

Biographies of all IOC Members

Part XXIX

By Volker Kluge



442. | Manuela Di Centa | Italy

Born: 31 January
1963, Paluzza
Co-opted:
11 December 1999
Resigned:
12 February 2010
Honorary Member
since 2010
Attendance at
Sessions: Present 11,
Absent 1



Former cross-country skier Manuela Di Centa comes from a sports-loving family. In 1980, at age 17, she made her debut on the Italian national team. Two years later, she competed at the World Championships and finished in eighth place. After problems with the President of the Italian Ski Federation, she left the team, but returned in 1986.

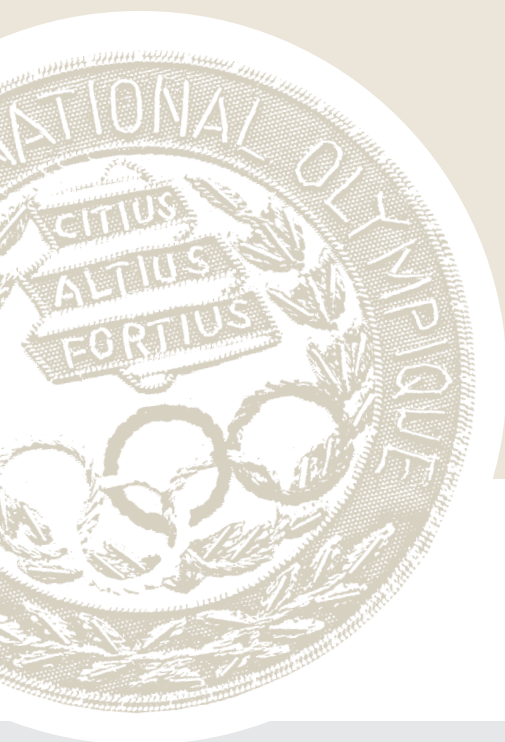
Di Centa participated in five Olympic Winter Games from 1984 to 1998. She won five gold, six silver and six bronze medals. The highlight for her was at the 1994 Games in Lillehammer, where she medalled in all five events. That same year, she won the World Cup. She repeated the feat in 1996. In addition, she was a seven-time medallist at the World Championships (four silver, three bronze) and gained 22 national titles. In 1996, she was the first Italian cross-country skier to receive the rare Holmenkollen medal.

Her younger brother, Giorgio, was also a cross-country skier. He won the silver in the relay at the 2002 Winter Olympics and gold in 2006 over 50 km and in the relay. Another relative, her cousin, Venanzio Ortis, was runner-up in the 10,000 m race at the European Championships in 1978.

Di Centa began her career in sports administration as President of the National Athletes' Commission (1996, 1998–2002). After being elected to the IOC Athletes' Commission in Nagano in 1998, she was one of the 10 sports people co-opted for the IOC. She was re-elected in 2002 for another eight-year period.

After retiring, Di Centa worked for the Italian TV (RAI) as a journalist and anchorwoman. At the IOC, she was a member of the Radio and Television Commission (2001–2010). As Vice-President of the Italian NOC (CONI) and Mayor of the central Olympic Village, she played a prominent role at the 2006 Winter Olympics.

Also in 2006, Di Centa went into politics. Between 2006 and 2013 she was a member of the Chamber of Deputies for the Forza Italia Party. She became the first Italian Women to climb Mount Everest in 2003, where she left the Olympic flag there. A year later she married the ski mountaineer, mountain guide and mountain runner Fabio Meraldi.



443. | Johann Olav Koss | Norway

The Norwegian Johann Olav Koss comes from a family of physicians: his mother is a psychologist, and his father is a cardiologist. The 1.89 m-tall speed skater participated in the World Junior Championships in 1986 and 1987. His international breakthrough came in 1990 when he won the World All-Around Championship. During the following four years, he won two more titles in 1991 and 1994. He was European champion (1991 in Sarajevo) and second three consecutive times. In addition, he placed 23 times in the World Cup (including four overall titles).

Koss made his Olympic debut at the 1992 Winter Olympics, finishing seventh over 5000 metres – his special event. Despite suffering from pancreatitis, he recovered within three days and won gold in the 1500 m event. Finally, he was second in the 10,000 m race.

The 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer became the highlight of his sports career. In his homeland, he won gold medals over 1500, 5000 and 10,000 metres, each with a world record.

At the same time, the medical student became involved with the organisation, Olympic Aid, founded by the Lillehammer Organising Committee, with the aim of helping children affected by poverty, war and disease. Koss donated his prize money and called on the Norwegian people to give ten crowns per person. The success was overwhelming. He traveled to Sarajevo, destroyed by civil war, to Eritrea and as UNICEF ambassador to Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in 1995.

After completing his studies in Australia, he founded Right to Play in 2000. Based in Canada, this international humanitarian organisation offers play and sports programmes in more than 20 countries. As its president and CEO, Koss, who lives in Toronto, is supported by a worldwide staff of 620 as well as more than 16,400 volunteer coaches.

During the 1998 Nagano Games, Koss was elected to a four-year term as a member of the IOC Athletes' Commission. In 1999, he was among 10 athletes named to the IOC, a position he held until 2002.



Born: 29 October
1968, Drammen
Co-opted:
11 December 1999
Resigned:
24 February 2002
Attendance at
Sessions: Present 3,
Absent 0

444. | Vladimir Mikhailovich Smirnov | Kazakhstan

The cross-country skier Vladimir Smirnov, born in a Cossack settlement, contested his first World Cup race in 1982 and made his international debut at the 1985 World Championships. He participated in four Winter Olympics involving teams with three different names: 1988 Soviet Union (URS), 1992 Equipe Unifiée (EUN), 1994 and 1998 Kazakhstan (KAZ).

Smirnov won his first Olympic medals at Calgary, silver in 30 km and at the relay, and a bronze in 15 km. He came home empty-handed in 1992 – his best result was eighth in the pursuit. Two years later he became Olympic champion over 50 km and won silvers in the 10 km and pursuit. With a bronze medal in pursuit, he completed his Olympic career in 1998.

At the 1989 World Championships, Smirnov won his first title in the 30 km. The high point of his career was probably at the 1995 World Championships, winning three gold medals in the 10 km, 30 km and pursuit. He also gained a total of 30 victories in the World Cup and won the overall in 1991 and 1994. In 1994 he was awarded the Holmenkollen Medal. With two victories at the Asian Games in Gangwon in 1999, he said goodbye.

During the Winter Games in Nagano, Smirnov was elected to the IOC Athletes' Commission for four years. In 1999 he was co-opted with nine other sports people to the IOC, to which he belonged until 2002.



Born: 7 March 1949,
Shchuchinsk
Co-opted:
11 December 1999
Resigned:
24 February 2002
Attendance at
Sessions: Present 2,
Absent 1

Smirnov has lived in Sundsvall, Sweden since 1990. He became General Manager of Scania CVAB for Russia and Kazakhstan, then Senior Advisor, and also served as President of the Kazakh Ski Association. From 2004 to 2010 he was Vice-President for Sport in the International Biathlon Union (IBU). He became an advisor to the Kazakh Minister of Sports and Tourism and headed the bid committee for Almaty to host the 2014 Winter Olympics (the bid failed to make the short list in 2006).

445. | Hassiba Boulmerka | Algeria

Born: 10 July 1968,
Constantine
Co-opted:
11 December 1999
Resigned:
31 December 2000
Attendance at
Sessions: Present 1



The fourth of seven children, Hassiba Boulmerka began running seriously at the age of 10. At the age of 20, she represented Algeria at the 1988 Olympics. She won gold medals at the 800 m and 1500 m events at the Mediterranean Games in 1991 and defended both titles two years later.

Her big breakthrough came in Tokyo in 1991, when the Constantine gazelle, as she had been nicknamed, won the 1500 m at the World Championships – a first for African women. Afterward she received death threats from extremists who saw her as anti-Muslim for running dressed in conventional running gear.

She also became the first to win an Olympic gold for Algeria. At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, she won the 1500 m race with the fastest time in four years.

After failing to defend her world title in 1993, settling for a bronze instead, she reclaimed the title at the 1995 World Championships. At the 1996 Olympics, she was involved in a riot during the semifinals. She stumbled and jogged at home with sprained ankle.

It was in 1998, after many races and successes and after the death of her mother, she decided to stop running. As a strong supporter of women's rights, in 1996 Boulmerka was elected to the IOC Athletes' Commission for a four-year term. In December 1999 she was one of ten Olympic athletes to serve as members of the IOC.

Boulmerka lived for some time in Miami, but then settled in Algeria where she established Hassiba Boulmerka Internationale (HBI). She has remained connected with sport. She is a member of the Executive Committee of the Algerian NOC. At the Mediterranean Games of 2018 in Tarragona she was Chef de Mission of the Algerian team.



446. | Alexander Vladimirovich Popov | Russian Federation

'Tsar Alexander', 'Alexander the Great', 'King of Swimming' – some of many superlatives Popov has earned over his career as one of Russia's great swimmers. He participated in four Olympic Games between 1992 and 2004 and won four gold medals over 50 and 100 m freestyle and five silvers. He is the only male in Olympic history to defend both titles on the short distances.

Popov was world champion six times and he is the only one to win the 100 m freestyle three times in a row (1994, 1998, 2003). In addition, there are 21 titles at European Championships, where he last represented Soviet Union in 1991. He held the world record in the 50 m free for eight and for the 100 m six years.

Popov grew up in the Urals, where he started swim training at a sports school for children and youth. After focusing on the backstroke until 1989, he switched to freestyle when he joined the squad of Gennadi Touretski. He followed his trainer to Volgograd, where he studied sports at an academy. He earned a Bachelor's and Master's degree in sports coaching.

When Touretski received a contract at the Australian Institute of Sport in late 1992, Popov accompanied him to Canberra. After more than 10 years 'down under', both men moved to Switzerland, where Popov prepared for his 2004 Olympic Games.

During the 1996 Games he was elected to the IOC Athletes' Commission. In 1999 he was one of the 10 sports people who were co-opted to the IOC. A year later he was re-elected in Sydney for an eight-year term, as well as 2008 in Beijing. From 2005 to 2010, he represented the IOC Athletes' Commission on the Foundation Board of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA).

Popov, who lives in Solothurn, Switzerland, is brand ambassador for Omega SA. In 2018, he ran as President of the Russian NOC (ROC), but he lost the election to the four-time Olympic fencing champion Stanislav Pozdnyakov.



Born: 16 November
1971, Lesnoy,
Yekaterinburg
Oblast
Co-opted:
11 December 1999
Resigned:
12 August 2016
Honorary Member
since 2017
Attendance at
Sessions:
Present 18, Absent 2

447. | Jan Železný | Czech Republic

One of the greatest javelin throwers of all time, Jan Železný – whose name in Czech means 'iron' and by the end of his career turned 'golden' – participated in five Olympic Games from 1988 to 2004. He won three consecutive gold medals, each with an Olympic record. He added a silver medal in 1988.

He also became a three-time world champion (1993, 1995 and 2001) and garnered two bronze medals at the World Championships and two at the Europeans.

Železný set four world records, most recently – in 1996 in Jena, Germany – with 98.46 m, which still hold today. He is the only athlete to throw more than 95 metres with the new type of javelin. All together, he played in 246 competitions, of which he won 148. He completed his career in Mladá Boleslav on 19th September 2006. Then he went into coaching.

Železný was elected to the IOC Athletes' Commission in 1996. Three years later, he was one of the 10 sports people who were co-opted as IOC Members. He was re-elected during the 2000 Games, but at the end of 2001 he announced his retirement from the Athletes' Commission to focus on training for the 2004 Olympics. British rowing Olympic champion Matthew Pinsent replaced him.

After the Olympic Games in Athens, where he finished ninth, he was re-elected to the IOC Athletes' Commission – this time for a term of eight years.



Born: 6 April 1949,
Mladá Boleslav
Co-opted:
11 December 1999
Resigned:
12 August 2012
Attendance at
Sessions:
Present 10, Absent 0