

Olympic Champion Says Boycotts Futile, Sports Key to Progress

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Olympic champion Sergei Bubka giving a speech at an Olympic event. **Richard Juilliart**

Despite already being one of the world's most successful athletes and having broken world records in pole vaulting, Sergei Bubka is ready to face new challenges and add more wins to his record. In September, the all-time pole-vault legend will be the youngest candidate to succeed Jacques Rogge as President of the International Committee.

Bubka is currently the holder of the world record for men's pole vaulting, but he would like to pass the torch on to younger athletes. In fact, getting young people more engaged in sports is one of the main goals of his presidential bid.

He is now in Moscow as Deputy President of the International Athletics Federations and head of the National Olympic Committee of Ukraine.

While walking through the huge atrium of Moscow's World Trade Center, Sergei Bubka

couldn't help but recall that this sleek modern space was one of the first Western-looking facilities to be built in Moscow. The center was built for the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow.

Q: What do you think about the widespread criticism that these big events do not really contribute to the development of sports in the areas that need it most, like the distant provincial towns in Russia?

A: I take a global, strategic perspective. I totally support the way your country [Russia] is developing sports, because nowadays, physical education in the world is no longer part of the school curriculum. So, people and especially younger people don't get enough physical exercise. Their version of sports is on the computer playing games! But what does it lead to? Young people across the world are in a critical condition when it comes to their health; many young people today have diabetes, are obese, suffer from heart attacks. These are shocking facts. But if you host such events as the Olympics, it acts as a tool to promote sports and healthy lifestyle.

Q: So you believe there is a link between these events and grassroots sports?

A: Of course. People get inspired by the success of famous athletes, such as Yelena Isinbayeva, David Rudisha, Usain Bolt and so on. They start to get interested. And in order for them to do sports they need to have infrastructure: gyms, swimming pools, playgrounds. All these facilities are made for people, not just to host big events.

Q: But when the Olympic Games in Sochi are over, for instance, the six venues that were built on the coast of the Black Sea will be mostly useless.

A: Legacy is one of the key factors for the International Olympic Committee when it considers various Olympic bids. As for Sochi, all these facilities will be used for sports, or as exhibition and congress centers. All the venues are designed with multiple purposes in mind. It all just depends on the professionalism of local management — to what extent they'll be able to make use of all the fantastic infrastructure that was built there.

Q: Mr. Bubka, you refer to Russia as "your country," and we are speaking Russian right now, but do people in Ukraine feel any connection, any affinity with the events happening in Russia?

A: Of course! We used to be one country and we are still brothers. Those who don't remember their past have no future. Many people know [about the championships] and many tourists will attend — I'd say at least 2,000 people each day. When Vladimir Putin invited me to the Universiade, I came along with my Ukrainian colleagues.

Q: To what extent then do you believe that sports can be a unifying force across countries and ideologies?

A: Well that's what sports have always been. Wars have been suspended before, during and after Olympic games in Ancient Greece, so that athletes could travel home safely.

Q: Unfortunately, this doesn't happen anymore.

A: Yes, even though the UN has passed a resolution calling on nations to observe this tradition. Sports are a unifying force that establishes contacts between communities regardless of their race, skin color or religious beliefs.

Q: And this is what I am guiding our conversation toward. Sports are also often used as a tool of political pressure. For instance, there have been calls to boycott the Sochi Olympics to protest the anti-gay propaganda law that was recently adopted in Russia.

A: Well, I am against boycotts, and as far as I know, the U.S. Olympic Committee was opposed to this call. The problem is that if you boycott an event, you only create more problems. Olympic Games are always a chance to foster better understanding between nations. I think that today a boycott would be absurd, especially from my standpoint, since I fell victim to the Soviet boycott of the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

Q: What did you think of this decision in 1984?

A: First of all, nobody cared about our opinion on the matter. The decision was made by the country's leadership. Most athletes have only one chance in their lives to perform well at the Olympics, and only 15 percent go on to later games. I was lucky and I won my Olympic gold in 1988 in Seoul, but most athletes don't have this chance, which is a real tragedy for them. I genuinely believe in the Olympic philosophy of mutual understanding and trust — what can be better than that?

Q: As one of the candidates in the upcoming elections of the IOC's President [in September 2013], how would you treat this situation? Would you respond to these calls?

A: Of course, we need to respond. We need to show what boycotts can lead to. If you won't communicate, engage in dialogue and seek consensus, you will never achieve progress. Whenever you have an interesting topic, you will always have people who will try to pursue their own interest and solve their own issues.

Q: But do you think athletes should speak up on international issues?

A: No, the Olympic Charter states clearly that Olympic games are not political.

Q: Even for such high-ranking sports officials as yourself? Do you feel obliged to speak up on the issue of gay rights, for instance?

A: Well, it's not a problem today. People can go around the world and speak up on issues. As for me, I haven't seen any precedents of things happening [with gay people].

Q: Why do you think people in the West and the Western press have a different opinion?

A: It's politics, [different countries have] different interests and the authorities here understand that very well.

Q: Do you have any plans to meet with young athletes in Moscow?

A: Yes, we have a program on Aug. 11th. I have it on my agenda; we'll be going to Red Square to give out autographs.

Q: In many of your interviews you've noted that in the future, if you become the IOC's president, one of your main tasks would be engaging with the youth, being more active with young people. But how are you going to do this?

A: Social networks are the best channel today, so there are huge opportunities to bring about progress. On the one hand, young people don't move around by sitting in front of their computers, but on the other, you can give them all this information about sports: about opportunities for participation, about the history and the future of the Olympic movement. I would also like to establish a youth council to directly engage with young people. We need to seek understanding and find mechanisms so that young people become proactive. The truth is that sports are the best way to succeed in life.

Q: But the question is, how will you attract the youth? For instance, you say that social networks will work, but they offer a wealth of information that can be difficult to navigate — how will you ensure that young people become interested in sports?

A: Well this must work at all levels: people must feel involved at the local, national and olympic level. For instance, I believe that we should start with schools; we should create an environment there that will encourage people to take part in sports. There are many so many options and projects there. Today the IOC's financial standing is very strong, so we need to invest in the future, and in the youth in particular. I would suggest a program that will offer grants to young athletes. Another option is to subsidize the best national federations so they could implement their own innovative projects. We can create an Icons Council — with such people as Bill Gates, Kofi Annan, Mark Zuckerberg and so on. These people have achieved so much in their respective fields. They serve as examples for many youngsters today. So what I propose is to integrate the Olympic movement into society as a whole. The language of sports is accessible to everybody. After all, 5 billion people watch the Olympics.

Q: How many people will watch the Athletics Championships?

A: If you look at the overall number it will be around 2 billion. But it's the second-most important athletics event after the Olympics. And it is a great achievement that Russia is hosting these championships. It's really great.

Q: How do you think we can make more people watch these championships? I'm sure you know that more people tend to watch football, and a lot more money is spent on it. So many youngsters would prefer to become football stars rather than sprinters.

A: First of all, we need to start from the very beginning. For instance, we have a kids athletics program that we conduct at schools around the world in 25 languages. This will make not only children but their parents interested as well. It also depends on how you work with particular star athletes. For instance, if you wanted to interview Usain Bolt, what would his manager think about it? Would he find time? An interview would be beneficial to both you and Bolt. Because more people would become interested in him and what he does. We try to give out as much information as we possibly can. It's called professionalism. Whenever journalists write about an event or an issue — people will find out about it. You just have to keep knocking until you are heard.

Q: As one of its biggest stars, you represent the Soviet sports machine. Do you think

the Soviet approach is still applicable? Should it be revived?

A: First of all, there was great emphasis on infrastructure during the Soviet period. There were strict standards on how many facilities should be built in a given area. And there is nothing wrong with having the same kind of standards today. But in real life, stadiums are demolished and residential areas and shopping malls are built instead. So you have to make your children engaged these days. Sports are a great tool for that. Physical activity is absolutely indispensable at schools.

Q: What advice would you give to a teenager in a provincial Russian or Ukrainian town, where there is no sports infrastructure and no way to reach out to someone like you? What should he or she do?

A: Well he should turn to his gym teacher...

Q: But what if the gym teacher himself is struggling to make ends meet and therefore has no time to train a future Olympic champion?

A: Well, there are many other possibilities. You can create a separate sports class at school with parents contributing a small fee. In my day, we would just take two stones and play football. Or we would find our way over a fence into a local military base where there were sports facilities, even with the military men trying to chase us. I didn't have proper shoes, but I wanted to achieve a lot. And here in Russia now, so much infrastructure is being built — I'm quite impressed.

Mr. Bubka, we wish you the best of luck at the upcoming election, thank you very much for agreeing to speak with us.

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