

the press conference with LORD SEBASTIAN COE

The bid process to interview Lord Sebastian Coe started on 19 May. I reached the finishing line on 22 September, weary and a little beaten, but I'd made it. Phew. There were some false starts along the way and lots of strenuous emails, but that is all standard for the Interviewing Games. On one occasion (24 July), a family emergency even meant Coe had to blow out just half an hour before we were due to meet. Having been told to arrive early for security reasons, photographer Phil Adams and I were already in the lobby of the Canary Wharf tower block that houses London 2012. But these things happen, no problem. Thankfully, all was sorted enough for Coe to make the charity horse race meeting at Windsor that evening.

Even on the morning of our re-arranged meeting, his PA hastily asks to make it half an hour earlier so Coe can miss the traffic home. We fit in and arrive on time, which makes it all the more surprising when Coe casually swaggers past us in reception at the allocated time, large Costa coffee in hand. We wait. A minion announces an unexpected delay. I silently call on the Traffic Gods to grid-lock E14.

Finally, Coe comes through and, with a wide, prolonged smile, says: "I'm Seb." We chit-chat while we set up in a small glass office cramped by a meeting table. A woman suddenly arrives and shoulders by Phil. Hurried, important, she's clearly a person immersed in vital work. She's in a blue pin-stripe suit and small glasses with a flash of funky red in the frames. She's a dead ringer for Dawn French, but taller. I instinctively offer my hand and she clasps it fleetingly — without removing the Biro in her hand or breaking stride. She squeezes into a seat next to mine. Silence.

Obviously, I know what is happening. I pause.

"Erm. Hello. I'm Rob McGibbon and this is Phil Adams."

"Yes. I know." A beat.

"Sorry. And you are?" I do apologise, my Psychic Recognition System is on the blink today.

"Jackie." Of course. I am an Olympic-size idiot.

My mind zaps through the circuitous steeple chase to this day and I vaguely recall a Jackie, way back before Karen and Susie. Yes, there was one email, answered by someone else. We have never spoken. I establish that this is Jackie Brock-Doyle, 2012's director of communications and public affairs.

"Err. I take it you are sitting in on this?" I say tersely.

"Yes."

"Well, no-one mentioned that to me."

"We always do this," she says dismissively, opening a big notebook. At this point I could have beaten even Coe in a dash to the lift, with Jackie on my back.

"Don't you think it might have been worth mentioning, you know, even just out of courtesy?"

"We always do this." And then Coe repeats exactly the same. *Aargh!* Give me strength. I surrender lamely and get on with the job.

Now, I'm not a fan of fake PR gush, but surely there are such things as basic professional manners. Well, if manners were an Olympic event, our Jackie would be a cert for the rusty tin medal.

I don't know. This interviewing malarkey is a ridiculous dance between two strangers at the best of times, but with an up-tight PR next to me, I'd rather be back stacking vegetables at Safeway. Quite why she thinks someone as media savvy and dryly on-message as Coe needs a minder defeats me. But Jackie's a top DOC and she knows best, so she's sitting in to keep an eye on me. Good decision.

Seb [and Jackie], maybe we can start with your views on the British press and its importance during the Olympic bid process? [The DOC starts scribbling.]

We had to work very, very hard in the early days to make the case. Some newspapers just simply didn't get it. Others, on occasion, chose not to, for odd reasons. We probably faced a press like no other city. The French press was not remotely as forensic or as questioning of the Paris bid as the British press was of us. I think overall, once we had properly articulated what we were doing — and I don't think we probably did that as well as we should have done



in the beginning — I think we got a very good deal. But it meant working very hard and recognising that there were some [journalists] you were never going to win over. Some columnists, quite rightly, take a perverse and independent view of their editorship.

Who were the hardest columnists to win over?

Ian Wooldridge — who is a very good friend of mine — had openly written that he had a pretty jaundiced view about the Olympic movement. For him, the departure point was Ben Johnson in 1988 and he had never really come back on board. He was always critical, but then it got to the point when he was generous enough to accept that we were making good progress. While he didn't come back on board and say this is the greatest thing since sliced bread, he was actually very fair.

There were some others that you simply weren't ever going to win over. I have had very good, very open conversations with Simon Jenkins. Simon doesn't get it. He would regularly write that we are concreting over east London, which we are not. We are leaving the largest urban park anywhere. I have known Simon through politics. In the end, we had a lunch. I took him through our plans. I brought him here and then we went head-to-head in a debate on Radio 2. Actually, I think that Simon, in his heart

"You know something — and this is absolutely true — I don't think I read a single paragraph of anything that was written [about the affair]"

Portrait
Phil Adams

of hearts, realises there is a little more in it than he probably thought, such as urban regeneration and issues of social cohesion.

How important is newspaper support for London 2012 going forward, and how much attention do you pay to the scrutiny you get from the newspapers?

They are always an important barometer. Newspapers are a large chunk of the delivery of the message. It would be ridiculous to sit here and say we take no interest, of course we do. I recognise that they are a large part of the vehicle of communication. I think that having a forensic, enquiring and, on occasions, irritating press probably makes us a better team. It is vital that we are open and transparent and we give explanation across a range of activities that we are involved in — like getting a newspaper to recognise that this is very, very much broader than how many medals are we going to get at the end of this process. It's about explaining about the regeneration...

[DOC Jackie stopped writing ages ago. Are you lot still paying attention?]

What are the vital messages of the argument for having the Olympics in this country that are often not given due prominence by the media