Olympic Games

This article is about the modern games in general. For the most recent games in Beijing, China, see 2022 Winter Olympics. For the upcoming games in Paris, France, see 2024 Summer Olympics. For the ancient Greek games, see Ancient Olympic Games. For other uses, see Olympic (disambiguation).

Olympic Games

Olympic Rings

Main topics

BidsBoycottsCeremoniesCharterHost citiesIFsIOCMedalMedal tablesMedalistsNOCsOlympismPierre de Coubertin medalScandals and controversiesSportsSymbolsTelevisionTorch relaysVenuesWomen participation

Games

SummerWinter

YouthEsports

AfricanAsianEuropeanPacificPan-American

AncientIntercalated

vte

The modern Olympic Games or Olympics (French: Jeux olympiques)[a][1] are the leading international sporting events featuring summer and winter sports competitions in which thousands of athletes from around the world participate in a variety of competitions. The Olympic Games are considered the world's foremost sports competition with more than 200 teams, representing sovereign states and territories participating; by default the Games generally substitute for any World Championships the year in which they take place (however, each class usually maintains their own records).[2] The Olympic Games are held every four years; since 1994, they have been alternated between the Summer and Winter Olympics every two years during the four-year period.[3][4]

Their creation was inspired by the ancient Olympic Games, held in Olympia, Greece from the 8th century BC to the 4th century AD. Baron Pierre de Coubertin founded the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894, leading to the first modern Games in Athens in 1896. The IOC is the governing body of the Olympic Movement, which encompasses all entities and individuals involved in the Olympic Games. The Olympic Charter defines their structure and authority.

The evolution of the Olympic Movement during the 20th and 21st centuries has resulted in numerous changes to the Olympic Games. Some of these adjustments include the creation of the Winter Olympic Games for snow and ice sports, the Paralympic Games for athletes with disabilities, the Youth Olympic Games for athletes aged 14 to 18, the five Continental games (Pan American, African, Asian, European, and Pacific), and the World Games for sports that are not contested in the Olympic Games. The IOC also endorses the Deaflympics and the Special Olympics. The IOC has needed to adapt to a variety of economic, political, and technological advancements. The abuse of amateur rules by the Eastern Bloc nations prompted the IOC to shift away from pure amateurism, as envisioned by Coubertin, to the acceptance of professional athletes participating at the Games. The growing importance of mass media has created the issue of corporate sponsorship and general commercialisation of the Games. World Wars I and II led to the cancellation of the 1916, 1940, and 1944 Olympics; large-scale boycotts during the Cold War limited participation in the 1980 and 1984 Olympics;[5] and the 2020 Olympics were postponed until 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Olympic Movement consists of international sports federations (IFs), National Olympic Committees (NOCs), and organising committees for each specific Olympic Games. As the decision-making body, the IOC is responsible for choosing the host city for each Games, and organises and funds the Games according to the Olympic Charter. The IOC also determines the Olympic programme, consisting of the sports to be contested at the Games. There are several Olympic rituals and symbols, such as the Olympic flag, torch, and opening and closing ceremonies. Over 14,000 athletes competed at the 2020 Summer Olympics and 2022 Winter Olympics combined, in 40 different sports and 448 events.[6][7] The first-, second-, and third-place finishers in each event receive Olympic medals: gold, silver, and bronze, respectively.

The Games have grown to the point that nearly every nation is now represented; colonies and overseas territories are often allowed to field their own teams. This growth has created numerous challenges and controversies, including boycotts, doping, bribery, and terrorism. Every two years, the Olympics and its media exposure provide athletes with the chance to attain national and international fame. The Games also provide an opportunity for the host city and country to showcase themselves to the world.

Ancient Olympics

Main article: Ancient Olympic Games

The Ancient Olympic Games stadium in Olympia, Greece

The Ancient Olympic Games (Ancient Greek: τὰ Ὀλύμπια, ta Olympia[8]) were religious and athletic festivals held every four years at the sanctuary of Zeus in Olympia, Greece. Competition was among representatives of several city-states and kingdoms of Ancient Greece. These Games featured mainly athletic but also combat sports such as wrestling and the pankration, horse and chariot racing events. It has been widely written that during the Games, all conflicts among the participating city-states were postponed until the Games were finished. This cessation of hostilities was known as the Olympic peace or truce.[9] This idea is a modern myth because the Greeks never suspended their wars. The truce did allow those religious pilgrims who were travelling to Olympia to pass through warring territories unmolested because they were protected by Zeus.[10]

The origin of the Olympics is shrouded in mystery and legend;[11] one of the most popular myths identifies Heracles and his father Zeus as the progenitors of the Games.[12][13][14] According to legend, it was Heracles who first called the Games "Olympic" and established the custom of holding them every four years.[15] The myth continues that after Heracles completed his twelve labours, he built the Olympic Stadium as an honour to Zeus. Following its completion, he walked in a straight line for 200 steps and called this distance a "stadion" (Ancient Greek: στάδιον, Latin: stadium, "stage"), which later became a unit of distance. The most widely accepted inception date for the Ancient Olympics is 776 BC; this is based on inscriptions, found at Olympia, listing the winners of a footrace held every four years starting in 776 BC.[16] The Ancient Games featured running events, a pentathlon (consisting of a jumping event, discus and javelin throws, a foot race, and wrestling), boxing, wrestling, pankration, and equestrian events.[17][18] Tradition has it that Coroebus, a cook from the city of Elis, was the first Olympic champion.[19]

The Olympics were of fundamental religious importance, featuring sporting events alongside ritual sacrifices honouring both Zeus (whose famous statue by Phidias stood in his temple at Olympia) and Pelops, divine hero and mythical king of Olympia. Pelops was famous for his chariot race with King Oenomaus of Pisatis.[20] The winners of the events were admired and immortalised in poems and statues.[21] The Games were held every four years, and this period, known as an Olympiad, was used by Greeks as one of their units of time measurement. The Games were part of a cycle known as the Panhellenic Games, which included the Pythian Games, the Nemean Games, and the Isthmian Games.[22]

The Olympic Games reached the height of their success in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, but then gradually declined in importance as the Romans gained power and influence in Greece. While there is no scholarly consensus as to when the Games officially ended, the most commonly held date is 393 AD, when the emperor Theodosius I decreed that all pagan cults and practices be eliminated.[b] Another date commonly cited is 426 AD, when his successor, Theodosius II, ordered the destruction of all Greek temples.[23]

Modern Games

See also: List of Olympic Games host cities

Forerunners

Pierre de Coubertin, co-founder of the International Olympic Committee and its second president

Various uses of the term "Olympic" to describe athletic events in the modern era have been documented since the 17th century. The first such event was the Cotswold Games or "Cotswold Olimpick Games", an annual meeting near Chipping Campden, England, involving various sports. It was first organised by the lawyer Robert Dover between 1612 and 1642, with several later celebrations leading up to the present day. The British Olympic Association, in its bid for the 2012 Olympic Games in London, mentioned these games as "the first stirrings of Britain's Olympic beginnings".[24]

L'Olympiade de la République, a national Olympic festival held annually from 1796 to 1798 in Revolutionary France also attempted to emulate the ancient Olympic Games.[25] The competition included several disciplines from the ancient Greek Olympics. The 1796 Games also marked the introduction of the metric system into sport.[25]

The 1834 handbill, written in phonetic vernacular, advertising "Ho-limpyc Gaymes" in Oswestry, Shropshire, England

In 1834 and 1836, Olympic games were held in Ramlösa, Sweden, and in Stockholm, in 1843, organised by Gustaf Johan Schartau and others. At most 25,000 spectators saw the games.[26]

In 1850, an Olympian Class was started by William Penny Brookes at Much Wenlock, in Shropshire, England. In 1859, Brookes changed the name to the Wenlock Olympian Games. This annual sports festival continues to this day.[27] The Wenlock Olympian Society was founded by Brookes on 15 November 1860.[28]

Between 1862 and 1867, Liverpool held an annual Grand Olympic Festival. Devised by John Hulley and Charles Pierre Melly, these games were the first to be wholly amateur in nature and international in outlook, although only 'gentlemen amateurs' could compete.[29][30] The programme of the first modern Olympiad in Athens in 1896 was almost identical to that of the Liverpool Olympics.[31] In 1865 Hulley, Brookes and E.G. Ravenstein founded the National Olympian Association in Liverpool, a forerunner of the British Olympic Association. Its articles of foundation provided the framework for the International Olympic Charter.[32] In 1866, a national Olympic Games in Great Britain was organised at London's Crystal Palace.[33]

Revival

Evangelos Zappas, co-founder of the International Olympic Committee

Greek interest in reviving the Olympic Games began with the Greek War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1821. It was first proposed by poet and newspaper editor Panagiotis Soutsos in his poem "Dialogue of the Dead", published in 1833.[34] Evangelos Zappas, a wealthy Greek-Romanian philanthropist, first wrote to King Otto of Greece, in 1856, offering to fund a permanent revival of the Olympic Games.[35] Zappas sponsored the first Olympic Games in 1859, which was held in an Athens city square. Athletes participated from Greece and the Ottoman Empire. Zappas funded the restoration of the ancient Panathenaic Stadium so that it could host all future Olympic Games.[35]

The stadium hosted Olympics in 1870 and 1875.[36] Thirty thousand spectators attended that Games in 1870, though no official attendance records are available for the 1875 Games.[37] In 1890, after attending the Olympian Games of the Wenlock Olympian Society, Baron Pierre de Coubertin was inspired to found the International Olympic Committee (IOC).[38] Coubertin built on the ideas and work of Brookes and Zappas with the aim of establishing internationally rotating Olympic Games that would occur every four years.[38] He presented these ideas during the first Olympic Congress of the newly created International Olympic Committee. This meeting was held from 16 to 23 June 1894, at the University of Paris. On the last day of the Congress, it was decided that the first Olympic Games to come under the auspices of the IOC would take place in Athens in 1896.[39] The IOC elected the Greek writer Demetrius Vikelas as its first president.[40]

1896 Games

Main article: 1896 Summer Olympics

The opening ceremony of the 1896 Summer Olympics in Panathinaiko Stadium in Athens

The first Games held under the auspices of the IOC was hosted in the Panathenaic Stadium in Athens in 1896. The Games brought together 14 nations and 241 athletes who competed in 43 events.[41] Zappas and his cousin Konstantinos Zappas had left the Greek government a trust to fund future Olympic Games. This trust was used to help finance the 1896 Games.[42][43][44] George Averoff contributed generously for the refurbishment of the stadium in preparation for the Games.[45] The Greek government also provided funding, which was expected to be recouped through the sale of tickets and from the sale of the first Olympic commemorative stamp set.[45]

Greek officials and the public were enthusiastic about the experience of hosting an Olympic Games.[46] This feeling was shared by many of the athletes, who even demanded that Athens be the permanent Olympic host city. The IOC intended for subsequent Games to be rotated to various host cities around the world. The second Olympics was held in Paris.[47]

Changes and adaptations

Main article: Summer Olympic Games

Francis Field at Washington University in St. Louis during the 1904 Summer Olympics

After the success of the 1896 Games, the Olympics entered a period of stagnation which threatened its survival. The Olympic Games held at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis in 1904 failed to attract much participation or notice. Of the 650 athletes in the 1904 Olympics, 580 were American; the winner of the marathon was later disqualified upon discovery of a photograph of him riding in a car during the race.[48] The Games rebounded with the 1906 Intercalated Games (so-called because they were the second Olympics to take place within the third Olympiad), which were held in Athens. These Games attracted a broad international field of participants and generated a great deal of public interest, marking the beginning of a rise in both the popularity and the size of the Olympics. The 1906 Games were officially recognised by the IOC at the time (although not any longer), and no Intercalated Games have been held since.[49]

Winter Games

Main article: Winter Olympic Games

An ice hockey game during the 1928 Winter Olympics at St. Moritz

The Winter Olympics was created to feature snow and ice sports that were logistically impossible to hold during the Summer Games. Figure skating (in 1908 and 1920) and ice hockey (in 1920) were featured as Olympic events at the Summer Olympics. The IOC desired to expand this list of sports to encompass other winter activities. At the 1921 Olympic Congress in Lausanne, it was decided to hold a winter version of the Olympic Games. A winter sports week (it was actually 11 days) was held in 1924 in Chamonix, France, in connection with the Paris Games held three months later; this event became the first Winter Olympic Games.[50] Although it was intended that the same country host both the Winter and Summer Games in a given year, this idea was quickly abandoned. The IOC mandated that the Winter Games be celebrated every four years in the same year as their summer counterpart.[51] This tradition was upheld through the 1992 Games in Albertville, France; after that, beginning with the 1994 Games, the Winter Olympics were held every four years, two years after each Summer Olympics.[52]

Paralympics

Main article: Paralympic Games

1964 Summer Paralympics in Tokyo

In 1948, Sir Ludwig Guttmann, determined to promote the rehabilitation of soldiers after World War II, organised a multi-sport event between several hospitals to coincide with the 1948 London Olympics. Originally known as the Stoke Mandeville Games, Guttmann's event became an annual sports festival. Over the next 12 years, Guttmann and others continued their efforts to use sports as an avenue to healing.

In 1960, Guttmann brought 400 athletes to Rome to compete in the "Parallel Olympics", which ran in parallel with the Summer Olympics and came to be known as the first Paralympics. Since then, the Paralympics have been held in every Olympic year and, starting with the 1988 Summer Games in Seoul, the host city for the Olympics has also played host to the Paralympics.[53][c] The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) signed an agreement in 2001 which guaranteed that host cities would be contracted to manage both the Olympic and Paralympic Games.[55][56] The agreement came into effect at the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing, and at the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver.

Two years before the 2012 Games, the LOCOG chairman Lord Coe made the following statement about the Paralympics and Olympics in London:[57]

We want to change public attitudes towards disability, celebrate the excellence of Paralympic sport and to enshrine from the very outset that the two Games are an integrated whole.

Youth Games

Main article: Youth Olympic Games

In 2010, the Olympic Games were complemented by the Youth Games, which give athletes between the ages of 14 and 18 the chance to compete. The Youth Olympic Games were conceived by IOC president Jacques Rogge in 2001 and approved during the 119th Congress of the IOC.[58][59] The first Summer Youth Games were held in Singapore from 14 to 26 August 2010, while the inaugural Winter Games were hosted in Innsbruck, Austria, two years later.[60] These Games will be shorter than the senior Games; the summer version will last twelve days, while the winter version will last nine days.[61] The IOC allows 3,500 athletes and 875 officials to participate at the Summer Youth Games, and 970 athletes and 580 officials at the Winter Youth Games.[62][63] The sports to be contested will coincide with those scheduled for the senior Games, however there will be variations on the sports including mixed NOC and mixed gender teams as well as a reduced number of disciplines and events.[64]

21st-century Games

The Summer Olympics have grown from 241 participants representing 14 nations in 1896, to more than 11,300 competitors representing 206 nations in 2020.[65] The scope and scale of the Winter Olympics is smaller; for example, Beijing hosted 2,971 athletes from 91 nations in 2022. Most of the athletes and officials are housed in the Olympic Village for the duration of the Games. This accommodation centre is designed to be a self-contained home for all Olympic participants, and is furnished with cafeterias, health clinics, and locations for religious expression.[66]

The IOC has allowed the formation of National Olympic Committees (NOCs) to represent individual nations. These do not meet the strict requirements for political sovereignty that other international organisations demand. As a result, colonies and dependencies are permitted to compete at Olympic Games, examples being territories such as Puerto Rico, Bermuda, and Hong Kong, all of which compete as separate nations despite being legally a part of another country.[67] The current version of the Olympic Charter allows for the establishment of new NOCs to represent nations that qualify as "an independent State recognised by the international community".[68] Consequently, the IOC did not allow the formation of NOCs for Sint Maarten and Curaçao when they gained the same constitutional status as Aruba in 2010, although the IOC had recognised the Aruban Olympic Committee in 1986.[69][70] Since 2012, athletes from the former Netherlands Antilles have had the option to represent either the Netherlands or Aruba.[71]

Cost of the Games

See also: Cost of the Olympic Games

The Oxford Olympics Study 2016 found that, since 1960, sports-related costs for the Summer Games were on average US$5.2 billion and for the Winter Games $3.1 billion. These figures do not include wider infrastructure costs like roads, urban rail, and airports, which often cost as much or more than the sports-related costs. The most expensive Summer Games were Beijing 2008 at US$40–44 billion,[72] and the most expensive Winter Games were Sochi 2014 at US$51 billion.[73][74] As of 2016, costs per athlete were, on average, US$599,000 for the Summer Games and $1.3 million for the Winter Games; for London 2012, the cost per athlete was $1.4 million, and the figure was $7.9 million for Sochi 2014.[74]

Where ambitious construction for the 1976 Summer Games in Montreal and the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow had burdened organisers with expenses greatly in excess of revenues, Los Angeles strictly controlled expenses for the 1984 Summer Games by using existing facilities and only two new that were paid for by corporate sponsors. The Organizing Committee led by Peter Ueberroth used some of the profits to endow the LA84 Foundation to promote youth sports in Southern California, educate coaches and maintain a sports library. The 1984 Summer Olympics are often considered until that date,the most financially successful modern Olympics and a model for future Games.[75]

Budget overruns are common for the Games. Average overrun for Games since 1960 is 156% in real terms,[76] which means that actual costs turned out to be on average 2.56 times the budget that was estimated at the time of winning the bid to host the Games. Montreal 1976 had the highest cost overrun for Summer Games, and for any Games, at 720%; Lake Placid 1980 had the highest cost overrun for Winter Games, at 324%. London 2012 had a cost overrun of 76%, Sochi 2014 of 289%.[74]

It has been documented that cost and cost overrun for the Games follow a power-law distribution, which means that, first, the Games are prone to large cost overruns and, second, it is only a matter of time until an overrun occurs that is larger than the largest to date. In short, hosting the Games is economically and financially extremely risky.[77]

Economic and social impact on host cities and countries

Seeking a scholarly institution to independently research the Games, Bob Barney led efforts to establish the International Centre for Olympic Studies in 1989, endeavouring to write about sociocultural impacts of the Olympic Games.[78][79] He felt that the Olympics "is worthy of study because it is one of the biggest meetings in a global context and has many political, economic, and other problems associated with it".[78] He began Olympika in 1992, the first peer-reviewed academic journal focused on the Olympic Games.[80][81] The International Society of Olympic Historians was founded in 1991, which publishes the Journal of Olympic History.[82]

Some economists are sceptical about the economic benefits of hosting the Olympic Games, emphasising that such "mega-events" often have large costs while yielding relatively few tangible benefits in the long run.[83] Hosting (or even bidding for) the Olympics appears to increase the host country's exports, as the host or candidate country sends a signal about trade openness when bidding to host the Games.[84] Research suggests that hosting the Summer Olympics has a positive effect on the philanthropic contributions of corporations headquartered in the host city, which seems to benefit the local nonprofit sector. This effect begins in the years leading up to the Games and might persist for several years afterwards, though not permanently.[85]

The Games have had significant negative effects on host communities; for example, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions reports that the Olympics displaced more than two million people over two decades, often disproportionately affecting disadvantaged groups.[86] The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi were the most expensive Olympic Games in history, costing in excess of US$50 billion. According to a report by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development released at the time of the games, the cost would not boost Russia's national economy, but could attract business to Sochi and the southern Krasnodar region of Russia as a result of improved services. But by December 2014, eight months after the games The Guardian stated that Sochi "now feels like a ghost town", citing the spread-out nature of the stadiums and arenas and the still-unfinished infrastructure.[87] At least four cities withdrew their bids for the 2022 Winter Olympics, citing the high costs or lack of local support,[88] resulting in only a two-city race between Almaty, Kazakhstan and Beijing, China who hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics. The Guardian stated that the biggest threat to the future of the Olympics is few cities or countries want to host them.[89] Bidding for the 2024 Summer Olympics became a two-city race between Paris and Los Angeles, so the IOC took the unusual step of simultaneously awarding both the 2024 Games to Paris and the 2028 Games to Los Angeles. Both of the bids were praised for high technical plans and innovative ways to use a record-breaking number of existing and temporary facilities.[90]