

Coe-production

It comes as a shock when your heroes grow old, when the titans of one's youth succumb to the passing years, lose their hair, grow flabby and weak, and reveal themselves to be the mere mortals we'd always, irrationally, hoped they weren't. And even more than film stars, it's our sporting heroes that have the most invested in their glorious youth. So it's a rare and wondrous thing when one of those heroes looks exactly the same as he did in his prime, even though that prime was more than 30 years ago.

The hero in question is Sebastian Coe, probably the greatest middle-distance runner Britain has ever produced. He broke world records so often that he actually held records about records – for one immortal hour he had the fastest times in history for four separate distances - until his great rival Steve Ovett bested him in the mile. Two of his World records lasted for nearly twenty years.

The standout achievement of his magnificent career was becoming the only man to successfully defend the Olympic 1500-metre title (1980 and 1984). He could have made it 3 in a row in 1988 had he not been controversially left out of the GB team, a decision that so dismayed the world that IOC chief Juan Antonio Samaranch tried to arrange a special wild card place for him and, when that failed, the Indian team suggested he might run for them (Coe's mother is half Indian).

He retired from athletics and had a successful second career in politics before becoming the chairman of the London Olympic bid committee. He maneuvered himself skillfully through the Byzantine corridors of power at the IOC to successfully present London's case and bring the games to Britain. Since then he has overseen the Herculean task of preparing for the 300 events involving 10,00 athletes, the issuing of 9 million (!) tickets and the zillion and one other details besides.

All this has proved expensive but Coe has stressed the theme of sustainability and it is hoped that the games will regenerate the East end of London and bring about improvements in the capital's infrastructure that will benefit the community for decades to come.

New stadia have been built and existing venues upgraded. The transport system – not London's strongest suit – is being overhauled with new 'Javelin' high-speed rail service using 'bullet' train technology from Hitachi forming part of an additional 4000 rail services a day during the events.

Keeping on top of all might be expected to add a grey hair or two to the head of the steeliest of champions, but Lord Coe, now 55, looks, give or take an extra pound or two, pretty much as he did when he was flying round the world's running tracks setting records and picking up medals for fun. If the immense pressures of the job ever get to him, he keeps it well hidden.

The souvenir shops are already doing good business and confidence is growing that the London Games could be one of the best Olympics ever. If so though, modest chap that Coe is, he won't be taking all the credit,

and will readily acknowledge the contribution of everyone involved in this epic project, which, all being well, will not only leave us all with great sporting memories but provide Britain with the world class facilities to help develop the next generation of heroes and record breakers.

Just don't mention the cost.

Written by Philip Patrick
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