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# Sport<sup>o</sup>

The weekend starts here



## Seb Coe

The man who led London to its finest hour speaks exclusively to *Sport*

**“There are some famous words you can find stamped on the bottom of a product. Words that, when you read them, you know mean high quality, mean skill, mean creativity.**

**“We have stamped those words on the Olympic and Paralympic Games of London 2012:**

**“London 2012. Made in Britain.”**

With the above words, and in a voice brimming with emotion, Lord Sebastian Coe brought to a close the Games of the XXX Olympiad. Years of lobbying, building, arguing, fretting and cost-counting had finally come to an end, along with a summer in which London shrugged off its heavy grey trenchcoat and revealed the glorious goods hidden beneath... →

**For Sebastian Coe, the man at the centre of it all, it was also the end of a decade-long mission – or “journey”, as he prefers to call it. There had been moments of elation, starting with the International Olympic Committee’s decision to award London the 2012 Olympics over Paris (“My first thought was: ‘Have I heard this correctly?’” says Coe. “It was like an out-of-body-experience...”), but there had also been difficult times; not least the day following London’s victory, when the capital was rocked by terrorist attacks.**

But while Coe’s public face had remained composed throughout those turbulent times, his emotions bubbled to the surface on that last day of the Games, when he stood in the centre of an Olympic Stadium that had in the preceding days and weeks been the scene of so many unforgettable performances.

“It probably was my most emotional moment of the Games,” he says, nodding contemplatively. “Because it was the end of a personal journey as well. My youngest daughter was three when I started it, and she was 14 when I made that speech. It was an unbelievable journey for everyone involved – and of course everyone will tell their own particular stories from it. But, for me, making that speech was the end of a decade-long chapter.

“They’re not easy speeches to write. I always try to make them as brief as possible, just because I tend to think that if you can’t say it in a minute and a half, then it’s probably not worth saying... I’d be an editor’s dream.” He chuckles, casting an eye over the sizeable tome that is his recently released autobiography, suggesting there’s someone out there who might beg to differ.

### Call for the army

The last time *Sport* had an audience with Coe, there were 22 days remaining before the London 2012 Opening Ceremony – a time when the chaos behind the presumably steel-reinforced doors of security firm G4S was yet to be fully disclosed. Six days later, it was reported that the company with a £284m contract to supply 10,400 security guards to Olympic venues didn’t have enough trained staff to do the job.

“Within an hour of Paul [Deighton, LOCOG’s chief executive] being advised that there was a problem, I knew about it,” recalls Coe. “The thing we had in our favour was our strong relationships with the Home Office, Ministry of Defence and across government, which meant that we had contingencies in place. So, within a day or so of being alerted to the fact G4S had a problem, we had it completely resolved. But it was never a security issue; it was only ever about the mix of numbers in those security arrangements.



“And actually, looking back, the military presence and the work of constabularies from around the country was one of the defining memories for a lot of people who went to the Games. There’s no question that it added to the whole atmosphere.”

### Grand opening

Coe had been less confident, though, about the Opening Ceremony. Or, to be precise, about the way in which the phantasmagoria that was Danny Boyle’s *Isles of Wonder* would be received by an estimated television audience of one billion people worldwide.

“If you’re being honest, you’re always nervous about opening ceremonies,” he explains. “Because they tend to set the tone and style for everything that comes afterwards. You want a great opening ceremony so that it acts as the curtain-raiser. But the worry is that you could always end up with one everyone is talking about in a disparaging way long into those days where you should be focusing on sport. “But I believed we had something, I thought Danny Boyle and Stephen Daldry had created something very special. But, at that point, I was probably too close to it to see how it was going to be viewed by the public. →

If you ask if I was surprised by the response to the Opening Ceremony, then the answer is probably 'yes'. It was just extraordinarily global, and to get lead photographs and stories in everything from the *LA Times* to the *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung*, with that level of approval, is not what most opening ceremonies get. The creativity Danny brought, and the filmmaker's eye with which he saw it, set it apart."

Not to mention the idea of parachuting the Queen into the Olympic Stadium from a helicopter – about which Coe admits princes Charles, William and Harry knew nothing until they saw mother or granny taking on the role of a Bond girl in east London.

**Eternal gratitude**

In *Sport's* pre-Olympics chat with Coe, he had been keen to emphasise just how heavily the task of organising a home Games was weighing upon him, saying earnestly: "This is the biggest project most of the nation will have witnessed in living memory, and we feel a big responsibility to deliver it and make people feel proud." Responsibilities that, most people would agree, Coe and his team more than fulfilled.

He's reluctant to take the praise, though. "Yes, Games are delivered by really focused people," he accepts, but he is also quick to turn it back on the millions who devoted their time to be a part of London 2012. "The spirit and humanity for which everybody now looks back at London is actually the millions of people of the UK who helped create the atmosphere, helped deliver the Games and helped local communities to make the most of them.

"I'm proud of being part of the team that delivered a Games that has made a big mark internationally, but I'm equally proud about the country I was born in – one that helped create an extraordinary atmosphere. We had 15 million people out on the streets watching

the torch relay, and 70,000 of the most exceptional volunteers who weren't just out for a Saturday afternoon on a bring-and-buy stall. This was session after session for eight or nine hours a day. My eternal gratitude will always be to the people of the UK who made the Games what they were."

It's been almost three months since the curtain came down on London 2012, yet most days you'll still find him in his Canary Wharf office, up to his eyeballs in the legacy-building he promised the Games would kickstart. One wonders, though, if having worked on something he was clearly so passionate about – and that had to be, if he was to do his job properly – there's a part of Coe that rather misses it all?

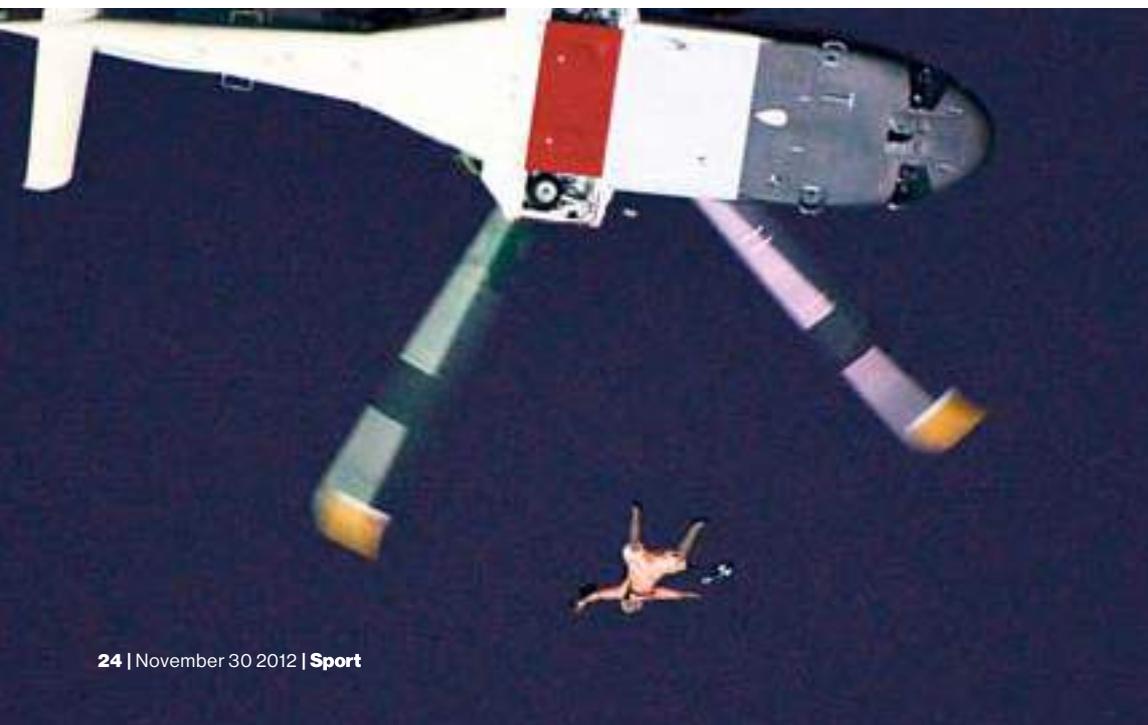
"No," he says firmly. "Because I remember very clearly, and fondly, September 10 2012 as being the first morning I woke up in nearly a decade without having to think about winning a bid or delivering a Games. People have often asked me if I am sad the Games are over. And the answer is no, because I think the most exciting part of this story is still to be written. We went to Singapore not just to deliver extraordinary sport, which I think we saw, but to make sure the Games carried on working for local communities and future generations."

There will be many who are sad that the days of strangers sparking up conversations on the Tube are over, and that Super Saturdays and Thrilling Thursdays are already spoken about with nostalgic undertones. Lord Coe though, is moving on.

Already appointed chairman of the British Olympic Association, there'll be plenty more Coe speeches to come. None are likely to be spoken with quite so much feeling as the one he gave on September 9 2012, but you can rest assured they will all be short and sweet. He gave us his word on that. ●

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**"When we saw the peach-coloured dress disappearing into the night sky under a billowing parachute, we looked at each other, both thinking: 'Oh my God! What have we sanctioned here?'"**



**Coe on...**

**In *Running My Life: The Autobiography*, Lord Coe gives an insight into the juggling act of running an Olympic organising committee and how he convinced the IOC that polishing a turd was possible after all...**

**On the visit of the IOC's evaluation commission to the Olympic (building) site in February 2005...**

"It required considerable imagination to superimpose the architects' model on to the blighted wasteland. The marker for where the stadium would be was a 50-foot pile of rotting fridges, and when I pointed out the site of the Aquatics Centre – beside a polluted river so thick with sludge it could have done duty as a crime scene – I felt like a time-share salesman on the Costa del Sol."

**On Sepp Blatter and the doomed 2018 World Cup bid...**

"Most people get Sepp Blatter wrong. They say he hates England. He doesn't. What he has a problem with is the English game. As president of an international federation, he sees the unwillingness of English clubs to release players for international duty. He sees the purchasing power of the English game... and he sees a national federation that, at the time of the bid, had no chairman or chief executive. Blatter once said to me: 'Your game is run by idiots. It's not run by bright people.'"

**On Ken Livingstone and an awkward encounter with a delegation from Beijing...**

"Meetings involving Ken were often very funny. In his office he had a Hugo Chavez doll... You pulled a cord and it went into a robotic dance, and Ken thought this was hysterical... The interpreter was just doing the introductions when Ken cut in and beckoned them over to the doll. 'Have you seen my pride and joy?' he asked, and pulled the cord. The Chinese minister looked on, not understanding a word and totally bemused. 'Do you know Hugo Chavez?' Ken added. A pause while this was translated. Then the interpreter turned back to us: 'The minister says yes, he does. Who do you think put him there?'"

**On first seeing the Queen skydiving in a peach dress...**

"We were in the Portakabin in the stadium that was Danny's makeshift editing suite, and even though we'd been involved at every stage from storyboard to final script, the wit, fun and sheer audacity left us speechless. And, if I'm honest, a little nervous. When we saw those shoes and the peach-coloured dress disappearing into the night sky under a billowing parachute, we looked at each other, both thinking: 'Oh my God! What have we sanctioned here?'"

*Running My Life: The Autobiography*, by Sebastian Coe, is published by Hodder & Stoughton and is out now, priced £20

Mark Ralston/AFP/Getty Images