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Mr President,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen:

I am very pleased to be here today to address you not only on the theme I know the best: 'the Athletes', but also to give you an athlete's perspective on the four other themes of our Olympic Congress.

We all know that the athlete is more than just an athlete. His field of activity is not limited to the field of play but goes quite beyond.

I'm deeply convinced that every athlete in the world can contribute to building a better society for future generations by giving the best of themselves inside and outside the sports arena.

I would like to start my presentation with our main concerned area: the Olympic Games and what it represents for us to take part in it.

There is no doubt that without athletes, there will be no Olympic Games, there will be no sport.

There is absolutely no doubt that the athletes are at the heart of the Olympic Movement.

If today, the Olympic Games are the premier event, watched by billions of people throughout the world, attracting worldwide interest, we all recognize that the athletes are the reason.

Through their performances, athletes have offered to the world the most beautiful and memorable moments.

I am sure that if I ask anyone of you to tell me which souvenirs you have from an Olympic Games or any sport, you will find a name right away.

Everybody remembers who are Jesse Owens, Jean-Claude Killy, Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt... and what they did. They inspired generations after generations throughout the world.

Today, in our evolving society, the athlete has become a role model or hero for the young generation. He makes them dream, he even gives them hope and even helps them to find their own way own goals in life.

Of course, we don't become a champion just like that. It would be too easy. Like for any other job, it demands years of learning, training and sacrifices.

As some of you might know, I hail from Namibia, a country four times the size of the United Kingdom and located on the southwestern seabed of Africa with a population of 2 million.

I grew up in the dusty streets of a township in Namibia called Katutura. Like many of those destitute Namibians under apartheid we had very little to look forward to, except hope for a better future.

Growing up poor and overcoming several obstacles made me a stronger person. I became more determined to succeed in life, and to me, that meant to stay in school and get an education.

Athletics became my trump card to get noticed. I became an Athlete with a purpose.

My purpose was to get a life, to represent my country, to give the best of myself.

As a result of my athletic achievements I was given the opportunity to study in the United States. This heralded the beginning of my athletics career. Through careful combination of high level athletics and education, I was able to obtain a Masters Degree in Business Administration whilst at the same time building an international career in athletics. It was not an easy journey, because I had to constantly strike a balance between academics and athletics.

Despite the difficulties in combining sport and education, I am happy that I was able to persevere because today, having retired from active sports, I can proudly fall back on my academic credentials.

I can only imagine the frustrations I would have been faced with following my retirement from international athletics if I had no academic grounding.

Remember if it was not for family, sport and education a young man from a little known country would not have had the opportunity to stand in front of you today.

My career in athletics as well as experiences of many other athletes across the world is testimony to what sports can do to help a young person achieve his or her goals, his or her dreams.

We also know what sport has done for us, but we cannot be complacent in assuming that the generations that follow us will find sport as we have.

We must actively work to guide them towards sport, to show them the physical and emotional rewards.

We have a responsibility to the young generation to let them know that taking part in sport is a wonderful life experience.

As President Rogge often says: Athletes have the responsibility to represent the three values of the Olympic Movement, excellence, friendship and respect. They have to show the kids of the world who follow us on TV, or on the net, that winning is great, but that it is the taking part that counts. Excellence means sharing our passion with them freely and showing them how men and women of honour and courage behave. Friendship encourages them to consider sport as a tool for mutual understanding. And respect incorporates respect for oneself and one's body... respect for others... for the rules...and for sport.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Being an athlete does not stop on the athletics track, a pool or a court...

Like any citizen in the world, an athlete has showed that he is competent, dynamic and capable of addressing any issue. Like any citizen of the world, athlete has rights and duties to express himself, to make his voice heard and to play a bigger role within the sports movement on local, national, regional and international levels... and beyond the sports field within society in general

And that is the IOC Athletes' Commission's goal. Be the athletes' voice.

People have to know what athletes think, what athletes feel and what athletes want: on the position they occupy within the sports movement and society in general; on their choice of training and competition's calendar, on their life and career choices; and even on the preparations for and holding of the Olympic Games.

These are key concerns for today's and tomorrow's athletes. These are also the sub-themes of this overall theme of 'Athletes', which were largely discussed during our International Forum last May in Marrakech. Let me outline some of our recommendations which will be discussed during our next breaking out sessions.

On the first one "Relationship between the athletes, the clubs, federations and NOCs", the Forum's participants unanimously agreed that all the members of the sports movement – clubs, national and International Federations and NOCs – have an important role and responsibilities vis-à-vis the athletes.

The athletes thus have a central role to play in raising the profile of sport and recreation across communities. For their part, the sports organisations must ensure that all athletes can compete on a level playing field. The athlete, to do his or her job properly, needs the support of his or her club, federation and NOC.

The Forum also encouraged sports organisations to strengthen their athletes' commissions, or if necessary create one, so that the athletes can make their views heard and ensure that the information provided is accessible to all. This is why inside any sports bodies, it is important that athletes are in a position to influence development and decision.

And one issue where the athletes should express mainly their voices and concerns is the protection of their health.

Thus, athlete's health during training and competition is an issue which spans the areas of education, information, treatment, prevention and anti-doping. For this reason, we called on the IOC to implement educational programmes on health protection and injury prevention at the Olympic Games and Youth Olympic Games, and to encourage the NOCs and IFs to do the same.

As for fight against doping, we have a strong position and a (life) ban should be recommended on anyone connected with cheating or other behavior that undermines fair-play and ethics.

Cheats must be punished; young athletes must have healthy dreams.

Sporting bodies' role is the implementation of the WADA code and the harmonisation of sporting calendars.

As for the IFs' technical decisions, in particular relating to competition schedules and rule changes, these should be taken in consultation with the IFs' respective Athletes' and Medical Commission representatives.

On the athlete's side, in fact, we need to work for better protection, better communication on the dangers of overtraining and over-competition, better prevention and better education.

As an athlete and as a person, we have to encourage clean sport and set a good example for the new generation.

On the key issue of the social and professional life of athletes during and after elite competition, we all need to understand the importance of combining education and sport ("dual career"), and thus to recognise and endorse the importance of life skills.

As I said earlier, an athlete's life should not be restricted to the sports arena.

There is a need to push the promotion of education throughout an athlete's entire sporting career.

From the very start of their career in sport, athletes should be given opportunity to prepare for life and that the Olympic Movement and national sporting bodies should provide specific support or assistance in achieving social and professional stability during and after elite competition.

This should be augmented by the support from both the coach and the agent in preparing the athlete for a final exit and a daunting future.

Of course, an athlete should also take the necessary steps to prepare for life after sport throughout his or her sports career, and also to make his or her post-sports life successful.

However, the role of sport is to give the athlete something back at the end of a sporting career.

As President Rogge once said: "The sports movement has a moral responsibility to help athletes integrate into the labour market at the end of their sporting careers. Athletes dedicate their lives to sport and it is only right that sport should give them something back".

We have to introduce and implement programmes such as 'The Athlete Career Programme' which provide emotional support and management during the transition period and create partnerships with sponsors to contribute to life projects, and not only sports performance.

All the stakeholders in sport – national sports organisations, governmental entities, etc. – and the athlete's entourage – family, coach – should also help the athlete to concentrate also on education.

Having a successful sports career is not incompatible with a successful social and professional life.

There are many examples of athletes who have shone on the international sporting scene while living a so-called "normal" life at the same time as winning medals.

This is why the Athletes' Forum in Marrakech has duly recommended amending the Olympic Charter to contain language encouraging the Olympic Movement to support the Athlete Career Programmes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A global research project conducted for the IOC in 16 countries, has shown that 63 per cent of people believe the Olympic Games are the pinnacle of all sporting events. Furthermore, 73 per cent expressed the opinion that the Olympic Games are more than a sporting event; while some 70 per cent thought the Olympic Games set a positive example for children and encourage them to participate in sport.

And we all must admit that the performance of Olympic athletes, alongside the ceremonies and the atmosphere around the Games, make the Olympic Games, the sport premier event.

At the end of the day we will always remember their performances, their winning, their loss, their joy, their sadness.

And we, all together, have to continue striving to make the Olympic Games stronger and even more enjoyable and in particular more attractive to the young generation.

But how? Maybe by providing a programme with a mix of novelty and stability. And us, the athletes, by being there and giving the best of us.

There is no doubt that sports presentation and competition format must be dynamic so that the young generation will remain attracted and come back to the field of sport.

Here, International Federations are very active and are working on elements such as: governance, judging and referees, competition format, and presentation of events, with the objective of increasing the appeal of their sport.

In turn, this will have a positive influence on the athletes.

For the Games, but also any other sporting event, the athletes are the main "actors". Organisers must focus on providing the best conditions for their performances - from venues to food, everything must be optimal.

This is why the involvement of athletes in the preparation of the Games is highly important. The athletes' input is needed, not only during the Games' preparation, but it should also be the case during the bid process.

I am pleased to say that this IS the case within the IOC, as the athletes are represented in all IOC commissions, and in particular the Evaluation and Coordination Commissions.

At the Olympic Games I learnt about Olympic values, not only about winning, but other values such as fair play, respect, sportsmanship, courage and friendship.

In 1992, at my first Olympic Games in Barcelona, I competed in the 100 and 200 meters. Walking into the Olympic Village, and seeing all these stars from other sports made me realize the magnitude of the Olympic Games.

I became an Olympic Athlete or Olympian. After winning my first silver medal I became an Olympic medallist.

However, in 1996, the biggest mistake I made was to go and stay in a hotel. Winning became more important than the other values.

I personally think and believe that all athletes should stay in the Olympic Village. This will reinforce the principle of equality at the Olympics.

It was not about what happened at the Games, but afterwards when I came home that shocked me with the thousands of my fellow Namibians greeting me at the Airport and in the streets. That is when I realized the real magnitude of the Olympic Games.

As chairman of the IOC Athletes' Commission, I deeply understand that the Olympic Movement structure is vertical in nature in that athletes are associated with clubs, clubs in turn are affiliated with their National Federation, for their part, are usually affiliated with an IF as well as their NOC and government. NOC is affiliated to the IOC.

For the Athletes' Commission, our main commitment is making sure that the voices of the athletes are heard within the IOC.

As a consultative body, its main role is: liaising between active athletes and the IOC, representing the athletes within the Olympic Movement and upholding the rights and obligations of the athletes.

We work for the athletes and we are elected by the athletes who competed at the Olympic Games.

We defend the interests of all Olympic athletes and their place within the Olympic Movement.

May I take this opportunity to thank my fellow colleagues for outstanding work all year long and it is a real pleasure working with you.

My thanks go also to all the former members and in particular to Sergey Bubka and Peter Tallberg.

In order to strengthen the role of the IOC Athletes' Commission and for us to evolve over the next decade, athletes need to be active at club level.

National Federations need to have an Athletes' Commission. International federations and National Olympic Committees too. I am strongly inviting them to follow the IOC's path and open the door of their executive committees to the athletes so that they could play a bigger role.

We obviously would like to see every athlete that have qualified for the Olympic Games compete at the Olympic Games but you will understand that we need to respect the working practices of 205 NOCs and as many as 33 IF athletes' commissions.

Sporting organisations shall ensure that all athletes can compete on a level playing field through effective and impartial implementation of technical standards and judging.

I am fortunate that I am from an event in athletics where there is not much concern with judging. We cannot afford judges ruining the life of an athlete. Judging at the Olympic Games needs to be of the utmost highest standards. No compromise at all.

As well as today, the Olympic oath is not enough. We have to consider a code of ethics for the athletes.

Another concern is the competition schedule. Some athletes are complaining about their competition schedule overload. As an athlete, do you have a say in this. Probably little but we should be involved. International Federations should more engage the athletes whether they are retired or active.

We are thankful to all stakeholders for making our dreams come true.

And we are in turn ready to give back.

Thus in Singapore, for the first ever Summer Youth Olympic Games, the members of the IOC Athletes' Commission will be on site during all the event. They will talk with the young athletes about their ideas, dreams and how they dealt with crucial issues such as doping. They will be taking part in the educational and cultural programmes implemented by the Organizing Committee. Because sport, education and culture play an integral role in the development of the young.

Through such a combination, we are able to develop critical life skills that matter long after a career in athletics, football, skiing, tennis... has come to an end.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sport changed my life. What I am today is because of what sport gave to me. What I built, what I discovered, what I achieved, it's thanks to sport.

As I said earlier, we have a responsibility to the young generation to let them know that taking part in sport is a wonderful life experience.

We have to be sure that this is the case everywhere in the world.

I would like also to remind our young that they not only represent the promise of a brighter future, but also the vitality of our present.

At the same time I would like to remind those individuals and institutions responsible for development of sport that sport, education and culture play an integral role in the development of our youth.

We know of professional athletes who took their sports seriously, excelled in it, and have gone on to make a mark in their professions or in enterprise, and as leaders of society.

It is crucial that we have to prepare the youth to have the greatest advantage in a future that will be both challenging and richer with opportunities.

Whether we are an athlete, a sports leader, coach, doctor, journalist or individual, it is up to us now to fully play our role of citizen within society and communicate our passion for sport to the young generation.

With my fellow athletes, I'm ready to continue to play this role following Coubertin's motto 'See far, speak frankly, act firmly'. And you?

Thank you.