

Former U.S. Rower Savors Sochi After 1980 Moscow Boycott

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Thomas Bach, right, embracing Anita DeFrantz at a meeting on Sunday. **David Goldman**

SOCHI — To say Anita DeFrantz has waited 34 years for this moment would not be an exaggeration.

The American rower missed out on the 1980 Moscow Olympics because of the U.S. boycott. She led a passionate — though fruitless — campaign against President Jimmy Carter's decision to snub the Games following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Now, after all those years, DeFrantz is finally in Russia for an Olympics. Not as a competitor, mind you, but as the highest-ranking American in the international Olympic world.

There is a sense of redemption for the 61-year-old DeFrantz, who has come to the Winter Games in Sochi as a member of the International Olympic Committee's policy-making executive board.

"It is an extraordinary experience to be able to be here supporting the Olympic movement," she said in an interview with The Associated Press. "It is an impossible thing that I am the senior member of the Olympic movement in my country."

The Philadelphia-born DeFrantz won a bronze medal and was captain of the U.S. rowing team at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, but her goal of competing four years later in Moscow was killed off by the boycott.

DeFrantz was the voice of the athletes' opposition and even filed suit to try to win the right for athletes to compete.

"I got hate mail," DeFrantz recalled. "I was just one person who believed in my right to pursue this goal. There was no federal funding involved at all, and then the federal government had used our desires and wishes and taken them.

"And the sad thing is it had no result. In June, we are negotiating for the sale of wheat with the Soviet Union. June 1980. It just broke my heart."

The Games went ahead without the Americans.

Then came the retaliatory Soviet boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. DeFrantz served as a vice president of the local organizing committee and mayor of the Olympic Village.

DeFrantz's career as an Olympic administrator took off. She became a member of the IOC in 1986 and a vice president of the international rowing federation, FISA, in 1993.

DeFrantz sat on the IOC executive board from 1992 to 2001 and served as the committee's first female vice president from 1997 to 2001.

She lost a bid for the IOC presidency in 2001. After several failed attempts to return to the executive board, DeFrantz won a seat last September in elections in Buenos Aires. It was a significant result for the U.S., which had been without a representative on the ruling body since 2006.

DeFrantz is the senior member of the four U.S. delegates on the IOC. The others are Jim Easton, former Olympic ice hockey star Angela Ruggiero and U.S. Olympic Committee chairman Larry Probst, who was elected to the IOC in September.

While DeFrantz has traveled to Moscow and Sochi before, being here now for the Winter Games carries powerful symbolism from the '80 boycott.

"It shows the strength of the Games," she said. "There were some people who spoke about crushing the IOC and destroying the Olympic movement because 'how dare they be so arrogant to continue with the Games?'"

DeFrantz has heard the calls from activists and some politicians for a boycott of the Sochi Games over Russia's law against gay "propaganda" among minors.

"Really?" she said. "What would that do? And who are you to say you are going to take away the hard earned right to be called an Olympian from these athletes, and what will it

accomplish?

"I can tell you that, having the athletes here, their experiences, the people they will meet, the world is going to be a better place. That I know."

The IOC has told athletes they are free to express their views at press conferences, but also reminded them the Olympic Charter prohibits political demonstrations on the medal stand and other venues.

DeFrantz's message to athletes: concentrate on performing.

"The one thing that can crush the Games is it becomes an opinion-fest," she said. "That is not what we are here for. We are here to celebrate human excellence. You are here to compete. Take your chance now to do that thing you have worked so hard at."

The IOC has been criticized for not doing more to oppose the Russian law, but DeFrantz said the Games themselves can make a point.

"We can show them what mutual respect and fair play looks like and hope that they understand," she said. "It is sad we are at this point in the history of humanity, but four years ago where was the U.S.? I'm glad that we have moved forward and I hope likewise the Games will show that it is a good thing to respect everybody."

DeFrantz is also turning her attention toward a possible U.S. bid for the 2024 Olympics. The U.S. has not hosted the Summer Games since 1996 in Atlanta. New York and Chicago mounted failed bids for the Olympics of 2012 and 2016, respectively.

"I do believe now is the right time for us to be in," she said, citing the continued financial support for the Olympics from U.S. sponsors and television networks.

The USOC has said it will decide by the end of the year whether to submit a candidate city for 2024. After years of strained relations over money and other issues, the USOC and IOC have mended fences in recent years.

Having a U.S. voice at the top table of the IOC can only help a potential bid.

"I have a great deal of knowledge over the years that I have amassed," DeFrantz said. "I think it would be helpful to share what I know and what I understand of my own nation and how it operates. There are always misconceptions.

"I have some strong opinions about things. I understand people will not always agree with me, but at least I can get a fair hearing and contribute to the discussion."

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