



YOUTH SPORT EVENTS

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Twenty years ago, the beginning of a new Olympic adventure was launched.

Now, the first edition of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) will be taking place in less than one year in Singapore.

Since the creation of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC) in 1979, and of continental associations, the European Olympic Committees (EOC, founded in 1975), in particular, have been seeking to establish their own identity. In the 1970s and 1980s, this was seen in the development of initiatives linked to preparing the Winter and Summer Games and to participation in these Games.

But the leaders of the EOC wanted to do more. Creating their own sports event was a possibility.

There was, however, no need to set up a continental, multidisciplinary sports event for the sporting elite. From the 1980s onwards, there was a plethora of high-level competitions (Olympic Games, World Championships, European Championships, World Cups, etc.). Having an over-booked schedule, with, as a corollary, the requirement to protect our athletes, was already a concern at that time, and is even more so today.

What was missing, however, was a competition for young hopefuls.

In 1987, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the National Olympic Committee (NOC) of the Netherlands, to which the Belgian NOC was invited as a neighbouring country, the idea formed in the minds of the then-President and Vice-President, Raoul Mollet and Jacques Rogge, to hold, in Belgium, a European multidisciplinary competition for young people (aged 14 to 18).

On 17 July 1991, the Opening Ceremony of the first edition of the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF) took place in Brussels, in the presence of the 33 NOCs that were members of the Association at that time.

Dr Jacques Rogge, then President of the Belgian NOC and of the EOC, was at the origin of this initiative.

This first organisation was considered a success at the time. Some 2,081 young people and accompanying persons, representing 10 different sports, took part and, two years later, the first winter EYOF was held in Aosta (Italy).

This year, the EOC organised and celebrated the tenth edition of the event in Tampere (Finland).

Today:

- the best young athletes from all 50 of Europe's NOCs participate in the summer and winter editions. Some 4,500 athletes participated in the EYOF in Tampere (Finland) and 1,700 in Slask-Beskidy (Poland);
- the host cities are chosen by the EOC General Assembly;
- the organisers have already been chosen up to 2013, and the host cities for 2015 will be chosen in December 2010;
- the EOC can count on the cooperation of the European and/or National Federations (NFs) concerned, as well as commercial partners, such as Eurosport and Feratel;
- on each occasion, the EOC manage to organise an event that is greatly appreciated by an increasing number of parties, with the enthusiasm of all the parties concerned (such as organisers, NOCs and the federations involved).

It is not surprising that all this leads us to the discovery of new talents at every edition.

Names such as Justine Henin (Belgium – tennis), Pieter Van Den Hoogenband (Netherlands – swimming), Carolina Klüft (Sweden – athletics), Oana Ban (Romania – gymnastics), and Lina Andersson (Sweden – cross country skiing), were all EYOF medallists who, several years later, climbed onto the highest step of the Olympic podium.

It is no surprise that this initiative was taken up 10 years later in Oceania. The first edition of the Australian Youth Olympic Festival (AYOF) took place in 2001.

Both the EYOF and the AYOF also show that looking for Olympic talent can go hand in hand with disseminating the Olympic values.

Twenty years later, IOC President Jacques Rogge thought that the time had come to set up an international event. Less than two years ago, the IOC Session gave the green light to the organisation of a first edition of the YOG. As we all know, this will take place next year, from 14 to 26 August in Singapore. Equal attention will be paid to the sporting aspect and to the education and cultural aspects of these Games. Over the last two years, I have closely followed the preparations for this event as an ANOC representative. For Singapore, there is a great challenge to which we must rise! To bring to life, within such a short deadline, the first edition of such an enormous event is a colossal task. I am, however, convinced that, with the support of his team and thanks to the IOC's wise advice, the President of SYOCOG, Ser Miang Ng, will manage to rise to the challenge, and that this first edition will mark the start of a new Olympic adventure.

An Olympic adventure through which young people from all over the world are encouraged to move, play sport, keep in shape, and par-



ticipate in sports competitions in a spirit where friendship, solidarity, tolerance and fair play are not just words taken in vain.

A movement like the Olympic Movement must constantly rise to new challenges. The first edition of the YOG, in Singapore in 2010, is a unique opportunity to demonstrate this.

May this Olympic Congress in Copenhagen lead us all to rally behind this new initiative of the IOC President!