

Top Athlete Says Sport Cannot be Muddled With Politics

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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Lamine Diack, International Association of Athletics Federation president.

With over 80 years behind him, Lamine Diack has had many chances to excel. He was one of the top athletes in his native Senegal, and he served in various posts in his country's government. On top of all that, he also found time to become father to 15 children.

Today, he is in Moscow leading the World Championship in Athletics as the president of the International Association of Athletics Federation, with the opening ceremony set for next Saturday.

He has kindly agreed to speak to The Moscow Times about Russia's hosting of one of the top events in the world of sports.

Q: Mr. President, welcome to Moscow and thank you very much for agreeing to answer our questions. Do you think Moscow is ready to host the championship? What is your assessment?

A: The Russian government has done a fantastic job. I would say they made a special effort to ensure the championship would be great. For instance, we have always had visa problems, but with Russia this was resolved very quickly. Russia is an athletics superpower so we expected that.

Q: Does coming to Moscow hold any special significance for the IAAF?

A: Of course, and one of the things we want to do is engage with young people. We created a program called Kids' Athletics. I was very pleased to see Russia's education minister saying "Ok, Mr. Lamine, I want to meet you and make a memorandum of understanding or a convention."

Q: Do you plan to organize any meetings with young athletes in Moscow, or bring athletes together?

A: Well, I hope the tickets are not very expensive. You see this kind of gathering once in your life, or two times in your life. It must be used by the youth as an occasion to see all our stars performing. And we have 47 different disciplines, so there is a lot to discover. In addition, every two years we have youth championships. We just returned from Donetsk, where 1,000 young athletes from many countries were competing. We really do have a solid community. We also have athlete ambassadors who come to many countries to tell their success stories. For instance, Michael Powell and Colin Jackson came to Moscow to promote athletics in general in addition to the event.

Q: We recently had a chance to speak with Stephanie Hightower, head of the U.S. Track and Field, and she told us a very moving story of her being unable to compete at the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow when she was at the peak of her athletic career. Have you heard about the calls for a similar boycott for the Sochi Olympics in Russia?

A: Yes, I read the newspaper, and people have also been trying to approach me about it. You know, in 1976 Africa boycotted the games in Montreal. At that time, I was someone who said no, we cannot boycott, and my country Senegal refused to boycott. We said the games should be a gathering of the entire world. During the games, all conflicts around the world must stop as this is an occasion to be united, not to raise political issues. In 1980, the U.S. tried to get Senegal to boycott the games. The great boxer Muhammad Ali came to convince us not to go to Moscow. I said, "Don't waste your time." We refused to boycott along with other African states four years ago, and we will definitely be in Moscow this time around! In 1984, it all paid back when Eastern Europe refused to go to Los Angeles. So, this is no time to raise political issues. I think that when we talk about gay issues and sports, we should bear in mind that there is the legislation, and this is a political issue. We cannot control it. In our [IAAF] constitution, there is no discrimination against sex, religion or gender. Article 4 protects that. So it is simply not a problem in our sport. And look, there was a time when the Soviet Union was in Afghanistan and there was a boycott over that, and now the United States is in Afghanistan! So what, should we not go to the U.S. now? They are there now too! Sports provide a chance for people with different opinions to sit together in one arena.

Q: So why do many people still try to use sports as a vehicle for change and as a way to promote their interests?

A: I think that some people have this vision of the world in which sport is an opportunity to use pressure and so on and so forth. But I will never do that, I have never done it in my life. I occupied several positions in my country, but it was politics. When we are sitting at the Olympic committee, however, we know very well that we come from different political parties. The Olympics, the world championships — they are both a fantastic occasion for gathering. The world is coming together, people from more than 200 countries. And we are in sports where everybody has a chance to perform, no matter how big or great the country is.

Q: Some people have said they are concerned about athletes of certain lifestyles coming to the Sochi games under new Russian legislation that many have called "anti-gay." Are you concerned that athletes may be at risk here?

A: I'm sure we won't have a problem. When you go buy a ticket, do they not let you enter because of your sexual preferences?

Q: Have you discussed the situation with Russian authorities?

A: No, I will not raise the issue; it's not a problem for me. I'm not going to discuss it. I have to focus on athletics. I cannot take care of Russian legislation. ... We are not here to create a political issue. We just want to organize a beautiful championship. And we look forward to Sochi.

Q: Speaking about sport as such. You have been leading this organization for almost 15 years, how has track and field changed over this time?

A: When I took over, the most important issue we were facing was how to teach the youth. We needed a lot of improvement in this area. And we had to address it with a wonderful program for kids. We improved the quality of events. Now, 204 countries watch our world championship, which is a world record. Possibly 5 billion viewers will watch this competition, and we are pushing further in this direction. There used to be no women on our executive council, but now we have six. We've also fought doping. We used to have just three people in charge of this, now we have 12. And national organizations now control the doping issue. A Jamaican organization discovered that [Asafa] Powell was positive for drugs, despite him being a hero there. But we still have to fight this. As long as you have human nature, you will have cheaters. So you just have to make sure that punishment is inevitable. For instance, only in 2005 did we discover that an athlete from the 1983 championship in Helsinki had been doping!

Mr. President, thank you very much for your time and we hope you will be glad to see some of your prescriptions fulfilled during the Moscow championship.

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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