

**Fillipos Syrigos**

## **Risking Your Life for a Sports Story**

### **THE HIT**

The morning of 18 October 2004 started as all my mornings. As usual, I woke up late, made coffee and sat down to savour it at the place where I had always sat in the last 13 years. From the balcony door I watched Saronicos gulf serene and washed in the sunlight. Even though we were in the heart of autumn this was like a true summer day.

I dressed accordingly: casual cotton pants, a thin longsleeved shirt and shoes without socks. I left my house around 12 noon for one of the southern suburbs of Athens, Kallithea, where the studios of sports radio station "Sport FM" were located.

Just the previous Monday I had done my first radio show there, entitled "Kangela", and I had still not familiarized myself with the idea, nor was I sure of the way that this show was supposed to run.

While driving I was thinking that it would be best during the two-hour show to take only SMS messages and not have listeners on air; this way I would avoid undue tension and surprises the extent of which would be difficult to predict.

Moreover, many of the listeners were quite fanatically pro one of the three major football teams Olympiacos, Panathinaicos, AEK- and not distinguished for their sportsmanlike spirit or their rationality.

This is the reason why things had gotten a bit out of hand on the first time, mainly over the issue of Karaiskaki Stadium: a football field which, while people thought that it had been conceded by the state to Olympiacos, finally and via obscure methods it ended up becoming a personal asset of Socrates Kokkalis, Olympiacos' President, without him having in essence paid a single cent for its erection!

I arrived at the station around 12.40. I still had about one hour and a half to read the 9 sports newspapers (a few months later they would become 10) before the show was to start.

There was nothing much in the news; interest was mostly focused on the match that Olympiacos would play on the next day against Monaco in Monte Carlo for the Champions League.

When the signature tune was playing, I admit that I was wondering how the next two hours would pass: I was already bored. And I was not at all sure that I had done well in accepting to do this show.

The show flowed in a manner that justified my decision to not have phone calls on air. The SMS messages received made it clear that some people wanted to protest about the things I had exposed about the Karaiskaki stadium case.

The other two hot issues that I was involved with at the time, namely the great Olympic scandal of Tzekos, Kenteris, Thanou and the true bosses of OCTAGON, a company who had a lion's share in the sponsorships of the Athens Olympic Games, were not among the priorities of the audience who were in their vast majority a football audience.

When the show finished I felt like a weight was lifted off of me. I was relieved.

"There is time until next Monday..." I thought to myself and went out on the street.

I crossed it and on the opposite sidewalk I walked to the right. Walking without thinking I turned left heading for the nearby parking lot where I had left my car.

On the next corner I turned right and suddenly - without having perceived anything at all - I heard a voice very close behind me: "Syrigos?..."

I stopped without thinking and before I had time to turn and see who it was, I got a huge blow to the head.

My first thought was that I had acted like an unsuspecting fool. I was mad at myself.

The next blow, on the head as well, brought me back again to reality.

I cried for help then for the first time with all the strength I had in me. A third blow to the head followed, but I was still very much conscious. After the fourth one, I heard someone very close-by shouting: "You punks, what are you doing to this man? You will kill him, leave him."

There was a pause. I was staggering with pain and dizziness when I felt a hand trying to help me stand on my feet.

"Who are you? What have you done to them?" a voice asked.

I did not answer. I turned my head to where the man who hit me must be walking. I saw two men with motorcycle helmets on.

One of them, the taller and most heavysset of the two, was at the time coolly removing his helmet and, holding it with his right hand, kept walking to the far end of the street.

"I am saved".

Blood was gushing from my head. My shirt was blood-soaked, as was my right hand from my trying to stop the bleeding.

All of a sudden I felt that I would faint. I leaned on the hood of a car. Someone held me.

A woman brought me an orange juice. I drank a little and immediately felt better. I sat on a chair and looked at my watch. It was 4.15.

I turned to the man who was holding me, I identified myself and asked him to call the Police and an

Ambulance. They had already done so.

After a while, with no police or ambulance in sight, I decided to do something. I called the radio show from my mobile phone and told them what had happened and where I was.

In a minute a friend was with me, but he seemed at a loss ...

"There is nothing wrong with me, don't be so scared." I told him to make him feel better. "Take the car and let's go to Central Clinic. I am tired of waiting...".

He brought the car, the door was held open for me and I sat next to him. He started instantly.

In my hand I held my blood-soaked mobile phone; I called my son and told him briefly what had happened and where I was going; thankfully, he was not very scared.

I then called my closest associate at the newspaper. Since 1988 I am head of the sports department of "Eleftherotypia", the political newspaper with the widest circulation in Greece. I also work for the only cable sports channel in the country. A newspaper, a cable TV channel, a radio show.... A lot of work for a 57-year old journalist, who has been in the front line for almost 40 years.

My colleague at the other end of the line was speechless.

What happened?

"I was hit".

Where?

"On the head with an iron fist they told me".

Where are you now?

"In the car on my way to the hospital. I will need some stitches and then I will come over. All right?".

I hung up and felt my low back and the area of my right kidney. I was hit there as well but on my blood-soaked hand I could not see the blood gushing from the wounds I had just discovered. I was in pain...

Stelios parked outside the hospital. I got out of the car by myself and entered walking.

They were expecting me. They ran the first tests quickly and then took me to surgery.

My mobile phone was constantly ringing. The doctor was doing stitches on my head and I spoke with television channels, radio stations. I talked with everybody.

At some point the doctor said: "Turn him over so I may see his back". I kept talking on the phone.

The doctor took it from my hand and threw it away.

A woman asked me whether I had anything to eat, and what, since morning. I was being prepared for anesthesia.

I had been stabbed and it was only then that I realized it. I had not felt a thing. I could not believe it.

I woke up about 4 1/2 hours later. The big clock on the wall said 9.30. I was very very cold but also worried.

"So many hours in surgery something very serious must have happened..." I thought.

I turned my eyes and looked up: on the I.V. line there was no blood unit, just normal saline. I was somewhat relieved. I was very cold. More blankets were given to me, but I was still shivering.

Shortly after my wife arrived. From the way she spoke to me I felt her anguish. When I was being taken for a CT scan I saw my daughter; she was crying. 45 minutes later the doctors were relieved to tell me: "You are out of the woods, that was a close one".

I had four stab wounds on my back.

- one had injured my right kidney;
- the second was only millimeters away from the main aorta;
- the third was at the lower half of the thoracic area and it was a miracle that the knife had not pierced the lung;
- there was also a fourth one to my left buttock but understandably no one paid much attention to it.

I was in the intensive care unit. The next day Security Police came followed by the police medical examiner.

He examined me and I could hear the descriptions and the comments made. When he finished it was clear to me that only by extraordinary luck was I alive.

But I did not make the sign of the cross. You see, each person has his own way of believing; priests, prayers were never for me. Never ...

I was in intensive care for almost two days until Wednesday noon.

Three days later I was discharged from the clinic with 15 stitches on the head, another twenty at the back and the rear.

I stayed at home for a mere nine days. On Monday 2 November I crossed the threshold of the newspaper offices and a few minutes later I sat at my desk. I was back just two weeks after the

assassination attempt determined to go on with what I had left unfinished.

## **THE FRONTS**

"Mr. Syrigos, someone tried to kill you. Do you suspect anyone?"

The Police officer who sat next to my bed, in the intensive care unit, was short, had a moustache and did not talk much; he was there to find out, not show off.

I told him exactly what I told three days later at the Press conference at the clinic one day before my discharge; that at the time I had three major reporting issues on which I worked and that the hit ought to be connected with one of those three.

Never, not then nor now, have I been one to point a finger and accuse when there is no hard evidence, so I kept to a bare description of the facts, hoping that this way the Police would be able to better do their job.

To this day, however, the Police are in the same place that they were when the said discussion took place...

### ***The Stadium***

Karaiskaki Stadium was owned by the Hellenic Olympic Committee and has always been the home field for Olympiacos.

In 1969 this Stadium hosted the European Athletics Championships.

In the 1990s the stadium, having sustained damages from earthquakes, was no longer used.

In the bid for the Olympic Games, however, Karaiskaki Stadium featured first as a hockey field and later as a football field that would host, among others, the women's football final match.

In the meantime, Olympiacos F.C. of Piraeus had initiated a move for acquiring the ownership of the stadium arguing that at the time Olympiacos was the only 'homeless' big team of Greece and there was no place to host it other than the stadium that had been its home field for decades.

The government, for vote-hunting reasons, willingly commenced this discussion, from which the following amazing facts resulted:

Olympiacos sports club would undertake to erect a new stadium at the place where the old one was located, and such new stadium would be used for the Olympic Games and would then pass for 49 years to the club's ownership.

Given, however, that Olympiacos sports club was not in a position to assume a business risk of such magnitude, all parties involved silently agreed in advance that the rights and obligations under such a concession by the state to Olympiacos sports club would be transferred to businessman S. Kokkalis, president of Olympiacos Football Company S.A., and friend of the government.

With this scheme which is the greatest political/sports scandal in the history of the Greek state, S. Kokkalis established a highly lucrative business on land owned by the State and with money that in essence originated from state funds.

Here is how:

Under Greek law, in the 49 years that S.Kokkalis would operate the stadium he would be required to pay to the State 15% of all his revenue gained therefrom, as a fair consideration for the concession of the land.

However, this obligation that S.Kokkalis undertook was suspended until 2019, which is the year in which repayment of the loans taken for the erection of the stadium shall end.

In other words, the loan amounting to 60,000,000 Euros is in essence repaid with money that the Greek State gratuitously gave to S.Kokkalis who, in addition to the stadium, has shops, restaurants, bars and parking areas erected and operating in the premises which, along with the revenue from the stadium, turn very substantial profit for him.

People thought that Karaiskaki Stadium was owned by Olympiacos. When I revealed in "Eleftherotypia" that through the collusion described above, the stadium was a personal enterprise of S. Kokkalis who owns 99.98% of its shares, there was an uproar mainly among the fans of the team.

They believed Kokkalis to be a benefactor of the team, they suddenly learned among others that Olympiacos, when using Karaiskaki Stadium, is required to pay rent to S. Kokkalis' company operating the field, i.e. "Karaiskaki Stadium S.A.".

In the light of these stirring revelations, the government did not make any statement; neither did S. Kokkalis, even though he saw that his influence over the masses of Olympiacos' fans, on which he had invested so much was in jeopardy; rather his hecklers spoke for him with insults and disguised threats.

Before the hit against me, I was in a state of siege for one whole year. After the hit, Olympiacos was one of the very few organizations who did not express their support to me and kept silent; as did S . Kokkalis .

### ***The Doping Scandal***

For the Olympic scandal of Kenteris, Thanou and coach Tzekos, I do not think that there is a lot than needs to be said.

You are familiar with almost all of the circumstances; so I shall give an account of those facts that I think that did not become known outside Greece and my involvement in the matter.

In 2002, in my column in 'Eleftherotypia' I had revealed that Tzekos and his two athletes were not in Chania, Crete, as was claimed by Hellenic Athletics Federation having been either deceived or an accomplice, but in Qatar!

I substantiated it by producing a local newspaper featuring an interview with Tzekos and a full story

on the athletes' preparation in Doha.

It could be easily concluded from this that these superstars played hide-and-seek with the flying doctors who performed doping controls. And this was not the first time either.

At the evening of 12 August 2004, when Kenteris and Thanou fled from the Olympic Village and the possibility that these two athletes may not participate in the Olympics shook the public in Greece, I received two shocking pieces of information.

The first one that I published on the next day and was fully confirmed was that throughout the period of time that Tzekos, Kenteris and Thanou claimed to be in Chicago - without however WADA control officers being able to locate them – they were doing their preparation in a seaside township about 100 km from Athens.

I revealed the hotel in which they stayed and the tavern where they took their meals. On the next day a big television station had the tavern-owner and tavern customers who happened to eat at tables nearby the one of those three, describing Kenteris' favorite menu and that of Thanou, how they were treated by their coach, what car they used and who among those three was the one who usually drove it.

The second piece of information, which on that evening I just made known to the publisher, the editor-in-chief and all the staff of 'Eleftherotypia', was that Tzekos was preparing a fabricated road accident for the purpose of having the two athletes admitted to a hospital, and for moving the public.

Three hours later, i.e. at around one o'clock after midnight, the bomb exploded.

Kenteris and Thanou had been admitted to an Olympic hospital in northern Athens following a road accident as they claimed!

The next days I revealed the information that came to my knowledge that evening - a fact which in conjunction with the police medical examiner's opinion and the investigation carried out by traffic police experts led to the conclusion that the road accident that allegedly occurred somewhere in eastern Attica, invoked by all three as the reason for their admission to the hospital, had never taken place.

The two Olympic winners and their coach were now disgraced in public.

A third revelation that caused a sensation had to do with the secret dealings between IOC and Tzekos, Kenteris and Thanou that led to the surrendering of their accreditation and their withdrawing from the Games, in exchange for a temporary suspension of any action against them.

At the time when the IOC spokesperson was showing to the television cameras the three accreditation cards and Tzekos, Kenteris and Thanou were stating that they had sacrificed their interest in the interest of Greece, 'Eleftherotypia' published all details of what exactly had been agreed the evening before; and television viewers were watching it happen, at that moment, live!

The doping issue, however, did not have to do only with Kenteris, Thanou and their coach; it is a

huge network almost as big as the drug network: with godfathers, dealer, peddlers, the only difference being that contrary to drugs where users are demerited, doping leads the user to success, wealth, stardom. And this is why I consider it to be, from the social aspect, more dangerous than drugs.

This was the basis and the essence of my position in a series of Eleftherotypia and TV appearances over the next few days.

Kenteris and Thanou were the occasion that brought this issue to the limelight; but this is a problem of huge dimensions as it reaches as far as the school games and almost all gyms where thousands of young people, with the assistance of anabolic drugs or growth hormone, aspire to quickly build their muscles in order to attract girls or as their passport to the night life and the underworld...

Following all the above, I think that there were many leads that the Police ought to examine in investigating the assassination attempt against me.

### ***Octagon***

In the spring of 2000 when Gianna Angelopoulos was appointed President of the Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games, she brought with her all executives with whom she had cooperated in 1996 and 1997 in the context of the Olympic Games Bid Committee.

All but one: Yannis Yannakis, deputy general director in the Bid organization and personal friend of both her and her husband!

The reason that Yannis Yannakis was left out of "Athens 2004" was an insignificant company named ACT, which until 2000 was doing business with poor results in the fields of athlete management and sports marketing.

However, 1.5 months after Gianna was again to the fore, Yannakis sold 35% of his rocky business to the international marketing giant, OCTAGON, that is a member of the IPG group, listed in the exchange of New York, and, for a wonder, subsequently got a lion's share in the sponsorships for the Olympic Games and the implementation thereof !

Investigating the matter since 1998, when other associates of Gianna's, headed by Marton Simicek, founded the company PENTE LINK in order to sell the know-how they had acquired near her during the Olympic Bid, I gathered admissions, testimonies and information that led to the most likely possibility that Gianna and Theodore Angelopoulos were not without connection to the activities of Yannakis and his company that was renamed from ACT to Sport Marketing OCTAGON.

The most important among them: In late 1998, Yannakis claimed in my presence: "Theodore Angelopoulos gave me the money to buy the company PENTE LINK and then close it, so that journalists would not have reason to write about the activities of his wife's associates in the Bid".

In the official government newspaper it was later shown that Yannakis indeed bought PENTE LINK but he did not close it; on the contrary, after renaming it to ACT, he quadrupled its share capital and became its chairman and managing director.

In an article of 'VIMA' newspaper, but also following my own further investigation, it was found that the transfer of PENTE LINK to Yannakis was executed under the counsel of the law firm of Vassilis Sarantitis, a former PASOK minister and an attorney at the time for Theodore Angelopoulos; indeed, as was written in 'VIMA', the shares had for some period of time (for an unknown reason) passed to a partner of the said law firm before being transferred to Yannis Yannakis!

In July 2000 the ACF--OCTAGON partnership was officially announced in the presence of 1.000 guests.

Mr. and Mrs. Angelopoulos were there, always under controlled publicity, given that the authorized photo agency did not distribute any pictures of the couple to the newspapers, possibly because just 1.5 months earlier Gianna had been appointed President of the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games.

In the same event, when I asked Yannakis who it was that brought him into contact with OCTAGON, he replied: "Theodore Angelopoulos did - to help me".

The Articles of Sports Marketing OCTAGON specify that if there was even one year in which the company posted loss Yannakis would be required to indemnify the foreign company, a fact implying that he had guaranteed to it that every year profits would be posted!

Under another paragraph of the Articles it derived that OCTAGON, even though having only 35% of the new company, could dismiss Yannakis at any time at its discretion and buy out his shares within six months.

It also had the right to do so in the case of Yannakis' death, a fact that caused justifiable questions in connection with the latter's actual status as a shareholder of Sports Marketing Octagon.

When all the above were published, the following occurred:

5 October 2004: Action instituted by Theodore and Gianna Angelopoulos against me and 'Eleftherotypia' claiming damages amounting to 10 million Euros.

18 October 2004: Assassination attempt against me by two unknown parties.

24 November 2004: Action instituted by Yannis Yannakis against me and 'Eleftherotypia' claiming damages amounting to 7 million Euros!

13 months later, two other sports writers in Greece have also been attacked. Mr. Kostas Nikolakopoulos just outside his home and Mr. Periklis Stellas in a crowded street in Thessaloniki. For the three of us the police investigation is still in the dark.