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ORIGINAL TEXT IN SPANISH

It is a great honour for me to address the participants of the XIII Olympic Congress, as a representative of the National Olympic Committees (NOCs). I thank the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), especially its President, Mr. Mario Vazquez Raña, for the opportunity to share some brief reflections on one of the central topics of this important event: The Athletes.

I am in a privileged position because I had the chance, as a high performance athlete, to achieve the distinction of 'Olympic champion' at the Mexico 1968 Olympic Games, and I am now the President of an NOC. I can therefore speak to you from both points of view: as an athlete, the reason I am part of the Olympic Movement and as a sports leader with the responsibility of guiding and directing athletes in order to help them reach the peak of their development.

We all are aware of what athletes represent in the Olympic context. From the time of Pierre de Coubertin to the present day, great strategic significance has been given to the training, development and lives of athletes. The modern Olympic Movement could not be conceived without athletes committed to its values and principles and, of course, there would not be athletes as we know them today without a strong and inclusive Olympic Movement with recognised leadership, and NOCs that support and lead them to success.

Since ancient times, the main protagonists of the Olympic Movement have been the athletes and, ever since, they have earned the admiration, respect and love of all people, especially children and youth. Their examples and sporting feats have transcended time, above all because this glory is part of the most valuable heritage of the society they represent. The highest symbol of the victory and honour of an Olympic athlete in the ancient Games was the olive or laurel wreath. This high distinction was the expression of the glory won, based on honour, equity, justice, mutual respect and fair play. On account of their sporting merits and their moral and ethical values, these Olympic athletes were elevated to the sacred category of real popular heroes.

Inspired by those traditions and by such a beautiful legacy, Olympism has adapted to new times, with the result that the modern Olympic Games are the most important sporting event in the world. Athletes today have the same or even greater value and prominence on the

world stage than in past times. The extraordinary vision and enthusiasm of Pierre de Coubertin led to the restoration of the Olympic Games, rescued and strengthened the values of Olympism, and placed the protagonists of the Olympic Games, the athletes, in their rightful place.

The world is in constant transformation and this has also affected sport. There are new rules and the demands are greater. Professionalism and commercialism have radically conditioned the work of NOCs and International Federations (IFs), as well as the government policies and legal frameworks, which regulate sports and consequently, the training and lifestyle of athletes. However, despite these profound transformations, the prestige and authority of the Olympic Movement has been elevated, the Olympic Games are valued more than ever, and respect and admiration for our athletes have risen accordingly, consolidating their position as the people's idols.

Nowadays, athletes who constantly struggle to prepare themselves to win, to do better, to surpass themselves – which is natural for any athlete – face strong barriers and pressures of all kinds. If these factors are not properly channelled at the right time, they can cause negative behaviours or attitudes contrary to the principles and values that promote and develop Olympic sport. Doping, cheating, foul play, violence and discrimination, among other blemishes, are unfortunately still present in sport, and need to be eradicated for the good of sport and Olympism.

NOCs, acting in compliance with the attributions granted by the Olympic Charter and by their own statutes, have the obligation to defend, support and prepare their athletes in the best possible way. We are, in great measure, responsible for ensuring that they become true role models to be imitated by our children and young people. We have to prepare them to compete and win, but above all, to be able to successfully face the risks and challenges imposed on them by the new conditions in which they compete, involving trends and practices that are impossible to avoid. If these are not addressed and controlled with due stringency, firmness, and constancy, they may result in irreparable damage to the life and health of the athletes.

In addition to this, there are other obstacles and difficulties likely to affect the behaviour of athletes. Among these, let me mention the inappropriate way in which the success of certain athletes is exploited, Olympic athletes are used for political interests to the detriment of their image, some governments intervene in matters related to athletes, the lack of proper programmes to stimulate, recognise and support athletes, and the absence of government policies to protect athletes from a social and employment point of view once their sports careers are over.

The remit of NOCs gets broader each year. We should be prepared for the future, as life continues to change at an incredible pace. A very eloquent example of this is the incorporation of new technologies and the role of youth, including athletes. Olympic education, the development of ethical principles and moral values, professional training, the fruit of their work and their social commitment, are the tasks of NOCs, which are necessarily subject to the constant impact of science and technology. Just to mention an example, the internet is a popular and extensively used medium that provides an open window on the world and a fundamental means of communication in these new times. The websites of dedicated athletes openly express their feelings and opinions, besides offering advice, which contributes to the promotion of Olympic values in general and those of the Olympic Games in particular. Athletes, who are publicly recognised, are now much more accessible and easier to



reach, thanks to this new medium. We can now be more attentive to their needs and support them in any way we can, so that their opinions can be heard without censorship and have positive results appropriate to an outstanding athlete.

We in the NOCs are deeply committed to the training of Olympic athletes, not only in the aspects relating purely to sport, as is our obligation, but above all in their training as citizens, in their professional and technical education as well as in their convictions about Olympic values. Sport, as represented by the most outstanding athletes, must contribute to the education of our children; it must support efforts to achieve sustainable development and contribute to the promotion of solidarity and peace among the peoples of the World.

It is vitally important that NOCs support athletes more forcefully, so that, as well as being successful sportsmen and women, they can play a key role in promoting and spreading the practice of sport and respect for the Olympic symbols and values, especially in these new times.

Elite athletes, Olympic athletes, and especially those with exceptional merits, quickly become public figures of great impact. Their careers, and the way they conduct themselves generally, outlast their time as active sportsmen. Young people who want to imitate their heroes look for all the information they can find about them on the internet; it is no longer necessary to visit sports facilities or stadiums to know the athletes and their lives. Today, just from a simple computer, it is possible to access any kind of information, both sporting and personal, and to have a chat with any athlete you want to.

When I was a young athlete, like everybody of my age, I had my favourite sporting heroes, my idols, my examples to follow, and I wanted to achieve their same success and, if possible, surpass them. I used to go to their training sessions and watch them. I wanted to be like them, I copied their every gesture, I asked what they did, how they lived. I wanted to know everything about their lives and, if I could approach them, I asked for an autograph. I was the happiest kid in the world. I used to read and look for comments in the press, on radio and television. I wanted to be a high performance athlete; I wanted to be an Olympic athlete. I am sure there are many young people like me in all parts of the world. That is why we have the duty and obligation to make sure that we approach young athletes in the correct way, leaving them with a positive and lasting imprint for their future development.

A country is recognised all over the world for the achievements of its athletes. When an athlete from a little-known country achieves success by reaching an outstanding level, all attention is on him; everybody wonders how he was able to reach such an enviable position. He becomes a role model, both for his countrymen and for the rest of the world. An athlete is much more than someone who is in training: an Olympic athlete breaks down barriers, he opens the gates of the world for himself, he harvests recognition and admiration for his country as a sports power.

Those of us gathered here at this XIII Olympic Congress feel a great passion for sport, and we have a great interest in perfecting it and ensuring its high standing. The best way to contribute to this great objective is to look after and protect our most valuable asset: the athletes themselves. We should always stand at their side, help them to rise when they fall, encourage them when things do not go as planned, and make them see how important they are and what they can achieve. We have to help develop in them a full awareness of the enormous responsibility they assume every time they wear their

national colours, because by expressing and representing patriotic values, they summarise what is best about their peoples and are symbols of national pride. NOCs always give maximum effort to fulfilling their important role in working with athletes. We need to strengthen our bond with them even further, giving full support to the creation and running of Athletes' Commissions within NOCs. We must coordinate their grassroots organisations and National Federations (NFs), acting as facilitators in seeking greater support from the National Olympic Movement and its partners, and the governments of their respective countries. We have specific, shared obligations in supporting athletes and must translate them into concrete actions. We need to find the correct channels of communication among the parties concerned that will allow us to coordinate the work of selecting, training, preparing and professionally developing our athletes.

It is sad that some sports idols, after their retirement from active competition, do not have specific professions or a dignified means of earning a living. NOCs should work for the introduction of programmes for the professional training of our athletes. Currently, due to the intervention of the IOC Athletes' Commission, we have a programme with Adecco, which assists in the preparation of the athletes and supports them in their search for a career. This is an excellent initiative, but at present only a few NOCs are involved. I consider that this programme must be strengthened and broadened, and I recommend that all NOCs use this new option. The Mexican Olympic Committee has adopted it and, even though it is in its initial stage, the first positive results are evident.

It is of vital importance that NOCs devote more time, effort and resources to prepare athletes as sports leaders and administrators, so that in the near future they can take on responsibilities in a sports federation, in their NOC or elsewhere. It is important to convince athletes that they have to prepare themselves, to study, learn and act with modesty and simplicity in order to become sports leaders and to occupy a position of responsibility in sports administration. Becoming an Olympic champion or medallist, by itself, does not necessarily mean that a person will be a good sports leader. He or she needs to be prepared.

I am certain that many of you, like me as a young athlete, criticised and demanded things of sports leaders that you considered necessary and did not understand why they were not solved. Today, as the President of the Mexican Olympic Committee, I understand the origin of some of the problems that we face and our limitations in meeting the needs of our athletes. However, because we experience the needs, we feel obliged to find solutions. We use our best efforts to make our athletes understand that there are different ways of getting their proposals and points of view examined and decided on more quickly. There may well be material or financial limitations, but there should not be any kind of limitation in the communication between athletes and sports leaders.

The Olympic Movement continues to prepare itself for the great and complex challenges it has to face in the years ahead. A magnificent example and an excellent opportunity in this line is the organisation of the first Youth Olympic Games (YOG), due to be held in Singapore in 2010. This innovative idea gives priority to training, education and culture, as well as competition. I am sure that the YOG will start a new age in the Olympic Movement, where the training and development of athletes is concerned.

I have the most absolute conviction that in order to guarantee the success of our athletes in the long run, we must strengthen their education, as well their professional and technical training. Doping, violence



in sport, egoism, discrimination and any other forms of exclusion can only be finally eradicated when our athletes, coaches and leaders are fully aware of their responsibilities and are willing to face with great firmness and dedication any manifestation or negative tendency that damages the fair and noble principles promoted by sport.

Dear delegates and guests, when I see members from all social sectors of the Olympic Movement and their partners gathered at this XIII Olympic Congress; when I appreciate our unity regarding the objectives and topics on the agenda of the Congress; when I see your enthusiasm and your commitment to sport, Olympism and the athletes themselves, I feel great satisfaction and enormous confidence in the future of the Olympic Movement. I can tell you, very sincerely, that participating in this Congress, and knowing that all has been done to guarantee its success, we in the Olympic Movement are prepared for the future and, above all, the ANOC and the NOCs will not fail their athletes nor the Olympic Movement.