**Seb Coe:**

At our closing ceremony, we can say that these were a games by everyone. "I made London. 2012."

When I remember what it was like when we were standing there selling the concept to the world and what it now looks like, it's a miraculous journey. We can do this. We're actually quite good at these things, and that's what I hope we remember from the games. The legacy for me wasn't about gilding the lily, it was putting things in place that London for years should have had. Let me tell you where I think it did profoundly make an impact. It certainly did off the back of the Paralympic Games and we were welcoming. And for me that's a template that I hope we never lose.

**Narrator:**

This is My London Legacy, a Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park podcast. 2022 is a special year for Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. 10 years since the London Olympic and Paralympic Games. In that time the park has delivered on its legacy; world class sport and entertainment venues, new homes, jobs, and two new business districts. And there's more to come with projects like East Bank, the most ambitious cultural and education district for a generation, set to open soon.

**Narrator:**

As Seb Coe said at the closing ceremony, "London 2012 was a games made in London and for everyone." But none of this would've happened without him and his team. He was the chair of the London Organizing Committee, and this is his story, in his own words, of his relationship with a special project, a special place, and a very special Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

**Seb Coe:**

I have to be honest, when I was standing in the Olympic Park on the edge of that tower block with the platform and with the movers and shakers from the IOC and I was saying, "Well, you see where that rotting pile of fridges is? Well, that's where the Olympic stadium's going. And the breakers yard, well, that's the Aquatic Centre. And oh, by the way, those two big orange towers, they're going to disappear and we're going to have a covered velodrome. Oh, and the 3000 affordable homes and we're going to clean up the rivers," and did sound for all the world a bit like timeshare salesman, I think.

But no, the Herculean efforts of everybody... I mean, the one thing I look back on the London years with such gratitude and thanks, and actually warmth, was just the unanimity of purpose. No political divisions, everybody just getting on, rolling their sleeves up and knowing that there was a lot at stake if we didn't get it right. And the most that was at stake was that we wouldn't have done what we did to transform an area of significant social and economic challenge. If you looked at the league table of deprivation in the UK at that time, Newham was at the top and by some distance.

So the transformation, turbocharged by the fact that you've got a games, you've got a deadline, you've got a day when the thing starts and finishes. But really to think that we built a new city inside an old city in seven years, which under normal circumstances without the games and would've probably taken 50 years, I think is something that I will look back and treasure. When I remember what it was like when we were standing there selling the concept to the world and what it now looks like, it's a miraculous journey.

**Narrator:**

I mean you've achieved a lot in your life, Seb. Is it one of your proudest moments?

**Seb Coe:**

Unquestionably. I mean, other than things I've done with my kids. Yeah, absolutely. And I always took the view that I like to think I put a few more people in my own sport during my Olympic years, but I think I recognize... There was an interesting anecdote actually on the eve of the bid decision in Singapore. I invited the athletes that were working with us, and they were very active, to my hotel area where I was working, and we just had a lunch. And we got into that dare to dream moment and there were a lot of world records, a lot of gold medals, Olympic medals, Daley Thompson was there, Colin Jackson, Ade Adepitan, Tanni Grey-Thompson. Had most of them actually. And we all figured out, and I can't remember how we got there, but that we would swap anything we'd done individually in our sport to get the right result the following day.

I have to say it took Daley a little bit longer to get there than some. And I think we did it on the basis that the impact that we could have, or we would make if we got the right to stage the games, had to be so much bigger, so much more than we'd actually achieved individually.

**Narrator:**

So, what bought you to the table at the start? Was it the idea of staging an Olympic Games and a Paralympic Games elite competition, top quality sport where you had succeeded yourself? Or was it the idea that here in 2022, there were some sporting venues, but a world class park, new affordable housing, new center for social and economic growth, education establishments. What brought you to the table?

**Seb Coe:**

Well, I think all those things, actually. I mean, what actually brought me to the table was Tony Blair, because I certainly wasn't the first choice to do this. [inaudible 00:05:50] did a very good job in creating the startup business, decided it really wasn't for her and I got brought in with barely a year to go and we were fourth out of five cities. Well, we'd only just squeaked across the line at initial evaluation phase. So, the first objective, if I'm being honest, was to not be embarrassed.

I'm a Londoner, spent a lot of time in London. My father was born a few streets away from where the Olympic Stadium is now in Stepney. I didn't want us to be embarrassed on the world stage. But I also, because I'd been a competitor, I'd also worked within UK sport as vice chair of the UK Sports Council back in the mid-'80s. I just knew the impact that these games would have, particularly on East London, because I was a member of Haringey Athletic Club in northeast London. These are challenged communities, and I just knew that if we got this right, there would be so much else that could be inspired around the game. I guess the honest answer is a bit of everything really.

**Narrator:**

And when did you look into the whites of the eyes of the IOC members and saw reflected back, not Seb the timeshare salesman, but Seb who was going to organize the best Olympic and Paralympic Games ever?

**Seb Coe:**

Well, there was an amusing moment actually because at the same time that we were selling the concept of the park, one of the criticisms was that London didn't have a transport system that was capable of staging the games. Actually, reality of it was we hadn't told the story very well. London shifts more people on public transport during the course of an hour in the day than most cities do throughout the whole of that day. And certainly, no other Olympic city pasted or present has had such a good public transport system. And we needed to promote that. And one of the ways we did it, if you remember, is we had a fleet of Range Rovers that disappeared into a hole in the ground in East London. I mean, the met police drivers that took us through the tunnel, because it wasn't even a dress tunnel, it just had a strip of concrete.

And we drove for seven and a half miles, with all the IOC members, to show that actually this wasn't pie in the sky. We'd got the tunnel. And I remember coming out to all the photographers and the camera crews at Kings Cross just to show actually we could do this. And that's when I think some of those IOC members suddenly realized that we were very serious about this. This wasn't just a desktop analysis; we'd already started work on the park and we had outlying planning permission months before we knew we'd won the right to stage the games. And that also impressed them because most cities don't get that planning permission for years. It is sometimes years into the delivery of the games.

**Narrator:**

Take us back to the park and the building of it. Was there a moment, Seb, where you realized, "Oh, actually yeah, we are going to do this. This is going to be okay," the ODA were delivering?

**Seb Coe:**

Well, I always had great confidence in the ODA. John Armitt was a very competent engineer who'd got a great track record. David Higgins who had worked in Australia as CEO of Lendlease, went on to Network Rail. There was some really, really smart people. I also think the fact that we were co-located in the same building, so it wasn't a matter of trying to get into each other's diaries. If I, as chair of the Organizing Committee, had an issue or John Armitt as chair of the ODA had an issue, we'd just walk across an atrium and sit and discuss it over a cup of coffee in our offices. So, I think having those two organizations co-located in the same building gave us all confidence within internally. And I think gave confidence to the organizations outside. And look, the first two years in the development of any site, your communications teams are trying to excite people about ducting and tunneling.

Nothing much is coming out of the ground and the whole world is watching and the media from time to time are going, "Well, we don't see anything. You must be behind schedule." And trying to explain the niceties of foundation work and washing 800,000 tons of soil, because we had the technology to be able to do that, rather than sending toxic soil into landfill somewhere and using microbiology to reduce toxins in the soil. And there was a lot going on that it was sometimes hard for people that didn't understand what was going on that site to buy into.

But what we were also keen to do is, as you remember, we had Young Constructors programs, we built a resource center so that young people could understand what sustainable building was about and how to build a games that was green and focusing on limited emissions and all the things that actually, back in 2005, it was a part of the agenda but it's not as profound a part of the agenda as it is now.

**Seb Coe:**

So, the seven years after we won the bid, and the building was taking place and the park was really taking shape by 2011. And then I remember walking around with you in 2012. I think actually you were on a coach, and you were the commentator driving us around the park.

**Narrator:**

When I wasn't a timeshare salesman, I was actually organizing tourist trips.

**Seb Coe:**

Exactly. I booked up for Greece a few years later with you. But no, seriously, is there a bit in the park where you could still go right now and go, "I remember when this thing changed," or "I remember when this happened."?

Yeah, there many parts of it. I remember going down the river, the River Lee. My goodness, navigating the boat around refrigerators, and bicycles and mattresses was... And suddenly to go back there a few years later with reed beds, and flood zones and landscaped areas where people now... It's a London park. I go to the park pretty regularly. I'm chancellor at Loughborough University. Loughborough University's on the park now. We've got thousands of postgrad students. So I can remember I had a sort of camp bed in the media operations center, which often I would, if it was too late to get back to the hotel, I'd sleep there overnight. That is now one of the big lecture theaters for Loughborough University, which I hand out degree ceremony certificates to. So yeah, I've seen the Olympic part develop in such wonderful and different directions.

**Narrator:**

You mentioned obviously you took over with a year to go to Singapore, you win the bid, you have seven years to deliver the games. Did you enjoy it?

**Seb Coe:**

Yeah, I did. Immensely. I can't tell you that every day was absolutely unalloyed joy, because in a project that has thousands of moving parts all the time and everything is at critical, whether it's your airports, your roads, your rail, security, all those things are massively complex. I mean people tend to forget that sport is really very, very important. But it's not the only thing that you are trying to deliver on.

You're trying to keep people safe and secure, but you don't want people coming to London thinking they were in lockdown city. The project management around the games, I genuinely think, challenges a city in the way no other project management in normal times ever challenges a city. And cities that come through that actually go on and understand a great deal more about the DNA of their city. One of the things that often is overlooked was how pleased I was that the public and the private sector, that were a little bit cynical about each other to start with, actually not only lost that cynicism, but worked really closely together. And some of those partnerships I know are still delivering in the host boroughs. So, look, lots of things to look back on. What was I most proud about? I guess it's all the things that could have gone wrong that didn't go wrong.

**Narrator:**

And what kind of leader were you?

**Seb Coe:**

I think that's so much easier for other people to answer. But I guess I fell back on my athletics career. My father was my coach, but he had a team of five or six people that we worked very closely with. And I think I learned from that period of my life that don't compromise on talent. You have to achieve world class things with world class people. Or once you've found them, once you've got them into the right roles and responsibilities, don't micromanage them. Let them get on with doing what they've got great talent to do. If you've got Danny Boyle as your Oscar winning director doing your opening ceremony, what on earth was I going to add to that?

My role was really protecting people like Danny and all the people that we had working and protecting them so that they could get on with the best work of their lives at that moment, not a year later or a year earlier, but always being there and trying to help create that environment where everybody just has the same vision, wakes up in the morning understanding why they're doing what they're doing, rocks up at the Organizing Committee knowing what they're doing and why they're doing it.

And just reminding people that there was a bigger, bolder, optimistic end to this. And it wasn't just simply about project management. I always encourage people, as I do even at World Athletics now, just spend a little bit of time every now and again sitting, asking yourselves why you are doing what you're doing. Not just how but why. And once you start balancing those two, I think you become a much better organization. So really, for me, it was just about creating the environment that allowed people to do what they were really supremely talented to do and not micromanaging them.

**Narrator:**

You mentioned the genius Danny Boyle, which brings us to the opening ceremony and games time in effect. Was that the moment where Britain realized it could do it?

**Seb Coe:**

I think so. And the opening ceremony is a big moment, isn't it? My template for the opening ceremony was really simple. I'd never left an opening ceremony in any sporting event where I'd gone, "Oh, goodness me, I could have done with another half an hour of that." So, what was really important to me was we did what we needed to do. Danny absolutely understood that he needed to tell a narrative, not a sort of in this year and then that year, but some really big national theme.

So really, as you remember, we chose that journey that our country has made from agrarian to almost post-industrial society. We started off with lands and goats in a field and we finished with Tim Berners-Lee. So, it was a journey that we needed to show. And an opening ceremony is a challenge because you need enough in there that showcased our slightly tongue in cheek British humor, but not so esoteric that 200 and something countries around the world are just completely lost by what you're doing. I like to think we got there. And the opening ceremony is really important, because if it goes badly then for the next week that's all anybody's talking about. They're not talking about sport.

**Narrator:**

And then during games time, what is your best memory? Is it still David Rudisha in the 800 meters?

**Seb Coe:**

Yes, it was, and I still think that was singularly the best performance. Track and field or otherwise. But my memories tend to be very personal ones. They were putting tickets on sale at two o'clock in the morning because the organization I now represent was determined to keep 1500 seats empty. I knew we'd get absolutely slaughtered if we got a full stadium and then a section that's empty that belonged. So, we put them out on onto the website one or two o'clock in the morning, and I remember bumping into a woman from Leeds with her kids and she said it was incredible. She'd done a stint at Jimmy's in Leeds, she was a nurse, she'd got back at midnight, she'd started surfing to relax a little bit and suddenly saw all these tickets. She woke her kids up at three o'clock in the morning, four o'clock they were at Leeds railway station and at nine o'clock they were sitting watching Olympic track and field.

I remember a really eye-opening conversation with a senior anesthetist that was on duty at Queen Mary's at Paddington the day of the terrorist attack in 7/7. And I thanked him, I was on a tube train going out to Excel and I thanked him. He'd got his volunteers uniform and I said, "So where are you headed to? And he said, "Oh, I'm an anesthetist." I said, "Oh that's great," I said, "What sport?" And he said, "Boxing." I thought, "Well, we've got the specialties of the volunteers right here." And I said, "Well thank you." And he said, "No, no, no. Thank you." And we did this sort of slightly British dance around, "No thank you," and he just then cut through. He said, "No," he said, "I was on duty at the hospital that day, and he said, "This is closure for me." He said, "I've seen the worst of mankind and I've also seen the best of mankind." So those are, for me, they are treasured moments as much as watching Jess and Mo and Greg Rutherford on Super Saturday. They're lovely memories to have.

**Narrator:**

We're talking about legacy, and I want to pick up on that theme of Britishness with you, Seb. Did the Olympics and the Paralympics just give us a little snapshot in time when, as a country, we were proud of ourselves again?

**Seb Coe:**

Yeah. Unquestionably. If you said to me what I was also very proud about is that I think we showed ourselves, as a country and as a city, to be creative, and competent and multicultural, which matters to me in my world. We were reflective of the world that people lived in. Fiercely protective of our history and protective also of our heritage. And we were welcoming.

And, for me, that's a template that I hope we never lose. Now the games did bring that together, it brought communities together that probably, at the beginning of that journey, didn't obviously think they had maybe much in common with each other. Volunteers that volunteered alongside each other. I guess I'm left occasionally wistfully to observe that I wish there was a little bit more of that collegiate collaborative political unanimity that we enjoyed over those years. I think we would be better off for that.

**Narrator:**

And when you were sat in those venues at games time, watching the sport unfold, were you thinking, "Yes, we've got this infrastructure right. Yes, we've got the presentation of this event right."?

**Seb Coe:**

In large part, yes. And I think we did it differently. And I think the crowds felt that they were in a venue where their service levels had been thought about. And our volunteers were, our games makers, were still the envy of... I mean, I travel around London a lot. There's barely a journey I make in London where somebody doesn't stop me to talk either about the games and certainly often introducing themselves as a Games Maker. And not just in the UK. I was in Africa the other day for the African Athletics Championships. Two people from overseas came up to me and said, "I was a games maker." So yeah, it was massively, massively important.

**Narrator:**

The idea of this podcast is about My London Legacy, and you actually introduce it. The IOC granted us permission for us to use some of your speech from the closing ceremony where you talk about the Games Makers, about how they made London 2012. And it was a games by everyone and for everyone. Do-

**Seb Coe:**

And made in Britain.

**Narrator:**

And made in Britain. And do you stand by that? And did it change things? Did it change volunteering in this country? Did it change London?

**Seb Coe:**

I think it did. Look, it's harder to know from that distance, but let me tell you where I think it did profoundly make an impact. It certainly did off the back of the Paralympic Games, there was very much a recalibration of the way we viewed disability and impairment, particularly in the workplace and in colleges and schools. There's no doubt that London is a very much more accessible city than it was. 4,000 hotel spaces we're fully accessible at the end of that journey. Public transport, some of the refinements and upgrades to our tube stations. All those things were hugely important. But I do think the impact that had on people seeing Paralympians are not just looking at people with disability impairment but watching elite sport and watching people with disability impairment doing things that none of us imagined were possible in an opening ceremony.

So that I think had a profound impact. I think the other legacy for me is, look, we do have in ability in the UK to doubt our own ability on regular occasions. And what was interesting, I went to Tokyo, and I was sitting talking to a senior ISE member just before the games and he said, "You seem nervous." And I sort of went, "Well, there's a lot that can go wrong." And he looked at me and it really calming influence. He said, "Look, why are you nervous?" He said, "You do great pageantry," he said, "You've got world leaders in large parts of the global economy that you've got working for you," he said, "Our kids can't wait to get to London for entertainment, and clubs and theaters. You've got assets that no other country's got, so you'll be fine."

And I remember having him on one side saying, "It's going to be great and we're all looking forward to being there." And then being in pitch battles in Morden because I was daring to put a road cycle race, and somebody couldn't park their car for two hours on a Saturday morning. I don't think it had a massive perception or difference for people overseas. I think they thought, on balance, we'd get this right. What I think it did do is I think it made people sit back and think, "Domestically, we can do this. We're actually quite good at these things." And that's what I hope we remember from the games that when our time came, we did it right.

**Narrator:**

And the park now keeps getting stronger and stronger. And when you look at those venues and you have the memories that we've been talking about, but actually memories that are still being formed, the London Stadium, the Olympic Stadium, is still one of the noisiest stadiums I've ever been in.

**Seb Coe:**

Absolutely. And if you think about the ongoing legacy, deal signed, the mayor announced it the other day. The MLB, Major League Baseball, we've got pop concerts. No, it's profoundly different and really important. And remember, these weren't venues that London had. It's bizarre that we soldiered on for as long as we did in a city of roughly 9 million people with not a single working 50-meter swimming pool. No covered velodrome for cycling, given the history of cycling, particularly in East London. The fact that we'd never, until that stadium got built, we'd never been able to host a European or a World Athletics Championships. Given the history and heritage of our sport to not have those venues... So, in a way, the legacy for me, it wasn't about gilding the lily, it was putting things in place that London for years should have had.

**Narrator:**

And just before we wrap up, because I know we're nearly on time, this is when I ask every-

**Seb Coe:**

On time and on budget. That was our mantra during the games.

**Narrator:**

And we're on time and on budget in this podcast as well. A question I put to everyone that joins us on the podcast, and I will have to put it to you; London Olympics, London Paralympics in 2012 wasn't the end. Was it just the beginning?

**Seb Coe:**

Yes, I think it was. I always said judge us 10 years later. And I think in large part that report book looks good.

**Narrator:**

Lord Coe, thank you so much for talking to us.

**Seb Coe:**

Really enjoyed it.

**Narrator:**

Lord Coe and his London legacy. You can also share your memories of the games and all things 2012 on social media using the hashtags #London2012 and #passthebaton. And there's much more in store this year. So, sign up for updates at 10yearson.queenelizabetholympicpark.co.uk.