AUGUST 9, 2024 / A green medal for Paris?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host, Today, Explained): The Olympics are ending Sunday, but let’s talk about how they started real quick.

[TEx Olympics Theme]

SEAN: They started the way every Olympics starts – with the torch. Some 10,000 people – athletes, a pastry chef, *scare bleu*! – Snoop Dogg?! They all carried the torch across France. And, as always, during the opening ceremony, it all culminated in the lighting of the Olympic cauldron.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Except this time, they didn’t actually light the Olympic cauldron.

SCORING BACK IN

SEAN: The Paris 2024 Olympic cauldron is literally smoke and mirrors. Instead of a burning flame, we get mist and light that appears to lift up a hot air balloon. The idea was to do the cauldron without pollution, because Paris was trying to have the greenest games ever. They wanted to cut the carbon footprint of London in 2012 and Rio in 2016 by 50%!

On *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna see how they did.

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram. Here to evaluate the greenest Olympics ever with an American in Paris – Mary Winston Nicklin.

MARY WINSTON NICKLIN (reporter): I'm a contributor to *National Geographic*, and I wrote and reported the cover story on the Seine River for the August issue of the magazine.

SEAN:The Olympics weren’t just trying to go green, they were also trying to be clean.  
  
MARY: There's been a massive $1.5 billion cleanup project. And the Olympics obviously is center stage here. You know, the Seine has played an incredible role, throughout the Olympics. And it's a venue for sporting events also.

SEAN: For people who have never had the pleasure, can you tell us a bit about the Seine and its history especially?

*<CLIP> SONG: BING CROSBY “LA SEINE”: The Seine when she starts on her travels, lazily flows from her source.*

MARY: I mean, this is seriously romanticized. It's, it's a river that ignites the global imagination.

*<CLIP> SONG: A MONSTER IN PARIS “LA SEINE”: I realize I’m hypnotized, La Seine, la Seine, la Seine …*

*<CLIP> SONG: THE KINGSTON TRIO “THE SEINE”:  The Seine, the Seine, when will I again meet her there on the Seine?*

SCORING IN <French Chorus Line\_APM>

MARY: And Paris wouldn't be Paris without the Seine, it only exists because of the Seine. And there's a two mile stretch of the river. And you've got monuments that people adore. The Eiffel Tower, Notre Dam, the Louvre. The 37 bridges illuminated at night. And to borrow the phrase, the Seine sparks joy, right? So. And the Seine is linked to the history of France.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675049502_French-Resistance-Forces_cobblestone_erecting-barricades_Nazi-flag)*> CRITICAL PAST: The storied Seine provides a natural bastion. Winding through the heart of the capital. The men took that position. The seven German forces would neither oppose…*

MARY: It's part of French heritage, so to stage the Olympics opening ceremony on the Seine, the first time the event has ever been staged outside the stadium, is an over-the-top way of showcasing this beauty, this heritage.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MILTWJmyzE)*> NBC NEWS: On a rainy night in Paris, the first ever floating opening ceremony featured a zipline to Notre Dame, a light show at the Eiffel Tower.*

*LADY GAGA: Bonsoir*

*REPORTER: and performances by Lady Gaga…*

MARY: And hey, it's inspiring wanderlust, you know, to boost future tourism.

*<CLIP> CBS: You can live on the Seine, eat and drink, make love, get married, take yoga, run a business, peruse old books, watch fireworks.*

SEAN: Okay, joy love, marriage proposals, culturally important, historically significant, a hub for for, for France's tourism. Tell me, before these Olympic Games what condition this national treasure was in.

MARY: Okay, so, I mean, let's be real. The Seine has been used as a dumping ground for centuries.

SCORING IN <Sarcastic\_APM>

MARY: You had Medieval butchers, you know, throwing animal parts in the water

SEAN: Animal parts?!

MARY: Oh, yeah, we don't want, we don't even want to go there... I mean…

SEAN: No, I want you to go there. I want you to go there. I want people to know.

MARY: Right? I mean, tanners putting dyes and chemicals. I mean, you know, laundry soap, human excrement, like, just awful. But this was really nothing compared to the industrial revolution. At this time, you had tons of factories. And so these were new toxic discharges that are going in the city, these factory pollutants. And what else you had is an exploding population. So you went from 1.2 million inhabitants in 1851 to 2.2 million inhabitants in 1881. So this I mean, the stuff going on in the Middle Ages just had no comparison to the Industrial Revolution. So as a result, Napoleon the Third at this time appointed an urban planner named Houseman to oversee a big urban renewal project. And part of that city transformation included a new sewer system. So this was an engineering triumph for the city at the time. Yet because these underground pipes and collectors put wastewater into the Seine, it was toxic for the health of the of the of the river. But it was very much a good thing for Paris health, if that makes sense. This system. Many old cities use a dual sort of sanitation system where stormwater, where rain runoff is collected into the same sewer system as sewage. So the complications come with heavy rains when this can overflow into the city op until the modern age. The more recent cleanup project has really focused on improving existing infrastructure to prevent that scenario from happening. The recent cleanup project went into effect in 2015 as part of the candidacy for the Olympic Games.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy4dCQORrZ8)*> (French, English VO) ANNE HIDALGO, MAYOR OF PARIS VIA AP: We have an obligation to transform our cities in the face of climate change. The Games are an opportunity to speed things up.”*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: So how exactly did they go about it this time around?

MARY: So this is such a good question. I get this a lot. Like, ‘How do you clean a river?!’ Like what? What's going on? Are there like filters or their nets. Like what? What is this? No, I mean, cleaning a river is preventing the bad stuff from getting in there, right? The harmful pollutants, the bacteria, that's what's going on.

*<CLIP> SURFRIDER EUROPE: We did the 16 samplings and most of them either. And the really high, rates of two bacterias, which, E.coli and Enterococcus.*

MARY: So in essence, we talked about that dual, you know, the sewage system where stormwater comes into the sewer and can be released in times of heavy rain storms. So we want to avoid this scenario. So basically what’s happened there’s been a lot of new infrastructure, rainwater tanks collectors that have been built. One that I went inside. It's incredible, it can hold the equivalent of 20 Olympic sized swimming pools of rainwater. And so. And when you're down in there, I mean, it's like it's cavernous. It goes deep underground. And the guys who built this, I mean, there's 40 engineers involved in this project. Paris is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. And underground is is dense with, you know, catacombs, metro tunnels, electrical wires. So to implement this was a real technical feat. And basically what this does, this this tank which is on the left bank in Paris. What this does is it collects rainwater in times of heavy downpours and then slowly releases it back into the sewer system to go to the water treatment plants, so that there is not an overflow into the Seine.

SEAN: Okay. So it sounds like they put a lot of effort into cleaning up this river to get it ready for the games, to get it ready for athletes who were told to swim in it. But an issue here. And I'm sure you saw the video because it felt like everyone saw the video is people who were like, vomiting after swimming in the Seine.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vd0Q8WWELoo)*> E! NEWS: Olympics triathlete Tyler Mislan Chuck leaves it all on the line at the Paris Olympics. Literally, the Canadian athlete is going viral for throwing up ten times after swimming in the Seine River during the men's triathlon July 31st…*

MARY: I've been keenly following the headlines and looking at the videos, as I'm sure you have, and I think especially there were concerns I saw when a Belgian athlete got sick after swimming, swimming in the Seine. But the latest news is that this sickness wasn't linked to E coli.

SEAN: Huh!

MARY: They they don't they haven't made links with the sun. From what I understand, the Paris 2024 organizers and World Triathlon were, you know, following protocols with water quality tests. They postponed the men's triathlon. Unfortunately, heavy rains still play a role. Usually, Paris gets the most rainfall in the winter. The summers are dry. But climate change has led to these downpours, which impact water quality still. And, you know, to put things in perspective, many beaches around the world were closed after heavy rains because of chemicals in the runoff. And the Seine faces an uphill battle when it comes to climate change.

SEAN: So all said was was was Paris ready with the Seine? You said this is sort of still a work in progress. Was it a bit of a failure that it wasn't done by the Olympics, or was it done enough? What do you think?

MARY: I don't think, I don't think of it as a failure at all because like I said, this is like a long term project and there's a lot of really terrible, let's face it, sort of gutting environmental news out there.It's really depressing.

SEAN: Mm.  
  
MARY: And if you look at the big picture, this is really a positive thing. The sun was basically biologically dead in the 1970s. There were only a few species of pollution or less resistant fish who could which could live in it, you know? And now you've got like 40 in the Paris region. And it's it's not just biodiversity and preserving nature in this super densely populated city. But, you know, like I said before, offering citizens a place to cool off in the summer because of these heat waves. We don't have AC, you know, I know this sounds crazy. And starting next summer, we'll have three places open to swimming in the sun. I know they're going to test it daily, and I plan to swim.

SEAN: You’re going for it!

MARY: I am going for it.

SCORING IN <Relaxing St. Tropaz\_APM>

MARY: Yes, there is still work to be done. But can we take a step back and look at this long term project, ten years in the making and how far we've come from, like a biologically dead river to one that's filled with life and swimmable like that deserves applause. <laughs>

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Please clap. Mary Winston Nicklin wrote about the Seine for the August issue of *National Geographic*. Nat Geo dot com.

When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna assess the rest of the green efforts at the Paris games.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> HADY MAWAJDEH (Today, Explained producer) sings a ‘Moon River’ parody*

*HADY: Poop river, wider than a mile*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. We got Madeline Orr with us. She’s an assistant professor of sport *ecology* at the University of Toronto. Go Blue! She just got back from the Olympics!

MADELEINE ORR (U of T professor of sport ecology): I went! I went to the Olympics. Yeah. But I'm like seven months pregnant and the heat in Paris was like, ‘Aahh! This is a bit much!’ Like, I'm going to go for a week, but I'm not down for like 17 days of this.

SEAN: Wait, is, is, is Paris, like, a lot hotter than, I don't know, say, say, Toronto in the summer?

MADELEINE: It's honestly kind of similar, but there's no AC to be found in Paris.  
  
SEAN: Mmmmm.  
  
MADELINE: So that makes it very much worse.

SEAN: And this was part of the controversy of these Paris Games.

MADELEINE: It was.

SEAN: I heard about them not providing AC to athletes and some American athletes even talking about bringing their own AC?

MADELEINE: Yeah. So the organizers are trying to work on ‘How do we reduce energy at every turn in these Olympics?’ And one of their brilliant plans that kind of failed in the end, but it was like a good idea in theory, was they were going to use geothermal cooling systems in the athletes village, which basically is like you drill way down into the ground and you pull up water and use that cold water to like, cool the building. The best it can do, though, is like 11,10 to 11°F colder than whatever the temp is outside. So if you get into like 95-100 degrees, like that's not doing much like you're still sleeping in uncomfortable conditions. So athletes were freaking out ahead of the games. Many national organizations, so, like, the national teams from different countries, complained and said, we're bringing our own AC units …

*<CLIP> TIKTOK @SASSCARELLA: If that is the most American move I’ve ever heard. <laughs> No, I'm kidding because it's not just the States – That's also Australia, Denmark, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, and Canada that are doing the same.”*

MADELEINE: … which, like, fair enough. Honestly, it's a health and safety thing. And then they kind of backpedaled in Paris. So three weeks before the games, they tried to pull a fast one and they brought 2,500 AC units into the village.

SEAN: Wow!

MADELEINE: Yeah. So they totally bailed on the plan. I mean, like their cooling system that they had is like still in the building, but like, that's not what they're using.

SEAN: And they were trying to have, like, what the sustainability Olympics too?

MADELEINE: Yeah. They so the Paris Olympics have, you know, pretty big promises that were made very long time ago.

SCORING IN <BRUTAL LIZARDS>

MADELEINE: 30 years ago, in 1994, the International Olympic Committee met their Congress, had their big Congress in Paris, and they decided way back then that the environment would be the third pillar of the Olympic movement, alongside sport and culture like way up there as a priority.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjZUPa0aHRI)*> OLYMPICS.COM: ​​The environment was built in at an early stage.The most interesting part was perhaps over. Efforts to try and change the attitude of people. That they should be concerned that that, that should learn why we did this.*

MADELEINE: Now, they don't really like, do anything about that for a long time. And then Paris was bidding for the games. The 2015 Paris Agreement happened and they were like, okay, like we we should be pulling these things together. This is the city of sustainability. We got to do a good job of this. And so they made all kinds of crazy promises about ‘Most sustainable Olympics ever,’ blah, blah, blah.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E2ON7POi2U&t=2000s)*> AGENCE FRANÇAISE DE DÉVELOPPEMENT: as 2024 has set itself. Uh, a target, uh, that is very clear, but very hard to achieve. That's to say, cut our carbon footprint by half compared with previous games. And to do this, obviously it would be premature to say too much, but over the last seven years, we have proved it's possible to act at every level, building, energy, nutrition, transport.*

MADELEINE: Like great. In theory, it just like doesn't actually work in practice, because when you bring millions of fans a city for what's basically a huge party for two weeks, that's not sustainable.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: So we've heard about the Seine, then we've heard about the AC, how else was Paris aiming to make this the most sustainable Olympics ever?

MADELEINE: So they had plans around food. That's kind of like one of the big buckets they were working on. The venues, if you're a fan and you go to a venue, you'll notice that like half of their menu is vegan, vegetarian options like, that's really cool. But they also did that in the athletes village. And that caught a lot of shade from athletes who were not totally delighted to suddenly have vegan and vegetarian diets imposed on them the week of their competition

So like, it's all, I think my impression when I was there was like, it's very well intentioned. They had really good ideas around, let's introduce as much sustainable options as we can wherever we can. And that was the right idea. It's just like the execution fell a little short.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@giveme1shot/video/7395924290450885934?q=paris%20olympics%20food%20bad&t=1723205553918)*>: TIKTOK @Giveme1shot: You disappointed me, you disappointed me.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@dailymail/video/7397822429206203690?q=paris%20olympics%20food&t=1723190056596)*>: HEZLEY RIVERA: I don't think it's very good, at least what we're having in the dining hall. I, I definitely think French food is good. But, what we're having in there, I don't think is the best.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@ariana.ramsey/video/7400137537269796138?q=ariana%20ramsey&t=1723206123265)*>: ARIANA RAMSEY: So I'm answering the most commonly asked questions to me while I'm in the Olympic Village by people who are not here. Is the food good? Not really. No.*

SEAN: So okay: AC, the river, the food. Anything else?

MADELEINE: Transit. They worked on transit like crazy. So everyone was on transit. There was like no option to drive really anywhere downtown. So everyone's on transit. That was great. They implemented about 400km of bike lanes that are permanent now in the city. It's like, that's cool. 12 new bus routes that are permanent now, like serving areas that didn't have good transit options. So like, they they did a lot of good stuff. It just still felt a little greenwashing to me.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
MADELINE: Like it just felt like they promised more than they would be able to deliver. And like, you know, you've talked about the Seine and like they backtracked, like they were trying to figure out how to make that work. And they got very, very vague, close, like it was a huge improvement, like cleanest it's ever been in 100 years. Still not quite safe enough for athletes. So it's a bit of a mixed bag on the outcomes there.

SEAN: Do you think these games were a genuine effort to take a different approach to hosting an event of this scale? Or do you think there is a lot of posturing?

MADELEINE: I like both. I think their team that was working on sustainability at the Paris Organizing committee did everything that was actually in their power. The problem is that when you host an Olympics, the model of hosting is so based on a tourism spectacle that brings millions of fans to a city that there's very little they can do with that to really cut the big emissions, which come from international fans.

SEAN: But like now that we're reaching the end of these games, how did the sustainability goals reached or, you know, missed compare to, like, London, Rio, Beijing, whatever.

MADELEINE: Paris is, is going to come out on the record books is looking much, much greener

SEAN: Mmm!

MADELEINE: than London and Beijing and Tokyo for that matter, and Rio and the more recent ones. That said, those were the least sustainable games on record. All of them.

SEAN: <laughs>

MADELEINE: So, so, like when I look at the total record of this over history, it, like, has been a precipitous downhill slide for a very, very long time as they've gotten bigger and bigger and bigger and more grandiose and spectacular. And Paris is basically leveling that line, but not necessarily in an upswing.

SEAN: So, you’re saying there’s really no sustainable way to do an event that, you know, hosts 10 plus million foreign people who all travel via airplane!

MADELEINE: Yeah, yeah. I – what I'm saying is that having a quote unquote sustainable Olympics is an oxymoron.

SEAN: Yeah.   
  
MADELINE: It doesn't exist.

SEAN: So that means it’s not going to exist in 2028 in Los Angeles – not exactly known for being the most sustainable place in the world. They, they might have twice as much Snoop Dogg …   
  
MADELINE: <laughs>   
  
SEAN: BUt there’s, there’s not a lot of hope for a green Olympics?

MADELEINE: There's, I'm actually, I'm actually very hopeful for LA. …   
  
SEAN: Huh!  
  
MADELEINE: But like with one *huge* asterisk next to hopeful, LA is using all existing venues. That's awesome. LA has a lot of the infrastructure already in place. They don't have to build a whole lot. They're not building an athlete's village. They're going to the college campuses like there's a lot of, for me, gold stars next to their plan.

SEAN: Go Bruins.

MADELEINE: Yeah. That said, there's no ground game on transport in LA. Like none. Like …   
  
SEAN: Right!

MADELEINE: Traffic is the name of the game. So I don't know. They haven't announced what their plan is on that yet but I can imagine. Just an atrocious amount of traffic. And L.A. is showy. We know this about L.A. LA likes to show off! So, yeah, right is L.A. going to be the city that turns around and says, ‘Yeah, we're going to cut international tourists coming in.’ Like, no chance! No chance! They're going to park Snoop Dogg at the airport in arrivals, welcoming people in to, like, attract even more tourism.

SCORING IN <STREGA NONA>

*<CLIP> SNOOP DOGG: Bonjour!*

MADELINE: And I understand that. I do. I get it. I also think that from a sustainability standpoint, like, that sucks. Tourism is the problem. And it is extraordinary. In Rio, I was in Rio, and you can imagine the amount of trash in Rio, just with the population that’s already there. They basically doubled the trash in the city over the course of two weeks. So, and it's not like all of a sudden you have double the trash bins and trucks and all the rest coming in to sort it out like it, it's just a huge production and it's really hard to, like, explain what that feels like and looks like to the communities that are impacted by it that are like living right next to it. So, good luck, LA. I wish you all the best. <laughs> But it's, it's a huge burden.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Madeline Orr! Sport ecology at University of Toronto. She’s also just published a book. It’s title: *Warming Up: How Climate Change is Changing Sport*. Find it wherever you find your books.

Our program today was mixed by Rob Byers and Patrick Boyd; edited by Amina Al-Sadi, and fact checked by Laura Bullard, who’s still mad at Paris. We were produced by Denise Guerra, who’s leaving us for Michigan today. Thank you for your service, Denise!  
  
The rest of the team here at *Today, Explained* includes: Hady Mawajdeh, Amanda Lewellyn, Miles Bryan, Victoria Chamberlin, Haleema Shah, Avishay Artsy, Peter Balonon-Rosen, Andrea Kristinsdottir, Matthew Collette, Miranda Kennedy, and Noel King.

If you, like me, can’t get enough Noel in your life, she’s hanging out with Kara Swisher on the *Pivot* podcast this week. *Pivot* does not use music by Breakmaster Cylinder, but we do.

*Today, Explained* is distributed by WNYC. This show is a part of Vox. Support our journalism by joining our membership program today. Go to vox.com/members to sign up.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]