Endgames

The Lords of the Rings: Power, Money and Drugs in the Modern Olympics by Vyv Simmons and Andrew Jennings (Simon and Schuster, 1992) Reviewed by Mike Ticher.

The problem with books about the Olympics is that they have to come out in Olympic year. Even Robert Hughes made sure that Barcelona was finished in plenty of time to cash in on the exposure guaranteed every Olympic city by the quadrennial bunfight. One of the many differences between Hughes' book and this expose of the grubbier corners of the Olympic movement seems to have been that he thought of the idea long enough in advance to be able to carry out the exhaustive research necessary. Simson and Jennings, "two of Britain's top investigative journalists", apparently spent six years researching their previous book, but I'd be surprised if they put more than six months into this one. That's a shame, because it's a great story.

The ideals of the Olympics, fair play, amateurism, the importance of taking part rather than winning, of fostering unity among nations, are a sham. According to the authors of The Lords of the Rings, they have been perverted by the leaders of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and their greedy associates in the commercial world. Prime villain of the piece is IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch who, the book 'reveals', was a loyal Francoist for forty years, and held high government office in Spain right up to the dictators death in 1975.

The charge against Samaranch is essentially that he has transferred his Francoist values directly into the Olympic movement: "The Club (Samaranch's circle) with its secrecy, its lack of democracy, its self-perpetuating elite, its ceremonies, protocols and medals appears to be not so very different from the movimento Samaranch loved." The key figure who cemented Samaranch's new power-base in the Olympic movement after the inconvenient onset of democracy in Spain was Horst Dassler, the German boss of the Adidas sportswear business. It was Dassler who marshalled the marketing skills which have transformed world sport over the past fifteen years into a massive vehicle for corporate sponsorship.

Until the 1970s, the leaders of the big international sporting bodies came almost exclusively from western Europe or America. Dassler and Samaranch, together with the other vital member of The Club, world soccer chief Joao Havelange, were acute enough to recognise and then to mobilise the power of the rest of the sports world. Adidas supplied sportswear and equipment to Third World and Soviet Bloc countries. Samaranch offered their sporting leaders a seat at the table of international sports decision-making. That didn't imply any real power, because they owed their position entirely to Samaranch, but it did carry with it the opportunity for almost limitless foreign first-class travel for the lucky few. Dassler's reward was to gain control, through his company ISL, of the marketing rights to the soccer World Cup, world athletics and, of course, the Olympics.

The results of this closed circle of mutual advantage have been catastrophic for the Games, according to Simson and Jennings. Where once the five linked rings of the Olympics were vigorously protected from commercial exploitation, Samaranch has set up a "Commission for New Sources of Financing, which is charged with selling off the emblem for the best price the market will bear". Twelve multinational companies, including Coca-Cola, Mars and Kodak currently hold exclusive rights in their area of business to use the Olympic symbol to sell their product.

Exposing the Olympics to rampant commercialism might have been justifiable if the money had been pumped back into sport at the grassroots. Instead, the authors allege, it has most conspicuously been spent to sustain a fabulously wealthy lifestyle for IOC members. Their overseas travel and luxury accommodation compare favourably with that of the world leaders with whom they regularly hob-nob. Since the financial success of the 1984 Games in Los Angeles, other cities have been queuing up to stage them. The ostentatious gifts they shower on the 93 IOC members to win their votes, do not shake Samaranch in his belief that their work is "bringing people together in peace for the the benefit of mankind".

As if that weren't enough, Samaranch and the IOC are also accused of turning a blind eye to drugs at the Olympics, and failing to implement effective measures to eliminate their use among athletes. The gist of what the authors have to say is undoubtedly true. However, there are numerous problems with the way they say it, which undermine their self-righteous zeal in displaying the Olympic ideal as the grotesque fraud it is.

Some are minor. The book is littered with grammatical and spelling mistakes, which surely betray a rush to get it out in time for Barcelona. (One of names misspelt is that of Nicolea Ceausescu, who Samaranch presented with the Gold Olympic Order.) Simson and Jennings are at pains to stress that they are "not sports journalists" - indeed, although they repeatedly refer to the Olympics as "our games", they give no evidence of being in the slightest bit interested in sport itself.

This might help to explain why the style of the book is so irritating. At times they seem to impose a strict limit of no more than 10 words per sentence. The excessive luxury surrounding the IOC members is chronicled in such excruciating detail that even Brett Easton Ellis might tire of it. The main argument isn't so much driven home as nailed down and beaten un-
conscious. Take this imaginative account of Samaranch at the opening ceremony in Barcelona:

Watch the President's right arm, is it stirring, is it twitching, is it taking on a life of its own, compelled by some visceral force to rise to an angle of forty-five degrees from his shoulder?

OK, we've got the message, he's an old fascist. Either Simson and Jennings have got a very low opinion of the average intelligence of people who read sports books, or they've spent so much time investigating that they've forgotten how to write.

The tabloidesque wouldn't grate so much, however, if the argument itself was constructed on firmer foundations. The authors claim "privileged access to first-hand accounts by key insiders". In fact, much of the first half of the book is little more than an extended interview with just one man, Horst Dassler's former offsider and marketing whizz-kid, Patrick Nally.

A lot more material comes from the 1991 IOC congress in Birmingham, where Simson and Jennings' "key insiders" seem to have been the public relations manager and waitresses at the hotel where the IOC members stayed, who were able to supply them with the devastating evidence (yet again) of what was on their nightly menu. The book is littered with sentences which begin: "One commentator described it as..." or "As one observer remarked...". Substantial quotes from newspapers and IOC publications add to the misleading impression that the authors have marshalled an overwhelming weight of evidence. They haven't.

The Lords of the Rings is on even shakier ground when it comes to its interpretation of what has happened to the Olympic movement. It tells a simple and compelling story. Once, the Olympics were pure and amateur and clean. Then along came the fascist Samaranch and his henchmen and turned it into the bloated, commercial, drug-ridden carcass we see today. This is nonsense. The Olympics never were such a beacon of innocence and universal values. From the very beginning they have been sullied by pettymindedness, nationalism and hypocrisy. The Games were constituted to Naziism in 1936. They accepted the 'shamateurism' of Soviet Bloc athletes for decades before Samaranch came on to the scene. Drug-taking was rife at least from the early 1970s. The medal ceremonies and parades (not to mention the lack of democracy in the IOC) which Simson and Jennings cite as a throwback to Samaranch's fascist past are a long-established part of the Olympic scene.

What's more, the fact that Samaranch was able to harness the voting power of the poorer members of the IOC, albeit for his own nefarious reasons, suggests that they had been pretty shamefully neglected by the previous incumbents from what the authors call "the more literate countries". Their association of Samaranch's IOC with fascism is as tendentious and laboured as the equivocation of the pre-commercial Olympics with freedom and democracy. There is no evidence to support their assertion that "the funding of voters [on the bids for the right to stage future Olympics] has offended the principles of those reared in the Western tradition of democratic politics".

Simson and Jennings protest that "there was no need to turn the amateur Games into just another arm of show-business, just another entertainment staged by professionals". But in the face of the huge sums of money generated by TV exposure and corporate sponsorship for all sports in recent years, it's hard to see how the Olympics could have remained amateur in anything but a nominal, utterly hypocritical sense. Certainly the other old bastion of international amateur sport, rugby union, succumbed to exactly the same pressures.

All of which begs the question of whether an Olympics in which multimillionaire tennis and track stars compete has a point any more, except to enhance the prestige of a few old men and the sales of the biggest corporations in the world. The Lords of the Rings is a pretty shoddy piece of work, but at least it comes up with the right answer to that one. "Perhaps it is time to turn our backs on the Olympics as we know them".

MIKE TICHER used to believe in the Olympics, and Santa Claus.