



INTERNATIONAL  
OLYMPIC  
COMMITTEE

**Press release**

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To: All Media  
Date: 24 April 2008  
Place: Lausanne

PR-27 - 2008

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### **Athletes passionately express their feelings on Beijing 2008**

Gathered in Lausanne, Switzerland, athletes from around the world who represent the voice of sportsmen and women on the International Olympic Committee, met to discuss how to address the challenging international backdrop into which the Olympic Games have been drawn in recent weeks.

The Athletes' Commission members<sup>1</sup> spoke passionately and from their own experiences about the inappropriateness of manipulating and using athletes as political tools. At the close of the meeting, they released the following statement.

"In 2001, the International Olympic Committee voted to award the Olympic Games in 2008 to Beijing, China. We believe the rationale for that choice – that the bid was the best one, technically excellent and that the Games should be brought to a country where one fifth of the world lives – was a sound rationale then, and remains sound today. Indeed, some of our Commission members were members of the IOC at the time and fully supported the choice of Beijing and still do.

The Olympic Games are an event that allow athletes from across the globe to show us a world as it can be when people come together peacefully to celebrate their commonality rather than focus on their differences. We believe firmly that sport has, over the past seven years of Games preparation, served as an entry point to allow a growing understanding between China and the world and vice versa. Of particular note is that in the past weeks three World Championships, which by the way are also the test events for the Olympic Games, have been staged smoothly and successfully. There can be no better way to encourage China's change and celebrate the positive steps already taken, than to engage through sport. And no better way than through the Olympic Games, watched by billions around the world, and millions who will come to Beijing.

We are all of the wholehearted belief that boycotts are pointless and senseless – and only hurt the athletes. Some of us know this through bitter, personal experience. Others know it through our friends. We are heartened by the fact that the futility of boycotts is recognised by the majority of governments and organisations around the world. We note, however, that in some quarters there are those who chose to play with the idea of boycotting the Opening Ceremony. On this point, we would like to stress that for each of us individually, parading for our country at the Opening Ceremony was a key moment of pride, the memories of which we remember fondly today; athletes who have this opportunity ahead of them will doubtless recognise how special this moment will be for them. The Olympic



ceremonies, like the Games, are for the athletes; it is for the athletes that the crowd in the stadium cheers and the supporters watch on TV screens around the world. Having heads of state, government and sports ministers alongside the general public in the stadium is a sign of support for their athletes.

Athletes have a right to express themselves, and plenty of opportunity to do so ahead of and during the Games. Typically, however, they are focused on how to achieve sporting success. They have trained years for their moment and deserve to experience it without being burdened with geopolitical issues – no matter how important those issues might be. Athletes from 205 different countries and territories compete against each other at the Olympic Games. This is why our event has regulations in place to discourage its politicisation. With so many issues and conflicts in our world, if we allow our event to be the place to raise them, this would change the essence of what we are there to do – to compete athlete against athlete in a spirit of respect, friendship and fair play. Athletes have the right not to express themselves – and certainly the right not to feel obliged to do so. It is normal that the majority of athletes will simply want to be allowed to focus on their preparations and their competitions. We support and defend them in this right.

With only three months left until the Olympic Games, we are excited and eager for the start of the event. The Torch Relay, which heralds the Games, and symbolises our values and dreams, has not had the peaceful passage it deserves. We are truly saddened by this. Violent protests around the Olympic torch are totally counter to the values the torch stands for. The torch, which does not belong to any country but rather to the world, represents Olympic values – nothing else, and should be allowed to pass peacefully. We do not want to see it mistreated nor exploited.

As National Olympic Committees make the final selections for the teams they will field in Beijing, we would like to wish athletes around the world the best of luck in the final qualification processes. This is your moment to shine on a world stage, to enjoy the experience and to know that you will be part of history. We can tell you from our experience that you will be warmly welcomed in Beijing by the Chinese people. We can also reassure you that the Organising Committee is paying the necessary attention to managing the air quality and that your health is of great importance to it. We believe today, as much as we did back in 2001, that Beijing 2008 will be a great success, giving Beijing and China the opportunity of a positive legacy they can manage and sustain. We, your representatives, along with your National Federation, your National Olympic Committee, and of course the International Olympic Committee are here to guide and advise you. Good luck!"

<sup>1</sup> *Commission members present: Sergey Bubka - Athletics, Lee Kyung Chun – Short track speed skating, Robert Ctvrtlik - Volleyball, Yaping Deng – Table Tennis, Rania Amr Elwani - Swimming, Frank Fredericks - Athletics, Hicham El Guerrouj - Athletics, Barbara Kendall - Sailing, Ljiljana Ljubisic - Athletics, Mireya Luiz Hernandez – Beach Volleyball, Alexander Popov - Swimming, Peter Tallberg - Sailing, Pernilla Wiberg – Apline skiing, HRH Princess*



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*Haya Bint Al Hussein - Equestrian (by telephone), Charmaine Crooks - Athletics (by telephone)*

*Excused: HSH Prince Albert II - Bobsleigh, Manuela Di Centa – Cross country skiing, Saku Koivu – Ice hockey, Rebecca Scott – Cross country skiing, Jan Zelezny – Athletics.*

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