has committed a total of \$3.2 billion to games-related projects.

Security is a key issue. The assassination of a British diplomat in Athens in June has reignited fears that the Games could be targeted by terrorists. No member of the underground leftist terrorist group November 17 has ever been arrested.

Greece recently signed an antiterrorism pact with the United States and plans similar deals with Britain and other countries. Greece sent a 26-member police force to observe operations in Sydney, and the head of security for the games, Peter Ryan, has been lined up as a consultant for Athens.

In November, Greek officials have scheduled a debriefing session in Athens with Sydney organizers and the IOC. By then, Athens hopes to remove any sug-

gestions that the games might be taken away.

The IOC has never revoked the Olympics from a host city, though there have been occasions where the games were moved:

- The 1908 Summer Games were awarded to Rome, but after Mount Vesuvius erupted in 1906, the Italian government concentrated its financial resources on rebuilding Naples, and the games were reassigned to London.

- Chicago was awarded the 1904 Olympics but, at the behest of President Theodore Roosevelt, the games were shifted to St. Louis, which was staging a world's fair.

- Denver backed out of hosting the 1976 Winter Olympics for financial reasons, and the games went to Innsbruck, Austria.

Another IOC vice president, Kevan Gosper, said it would take "something exceptional" for Athens to lose the 2004 Games. "The worst thing we could do is show any prevarication on our part," he said. "It would be very destabilizing."

Meantime, Angelopoulos-Daskalaki presses on with her salvage operation. "There has not been a single day in the last three months where we have relaxed," she said. "We will never relax until the Games will finish."