

Race Against Time

Athens Olympic Committee chair **Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki** is making sure her city will be ready for the 2004 Games


YIORGOS KAKALIS—REUTERS

JUST OVER A YEAR AGO, ATHENIANS FEARED THEIR CITY'S preparations to host the 2004 Olympics were so far behind that the Games might be shifted elsewhere. But now, say International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) officials after their latest inspection, that is no longer an option. What happened? Many things, among them the appointment in May of last year—at the insistence of then I.O.C. President Juan Antonio Samaranch—of Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki as head of the Athens Olympic Organizing Committee (ATHOC).

With fewer than 1,000 days left to finish 138 Games-related infrastructure projects, Angelopoulos, a 46-year-old lawyer, is setting fire to dragging feet in the city that revived the ancient Olympic tradition in 1896. She has applied her steamroller approach, ordering an end to procrastination and rehiring some of the advisers who helped put together Athens' winning host city bid. She has also engaged a team of American public-relations experts to improve ATHOC's tarnished image. That could explain why she's also trimming expectations, replacing bold promises of hosting "the best-ever Games" with safe pledges of a "unique" no-frills, back-to-basics Olympics competition.

Frugality, though, is not one of her personal virtues. Lanky, lavish and loud—she favors bright-colored ensembles and satin stilettos—Angelopoulos is a certified member of the city's gilded haute monde. Vice chair of the dean's council at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and mother of three, she is married to shipping-and-steel titan Theodore Angelopoulos and is one of the country's richest women. That doesn't deter her from putting in 12-hour workdays to salvage her country's Olympic effort, for which she accepts no pay. Not bad for a girl who grew up helping her father sell citrus on the island of Crete.

Not good, though, in the eyes of several socialist ministers, who seem peeved by Angelopoulos' strides, as well as her arm twisting and table-thumping tantrums to get preparations going. Add her political past as a conservative backbencher and her currently soaring popularity, and it's not entirely surprising that socialist Culture Minister Evangelos Venizelos is jousting with her over who is the country's real Olympics boss. After their imbroglio reached jarring proportions, Prime Minister Costas Simitis last week called the two into his office for peace talks. Both pledged to pursue preparations as a matter of "top national priority." Let the Games begin. ■

Q&A

Q. What Olympic sport best resembles the task you face?

A. The closest would be the decathlon, because you have to have so many different skills.

Q. You once promised Athens would host the best Games ever. Is that a realistic goal?

A. Sydney did a great job, and so will we. Every host city adds its own culture to the Olympics.

For example, the Marathon race will begin from the ancient town of Marathon and will follow the original route first run in 490 B.C. These Olympics will be unique because the Games are coming home to their birthplace.

Q. The government has admitted that certain projects won't be done in time. Will that affect the quality of the Games?

A. The government has acknowledged delays but also said it will make up for lost time on the infrastructure needed to host the Games and leave Greece a lasting legacy.

Q. Has the I.O.C. given you a deadline by which venues must be completed, or at least ready enough for trial runs?

A. Our first sailing test event is

next August, and the majority of the rest of the test events are in 2003. That is why we are adhering to strict timetables to get the projects done. Every day counts.

Q. What would you say is your biggest obstacle?

A. We Greeks like to do things at the last minute. Well, the last minute is now. The biggest challenge is coordination.