

STAR CLASS REINSTATEMENT IN THE OLYMPIC GAMES: THE STORY

It was a dark, stormy night in 1996... not really!!.... it was a Thursday or Friday afternoon, I don't remember, with a nice winter sun when I drove to the Folli Boatyard in Abbadia Lariana to pick up my new Star just finished. Like all The Star Sailors, I had spent a lot of time working on the boat, detailing what was my new boat for the next Olympic campaign. Arriving at the site I was very excited, anger to see the results elaborated by Andrea (Folli) according to the latest indications... the boat was gorgeous, a marvel. Everything ready and accurate as always in a boatyard that has expressed (and continues to express) the Italian craftsmanship that often encroaches on art. After packing the boat on the trailer, almost ready to toast with Andrea, his sister and the guys of the boatyard, so really right before leaving for home, my phone ringed and the bad news arrived. A BOMB: THE STAR IS OUT OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES!!! What a blow, right there, in the yard, at the pick-up of the new STAR... in hindsight an episode that helped make this whole story a true legend... at least for me and a bunch of other star sailors.

However, after sharing with Andrea Folli the amazement and despondency, we made few phone calls to have confirmation. Having had confirmation of the bad news, not knowing what else to do at the moment, I sadly attached the trailer to the car and took home the new, but now ex, Olympic Class not knowing absolutely how to continue my sporting career turned so suddenly. (at the time I knew virtually nothing about ISAF - WS today - so I had no idea what might happen.) A few days spent at home between phone calls from the Star friends, in the most absolute confusion of mind, had certainly not improved the situation: a kaleidoscope of ideas, chattering, of more or less extravagant strategies circulated among all the members of the International Class. The Board of the Class was, instead, reluctant to act. Prudence, despondency and a line, typical for the Star of those times, of great self-celebration was prevailing in the Class management. Perhaps the same supplant that led to exclusion from the Olympics a month earlier. The International President of the time, the German of Kiel Dr. Dierk Thomsen, an open person, capable and very well known in the international sailing world was at a delicate time in his life due to physical problems (later overcome fortunately very well). While the whole world of the Starists struggled to find "the answer" to the new situation, he was encouraging me to act. I do not know if it was my still young age, recklessness or "divine inspiration" that at one point made me consider how "to exclude the Star from the Olympics" was a mistake for the IOC more than for sailing. This convinced me that, for this reason, the adverse decision could have found repair precisely thanks to the IOC and not through ISAF, towards which, instead, all the main actions taken by the class were mainly immediately directed. So, without asking anyone anything, I decided I had to get to the IOC and to IOC President J.A. Samaranch. But how to do it? I had not yet made the sailing career that came in the following years and many "doors", not to say all, were closed. It occurred to me, however, that there was a gentleman I knew little at the time, Mario Caprile, very close to the Folli family, who was Italian, originally from Lake Como, had developed his business in Spain for a long time and through his family relations was very close to Juan Carlos, King of Spain a well-known sailor. So, I asked Folli to give me a contact number and phoned him: he was still unaware of what had happened, but Mario listened to me and immediately understood the meaning of my strategy of going directly to the IOC. He asked me to give him an "executive summary" of the whole affair to be used to try to reach the IOC through his contacts and his "Spanish relations".

These first "movements" on my side, however cautious, did not remain hidden for very long: the attention on the issue was very high; the Star Class was an important sailing power and the fact that it was eliminated from the Olympic Classes a "momentous" fact as the result of existing strong

tensions between the USA and the rest of the sailing world, English in the lead. So, they began to "proliferate" supporters (I have to say very few) and detractors (almost all Italians and Americans) of my initiative who wondered and asked me what had jumped into my head to start such an action "on my own".

I remember many hard comments by Italians who publicly mistreated me accusing me to be arrogant and conceited in doing such a thing without going through "the establishment" not realizing that the winning basis of my idea was precisely to go through alternative ways to ISAF demonstrating how, the elimination of the Star, eliminated, in fact, from the Olympics all the biggest and most well-known names of Sailing and the America's Cup of that period, which, for many reasons, aspired to go to the Olympics in the Class.

However, thanks to the support of Mario Caprile, passing through the King of Spain, I got a first meeting at the IOC in its headquarters in Lausanne where I met with President Juan Antonio Samaranch. Worried and excited that my path had led me up to them I went to Lausanne (where I would then return with Mario Caprile to meet Samaranch again before the final decision of the IOC taken in Nagano).

I had been given a 15-minute appointment with Samaranch's by his secretary, not long thought to explain the situation and in English....not easy. I was worried.

Arriving at the IOC I remember having travelled, accompanied, endless corridors, some with a beautiful view and having reached the office of the most important man of the Sports of that time (and not only). The office was very nice, institutional but welcoming, I remember a pleasantly diffuse light.... a bit of a "sportsmen" paradise... but maybe I idealize and it's just my memory. From the next day I had a blackout-out of what I said in those first fifteen minutes, but it must have been particularly effective, or maybe my passion for the sport was. The fact is that Samaranch called the secretary, unlocked his agenda (luckily, he probably had nothing important to do.) and invited me to take a walk together through the park passing through the Olympic Museum and the port of Lausanne. I remember pointing out that most of the sail (at that time and still today) was made of keelboats and that losing the Star meant reducing the importance of the Olympic program. We stayed together about two and a half hours at the end of which, in his style that I have learned to appreciate over time, he only told me that he understood and would see what could be done but that the thing was in itself very difficult (it had never happened that the IOC corrected the decision of an international federation in progress of four years quad and I believe also ever before in general).

Comforted by the meeting, although without anything concrete in hand, I went home and reported to Mario Caprile and very few others.

The controversy in Italy meanwhile inflamed, even without knowing about my going to the IOC. I think if they had known, they would have accused me even more... from Lake Garda to Sicilia, with the usual evil that has always labelled us Italians unable to make system and push each other but rather dedicated to discrediting each other.

Time passed and we arrived at the Bacardi Cup in Miami, an event that for the Star has always been a kind of world title, 80 years of history, an impressive list of winners and also the event where, at the beginning of each year, the Star Class were scheduling its first Administrative Com. in which I sat for the first time as "delegate" (last "wheel of the wagon") as wanted by Dierk Thomsen. Shortly after my arrival in Miami I had already taken a nice "vague" of criticism "from "presumptuous Italian who had to leave politics in more expert hands", because, otherwise, "I would have brought the Class to ruin". In short, a beautiful fiery atmosphere. Although intimately intimidated I did not give anyone to see remaining ready to fight at the meeting to convince of my thesis. The night before the meeting, much to the surprise and outcry for all, there was a rumour

that, perhaps, the president of ISAF (now WS) the Canadian Paul Henderson, known for being a wrist man and rather direct would have arrived to join our Class meeting.

The next day at the meeting, after much discussion with those who did not understand that, if we had not acted, the end would be marked for the Class, the situation in the meeting was stalled. That's when Paul Henderson, "the Pope" (his nickname equals Lowell North's) arrived. Entered directly in the room, saluting with his loud voice. He sat in front of me staring at me for a few seconds and then starting out saying: "I know that some of you have contacted the IOC"....silence....unfortunately, my chair did not offer effective hiding places so I remained ready to face the storm (I was really convinced of what I was doing and I did not want to give up but had no idea of Pope's position on that) when, He went on to say, "notwithstanding I believe that the IOC is a level of contact that belongs to the International Federation, I think it was a bold and intelligent initiative and therefore should be pursued under the coordination of me and ISAF." Seeing the faces of the Class "Senators" sitting around bleaching with minds hanging in mid-air 'I think will remain, for me, one of the funniest moments of this story, that of beautiful moments gave me several others later on.

Faced with this "tackle slipped to the ankle" of P.H. The meeting ended quickly. Kicking off the room the "after-actions comments" by the Governing Comm. of the Star Class, was: "thank you Riccardo for starting this thing but now we continue as we have more experience". I just said, "ok, I have no problem as long as you will do...". To my surprise, however, before the end of the evening I was approached by Paul Henderson (also a member of the IOC) who almost secretly said to me: "let them do, on this thing we work together" I gave him my email and I stood waiting. He also asked me if I had ever thought about joining ISAF, I said no. He replied: "I will speak with Sergio" (Gaibisso, historic FIV president at that time). In fact Sergio, later in 1997, considering me "out of his control", opposed my inclusion in ISAF "forgetting" to sign my presentation to join the technical committee and thus expiring the bureaucratic terms for my inclusion. Months later at Henderson's invitation, I went to the ISAF annual meeting where, become president of the Star Class in the meanwhile, I was proposed and placed on the Equipment Com. as a representative of the ISAF Classes Com.

During the whole story there were many important and un-suspectable people who helped me and the Star. I remember one afternoon at home in Milan, when I received a phone call requesting several explanations from President Marc Holder, the very powerful president of the World Winter Sports Federation that I did not know personally but that I later discovered to be a great friend of Samaranch.

These kind of "adventures" have very long rhythms, as you can imagine... meeting after meeting, from one month to the next, to the other with balances that often transcend the specific episode especially if this is potentially destined to become an unprecedented "case". The most difficult thing is to remain focused for so long, not to lose hope and not to pollute the general vision with all the emotions and doubts that in the meantime crowd the mind.

In fact, there were many ups and downs, indiscretions and denials over the months.

Meanwhile, we all found ourselves at the Star World Championship in Marblehead, at the historic Corinthian YC. I arrived there in doubt about what to do, the FIV had proposed to me to leave the Star to move to the Soling making available a Federal boat. I really thought it could be the last major regatta in Star. But when I arrived, I found a "surprise" waiting for me: Dierks Thomsen, the incumbent STAR president, tired for health reasons but also eager for a "young man" to represent the class, invited me to dinner and said he would resign if I agreed to run for president. My

surprise was very great, I did not sleep at night trying to understand what to decide in between continuing to follow the Olympic dream choosing the Soling or my heart and passion accepting the proposal and the Star. My choice came in the afternoon, after an "amazing" day at sea in the midst of so many champions in a ballet of thrilling tacks and jibes and "head-to-head" overlaps. Back on land I went to Dierks and told him that I accepted but with conditions that I considered "essential" for the class to return to the Olympic: The inclusion of nationality letters on the sails (the Star had only progressive numbers internationally on the sails), the inclusion of the rule of weight limit for crews and the introduction of the code on advertising, until then banned from the class, which would have allowed the teams to have their sponsors. This culture was so "eradicated" in the Class that was like me going to tell the Class Establishment that "their mothers were doing the oldest job in the world". Dierks Thomsen, shared my vision and agreed to support me and proposed to the Class Board a formal meeting to hear, in turn, my condition before presenting myself to the General Assembly scheduled for the next day. Meeting that took place in the splendid library of the Club, one of the "sancta sanctorum" of the American yachting. Sitting in the dim light of the library, all in formal dress except me, they listened to my three conditions and motivations and remained in a glacial silence, impassive. More than a minute's silence, I assure you that it seemed very long even in function of the calibre of the characters sitting in front of me. The silence was interrupted by another European, Uwe Von Below, vice-president of the class and prominent businessman throughout northern Germany who, in real Anglo-Saxon style, began to blink on the table in a sign of acceptance and approval. Slowly everyone followed him, one by one.

Having reached their consent, at least formally, the next day I was introduced to the unsuspecting star sailors during the AGM. After the first moments of congratulations and incitement from those present, especially Europeans, on the same evening a US delegation came to dispute the fact that Dierk Thomsen's decision had not left them the opportunity to think of an American candidate who could give way to the unwritten rule of alternation, that is, the fact that a European president should succeed an American and then a European and so on. On Dierk's advice I agreed to extend the deadline for submitting candidates by a further 15 days. About a week before the new deadline expired, I received a phone call from Mark Reynolds, my friend back then, asking me if I was willing to talk to Malin Burnham, the West Coast's leading publisher and former class president in the early 1980s. In fact, Malin called me to tell me that he would only apply if I withdrew my candidacy and tried to convince me in various ways. My answer was that having now accepted in front of the AGM I would not retire and that the best would win as well. He did not run, I was elected and soon after the Americans (through a famous lawyer now my friend and supporter, Joe Bainton) sued me for "discrimination" against those who had to revise their crew with the introduction of the weight rule (a formula studied by me and Alexander Hagen).) It was long but in the end we won and the formula is still in force today.

Meanwhile, the IOC continued to ponder what to do with our request to reinstate the Star with the award of an eleventh medal (one more than the ten expected) to the sport of sailing. To prepare for the best and to convince the nations within ISAF on the one hand and the IOC on the other we had several meetings with Paul Henderson and Mario Caprile at various airports and then a last, important one in Lausanne where we brought to J.A.Samaranch a final file with all the arguments in support of the reinstatement of the Star among the Olympic disciplines. At this point the games were done, I could only wait and leave everything in the hands of Paul Henderson until the next meeting of the SOCOG (Sydney Organising Committee for Olympic Games) the committee that ran the Summer Olympics in Sydney which had set the final and final meeting for 19 January 1997 in Nagano, Japan. In the meantime I inherited the date for my first meeting as Star president from the previous Star Class Board to be held in Chicago the next January 17th. The first thing I

did, coming into office on 1 January 97, was to move that meeting to 19/20 of January so that I could immediately react to whatever the final decision of the IOC was. Which led me to receive another round of grievances because the date change at such short notice forced a large part of the Class board to pay some penalty on the plane tickets already purchased. True or false that it was I never knew but considering that it was useless to meet before the decision of the IOC and that none of the 15 members of the board was destitute to the point of not being able to endure a few hundred dollars of difference, I moved the date certainly not lightening the climate towards me. I arrived at the beautiful and important Chicago YC in the morning with two strategies on my computer: one for the Class excluded from the Olympics and another for the Class readmitted to the Olympics. On the night I had not received any official news from Japan except a short txt on the phone from the Spaniard Fernando Bolin at the time Vice-President of ISAF: a laconic "congratulation" that bodes well but in fact said nothing. The meeting set for nine o'clock in the morning with half of those present who wanted my "scalp", the news that did not arrive. All sat at a long table in an austere Lake-level Club Room, beside the lake that was beginning to freeze. I was wasting time hoping to know something before to start the meeting but was late and I couldn't wait any longer....." Gentleman let's start." At that specific very moment, as in a movie, the Secretary General of the Chicago YC knocked on the door interrupting us and passes me a fax just arrived: from Paul Henderson to the STAR MAFIA (nickname of the Star Class Board) "I am pleased to inform you that the IOC has decided to correct the decision to exclude the Star from the Olympic classes planned for Sydney 2000 reinstated it in fact among the ten boats planned. In order not to harm the nations and competitors, he also decided to award the sailing an extra medal, bringing from ten to eleven the categories admitted to the games with the inclusion of the 49er". My heart was bumping.... It was done! Another piece of sailing and Star Class history had been completed; then came other epic battles to remain Olympic still under my mandate, with the historic exclusion of the Soling. A "heritage" that still makes the star class, with the modern Star Sailing League a boat on which all the best want to win.

Riccardo Simoneschi

End-----
