

## Origin and History of the Olympic Games

### The Rise of the Games

The Olympic Games originated long ago in ancient Greece. Exactly when the Games were first held and what circumstances led to their creation is uncertain. We do know, however, that the Games were a direct outgrowth of the values and beliefs of Greek society. The Greeks idealized physical fitness and mental discipline, and they believed that excellence in those areas honored Zeus, the greatest of all their gods.

One legend about the origin of the Olympic Games revolves around Zeus. It was said Zeus once fought his father, Kronos, for control of the world. They battled atop a mountain that overlooked a valley in southwestern Greece. After Zeus defeated his father, a temple and immense statue were built in the valley below to honor him. This valley was called Olympia, and soon religious festivals developed there as people came to worship Zeus and to approach as nearly as possible his great strength. It is believed that these religious festivals eventually led to the famed Games of the Olympics.

Although we do not know just when the Games were first played, the earliest recorded Olympic competition occurred in 776 B.C. It had only one event, the one-stade (approximately 630-foot or 192-meter) race, which was won by a cook named Coroebus. This was the start of the first Olympiad, the four-year period by which the Greeks recorded their history.

Athletic competition became so important to the Greeks that the Olympic festivals were a peaceful influence on the warlike city-states. Sparta was famous for the strict military training of its citizens. But it would wait until the Games were over before sending fighters into battle. Other cities followed this example.

For the first 13 Olympic Games, the only event was the one-stade run. But over the years, new sports were added to the Games. The hoplitodrome, for instance, was a footrace the athletes ran wearing full armor. The pentathlon, in which the athletes competed in five events (jumping, javelin, sprint, discus, and wrestling) was added to the Games in 708 B.C. The pancration was introduced in 648 B.C. This brutal sport had no rules and combined boxing and wrestling. A winner was named only when one man raised his hand in defeat or lay unconscious on the ground.

In addition to the pre-existing religious shrines and altars, a vast complex of buildings and structures was constructed at Olympia to accommodate the growing number of sports and athletes. Chariot races, first run in 680 B.C. , were held in the hippodrome. Boxers and wrestlers trained in the Palaestra, which was adjacent to the gymnasium. The Leonidaion housed the athletes.

Generally, only freeborn men and boys could take part in the Olympic Games (servants and slaves were allowed to participate only in the horse races). Women were forbidden, on penalty of death, even to see the Games. In 396 B.C. , however, a woman from Rhodes successfully defied the death penalty. When her husband died, she continued the training of their son, a boxer. She attended the Games disguised as a man and was not recognized until she shouted with joy over her son's victory.

Her life was spared because of the special circumstances and the fact that her father and brothers had been Olympians.

At first, the Games were strictly for Greek citizens. Eventually, however, athletes from all over the Roman Empire (which covered the entire Mediterranean region) were permitted to participate.

All athletes were required to take an oath that they would observe all the rules and standards. In spite of the luxurious facilities offered to athletes, all had to remain amateurs. That is, they had to pay their own expenses, and they could receive no monetary awards.

Winners of the Games were crowned with wreaths of olive leaves and hailed as heroes. They were showered with material gifts, and sometimes a special entrance was cut in the wall surrounding their home city just for them to pass through; a symbol that the people of the city felt well protected with an Olympic champion living among them.

Perhaps the greatest athlete of the ancient Games was Milo of Croton, a wrestler who lived in the 500's B.C. He won the wrestling crown six times, and he was said to be so powerful that he could carry a full-grown bull on his shoulders.

The ancient Olympic Games also honored, and inspired, artists. The poet Pindar wrote many odes in praise of the Games' winners. The Olympic buildings were prime examples of the beauty of Greek architecture, and the remains of Zeus' great statue bear the signature of the famous Athenian sculptor and architect Phidias. Like the athletic champions, artistic champions were awarded olive wreaths and great acclaim.

### **The Decline of the Games**

After Rome conquered Greece in the 100's B.C. , Olympic standards began to decline. Competition for the common good was ignored by the glory hunters, who were willing to use any trick or deceit to win. For instance, in A.D. 67 the emperor Nero brought his own cheering section and competed in events himself. Even though he fell from his chariot during the race, he was named the champion. In A.D. 394 the Roman emperor Theodosius I, a Christian who considered the Games a pagan festival, ordered them stopped.

Olympia then began to crumble. The great statue of Zeus was taken away to Constantinople, where it was destroyed in a fire. In 426, Roman emperor Theodosius II ordered all the temples destroyed. Earthquakes later helped finish what human hands had started, as well as flooding caused by a change in the course of the river that flowed through Olympia. The once-great city was eventually buried.

In 1829, German archaeologists began uncovering Olympia. Today, the site of the ancient Olympic Games is only a shadow of its former glory. Many of the building foundations remain, but few walls and pillars still stand, and the stadium where footraces were held long ago is now just a broad stretch of barren ground.

## The Modern Olympic Games

The revival of the Olympic Games began with Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937) of France. Coubertin was greatly interested in education, and he firmly believed that the best way to develop the minds of young people was to develop their bodies as well; learning and athletics should go together. After he visited the ruins of ancient Olympia, it occurred to Coubertin that perhaps the best way to generate widespread acceptance of his theory was to resurrect the Olympic Games. He hoped the new Games would bring back the ideals of physical, mental, and spiritual excellence displayed in the ancient Games, as well as build courage, endurance, and a sense of fair play in all who participated. In addition, he hoped the Games would turn the tide he saw worldwide of the growing commercialism of sports.

In 1892, Coubertin first introduced the idea of starting the Olympic Games again. Few people were ready to accept his idea. But in 1894 Coubertin founded the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and began planning the first modern Olympiad.

The first modern Olympic Games were held in 1896 in Athens, Greece — a fitting place to rekindle the spirit of the early Greek Games. Coubertin remained president of the International Olympic Committee until 1925. In this office he directed the course the Games were to take. He wrote the Olympic Charter, protocol, and athletes' oath, and he also planned the ceremonies.

Although the modern Olympic Games are patterned after the ancient Greek Games, there are important differences. Unlike ancient Greece, modern nations have not stopped wars for peaceful athletic competition. Because of World War I, Games were not held in 1916. Nor were they held in 1940 and 1944, during World War II.

The original Olympics were always held at Olympia. Almost every modern Olympiad is celebrated in or near a different city of the world. The earlier Games were open only to Greek citizens and athletes from other Mediterranean countries. The modern Games encourage all nations to compete. A person may enter if his or her country has a National Olympic Committee (NOC) that is recognized by the International Olympic Committee. Events for women have become a major interest in the modern Games, and the winners receive honors equal to those given the male winners.

The ancient Greeks furthered culture by giving honors for cultural achievements at the Olympic Games. The modern Olympics hold an arts festival, where the culture of the host country is showcased in various art forms.

Footraces, jumping, discus and javelin throwing, boxing, wrestling, and some other events were carried over from the original Olympic Games. But such present Olympic contests as cycling, canoeing and sailing, football (soccer), basketball, judo, rifle shooting, and water polo were unknown in early times. The modern pentathlon tests an athlete's all-around ability in swimming (300-meter freestyle), cross-country running (4,000 meters), fencing with the épée, horse show jumping, and shooting with a target pistol at 10 meters.

One of the most grueling events of the modern Olympics is the marathon. This footrace over a distance of 26 miles, 385 yards (42.195 kilometers) is a supreme test of the runners' endurance. The marathon was not run at Olympia, but it has its origin in ancient Greece. In 490 B.C. the Athenians

defeated an army of invading Persians at Marathon, which is northeast of Athens. From there, Pheidippides, a champion runner in the Olympic Games, carried the news of victory to the people of Athens. To do this he had to run a great distance. Once he reached Athens and gasped out his news of victory, he died. It is in his honor that the marathon race is run.

In 1924, the Winter Games became a new feature of the modern Olympics. Such cold-weather sports as pair and figure skating, ice hockey, bobsledding, and the biathlon (rifle shooting on a cross-country ski course) could never have developed in the warm climate of Greece (although figure and pair skating and ice hockey had been included in previous modern Games). Until 1992, the Winter Games were held in the same year as the Summer Games. Beginning in 1994, the Winter and Summer Games were held two years apart, on separate four-year cycles.

## **The Olympic Principles and Traditions**

Over time, the IOC has established official symbols, statements, and philosophies that represent the ideals of the Games. These include the Olympic creed, motto, and symbol; the Olympic flame; the athletes' oath; and the Olympic Movement.

### **The Olympic Creed**

The creed, or guiding principle, of the modern Olympic Games is a quote by Baron de Coubertin: "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well." The Olympic Motto

The Olympic motto consists of the Latin words *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, which means "Swifter, Higher, Stronger." The motto, introduced in 1924, is meant to spur the athletes to embrace the Olympic spirit and perform to the best of their abilities.

### **The Olympic Symbol**

The official symbol of the modern Olympic Games is five colored rings linked together. These rings represent the continents of North and South America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. They also symbolize the uniting of athletes from all over the world to compete at the Olympic Games. The Olympic flag, first used at the Antwerp Games in 1920, has the Olympic symbol in the center of a white field.

### **The Olympic Flame**

The Olympic flame symbolizes the continuity between the ancient and modern Games. Modern Games are opened officially by runners carrying a burning torch brought from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. Except where travel by ship or plane is necessary, the torch is carried overland from Greece by a relay of athletes. At the site of the Games, the torch is used to light the flame in a giant torch, or cauldron, which burns for the duration of the Games. The flame was first used at the 1928 Games.

## **The Athletes' Oath**

At the opening ceremonies, an athlete from the host country takes the following oath on behalf of all the athletes: "In the name of all the competitors I promise that we shall take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, committing ourselves to a sport without doping and without drugs, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honor of our teams." Like the Olympic symbol, the oath was first used at the 1920 Games.

## **The Olympic Movement**

The Olympic Movement is a philosophy created and promoted by the International Olympic Committee. This philosophy advocates using sport not just as a physical activity but also as a means of educating people.

According to this philosophy, the good sportsmanship, sense of fair play, and respect for fellow athletes that is developed through participation in sports teaches men and women of different races, religions, and nationalities to work peacefully together in competition toward common goals. The Olympic Movement works to expand such lessons beyond the sports arena in the hope of promoting peace and a sense of brotherhood throughout the world.

The most prominent way the IOC promotes the Olympic Movement is through the Olympic Games. But the Movement's ideals are practiced in other ways, including the promotion of environmental issues, fighting drug use among athletes, and providing financial and educational aid.

## **Olympic Awards**

Like the ancient Greek athlete who won an olive wreath, modern Olympic winners also receive awards. The winner receives a diploma with a gold medal as first-place prize. A diploma and a silver medal are awarded for second place, and a diploma and bronze medal for third place. At the awards ceremony, the three medal winners stand on platforms as their medals are placed around their necks. The national anthem of the gold medalist's country is played, or the Olympic Hymn may be played instead if the winner's country wishes. Athletes placing fourth, fifth, and sixth receive diplomas. Each participant receives a commemorative medal.

The IOC does not recognize any nation as winner of any Olympic Games. Only winning individuals and teams are credited with victory. But newspapers publish tables indicating the numbers of medals won by each country. These figures have been used to stress the leading roles played by countries like the United States and Russia and to emphasize the competition between them.

## **Politics and the Olympics**

The IOC tries to maintain the Olympic ideals and hold Games that are free of political conflict. However, politics have occasionally intruded into the Games.

For instance, host countries have tried to use the Games as a showcase for the merits of their political systems. The most glaring example of this was at the 1936 Games in Berlin, Germany. Adolf Hitler, dictator of Nazi Germany, tried to make the Games a Nazi propaganda show. He believed Germans belonged to a "master race" and that German athletes were superior to all others,

especially blacks and Jews. But to Hitler's embarrassment, a group of African American track-and-field athletes won eight gold, three silver, and two bronze medals. Foremost among them was Jesse Owens, a sprinter and long jumper. He won four gold medals; no other male track-and-field athlete in these Games won more than one.

At the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Americans politicized the Games. Two African American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, placed first and third, respectively, in the 200-meter dash. As the national anthem played during their medal ceremony, each man raised a clenched fist above his head in support of the Black Power movement and to protest racism in the United States. They were suspended from the Games and expelled from the Olympic Village.

### **Boycotts**

Over the years, numerous countries have boycotted (refused to participate in) the Olympic Games, usually for political reasons.

The 1956 Summer Games in Melbourne, Australia, were boycotted by seven nations. Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon refused to participate because of a dispute over the Suez Canal. Spain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands boycotted the Games in protest over the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary. And China (The People's Republic of China) boycotted the Games after a flag for Taiwan (The Republic of China) was raised in the Olympic Village.

Twenty countries, most from Africa, boycotted the 1976 Summer Games in Montreal, Canada, because the IOC refused to ban New Zealand from the Games. A New Zealand rugby team had played in South Africa, which had been banned from the Olympics since 1964 for its policies of racial segregation. The track-and-field competition was especially affected because some excellent runners were from the boycotting African nations.

More than sixty nations invited to the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow did not take part as a protest against the host country's military incursion into Afghanistan. Among the boycotters were countries with traditionally strong teams, including Canada, Japan, West Germany, and the United States. The Soviet Union and 16 other nations (mostly Communist) then boycotted the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles, the official reason being a fear over the lack of security provided.

In 1988, North Korea objected to its neighbor South Korea hosting the Games, so it boycotted. In support of North Korea, Cuba also declined to participate.