

The Olympics: Past and Present

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Word Count: 2,178



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THE OLYMPICS: PAST AND PRESENT

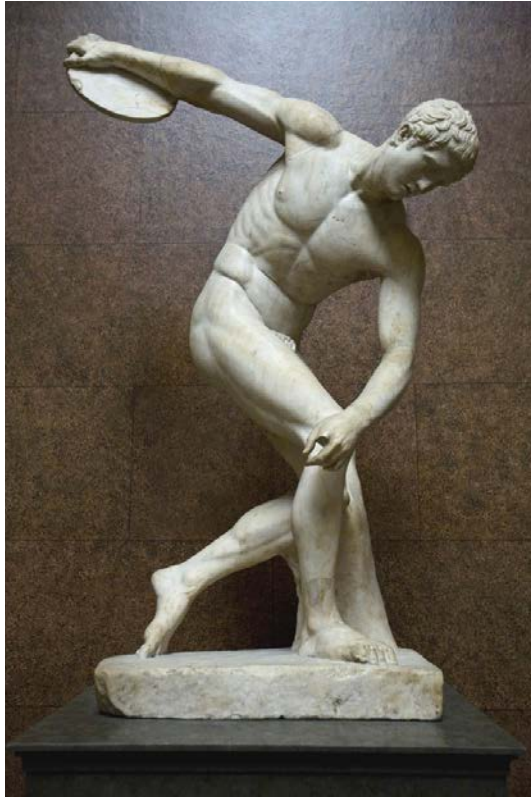


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María Colón of Cuba throws to win the women's javelin final. She set a world and Olympic record of 68.4 meters on July 25, 1980.

TO BE THE BEST **IN THE WORLD**

Citius, Altius, Fortius. These three Latin words, meaning “Faster, Higher, Stronger,” are the **motto** of the Olympic Games. It's natural for any good **athlete** to want to do better than his or her **competitors**. But in Olympic contests, winning means even more. Athletes who win Olympic gold medals are the best in all the world.

Did you ever wonder where the Olympic Games came from? The Olympic Games began in ancient Greece and have a long history of promoting peaceful competition. Many cities around the world compete for the honor of holding the Games. Hosting the Summer Olympics or Winter Olympics makes a city part of the Games' rich tradition.

THE ANCIENT OLYMPIC GAMES

Ancient writings say that the first Olympics took place in Olympia, Greece, in 776 BC, although many historians believe it was probably much earlier. The ancient Greeks actually held four different athletic competitions, one every year, each one honoring a different god. The Olympics was just one competition out of the four, which is why the Summer Games and Winter Games are held every four years. The Olympics honored the king of the gods, Zeus, who lived on Mount Olympus. Because Zeus was the most important of all the Greek gods, the Olympics quickly became the most important athletic competition.



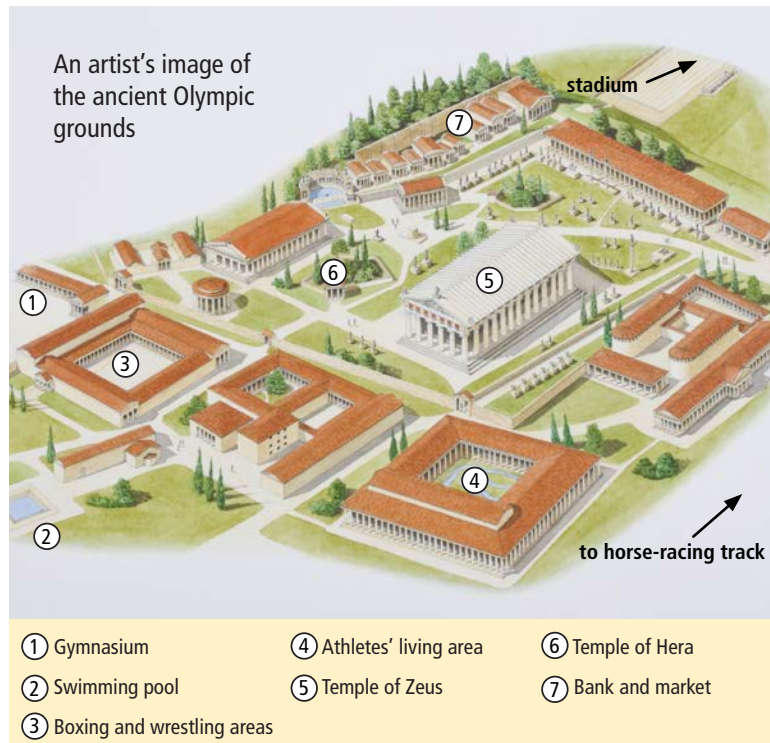
Map of ancient Greece around the time of the first Olympic Games

The earliest Olympics included only short footraces. Over several years, the organizers added other athletic contests until there were fourteen events in all. The contests included stadium sports and racetrack sports. Events such as footraces, boxing, discus throwing, javelin throwing, wrestling, and jumping were held in the stadium. The dangerous chariot races were held on a racetrack. Many of the athletes in those early Games were soldiers. Some Olympic events were similar to the sports used to train people for the armies of the Greek **city-states**.

The ancient contests had rules, but they were not as strict as the rules of modern-day Olympics. For example, wrestlers could kick, punch, pull hair, and break bones. In the chariot races, the racers could knock over each other's chariots and horses. Athletes were often seriously injured or even killed during the events.



The statue of Zeus inside the temple at Olympia was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.



Thousands of spectators traveled from all across Greece to see the ancient Games at Olympia. The athletes, who trained for months or even years, were treated like heroes when they won. The only official prize for the winner of each event was an olive branch from a sacred tree. But the winners achieved fame and were honored throughout Greece. Olympic champions were often given money by their hometowns to celebrate their victories. They were also freed for life from the burden of paying taxes.

The ancient Games were an important source of business for many Greeks. People provided visitors with food, supplies, and places to stay. Because so many people came from all over Greece during the Games, Olympia was a good place to hold business meetings and family reunions. The Olympic grounds had many resources for visitors to use. In addition to the buildings for sporting events, a fine hotel, a swimming pool, a **sauna**, a marketplace, and a bank were available.

For some people, the Olympics also had religious importance. The Olympic grounds were home to a temple with a huge gold-and-ivory statue of Zeus. Some people enjoyed the public **ceremonies** of the Games, including the parade, or **procession**, of all the athletes and officials. Many people attended a large ceremony honoring Zeus and a celebration feast.

But most importantly, the Olympic Games were times of peace in Greece. During every Olympics, a strictly enforced **truce** guaranteed that no fighting took place between any of the Greek city-states. The Games were a way for the city-states to compete with each other peacefully. While the Games were being held, people could travel throughout Greece without fear of war.

The ancient Olympics were different from the modern Games in other ways as well. Only men were allowed to compete in the early ancient Olympics—adult women were not allowed to compete or even to watch. The Greeks did allow young girls to watch the Games, though. Eventually, the Greeks created a separate women's athletic festival in 470 BC to honor the goddess Hera, the wife of Zeus.

The ancient Olympic Games were popular for hundreds of years. Even after the Roman Empire conquered Greece in 146 BC, the Games continued. But in AD 393, the Roman emperor Theodosius (thee-uh-DOH-shee-us), a Christian, ended them. He stopped all festivals, including the Olympics, that honored the old Greek gods. Olympia and the Olympic grounds were abandoned. After hundreds of years of neglect, war, earthquakes, and floods, the ancient Olympic grounds were buried under rubble and forgotten.

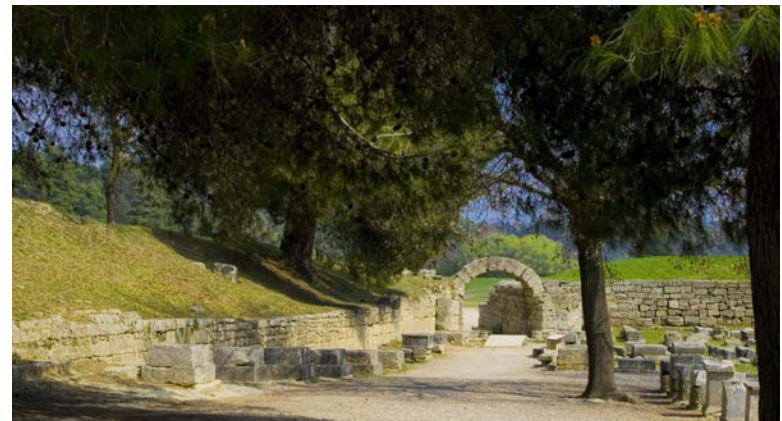


Some of the ancient footraces required runners to carry heavy shields.

THE OLYMPICS REVIVED

Although the site of the ancient Olympics was lost, the legends remained. Stories about the Games continued to interest historians more than a thousand years after the Games ended. In the 1700s, **archaeologists** began searching for the Olympic grounds. By the 1890s, they had uncovered most of the major buildings at Olympia.

A Frenchman named Pierre de Coubertin (duh coo-bair-TAHN) was interested in the ancient Olympics. He liked the idea that the ancient Greek people had used sports to compete peacefully instead of going to war. Coubertin wanted to start a new Olympics as a worldwide sporting contest. People loved the idea, so Coubertin formed the International Olympic Committee, or IOC, in 1894.



Ruins of the stadium entrance built around 200 BC in Olympia, Greece



The men's weightlifting winners receive their medals at the 1936 Games in Berlin, Germany.

Coubertin decided that the modern Olympics should celebrate the love of sports. He didn't want athletes to compete out of a desire for money. So, like the ancient Olympics, the modern Olympics would give out a simple prize rather than money or goods. The IOC also made a rule that professional athletes—those who made money from competing in their sports—could not participate in the Games.

Greece, home of the ancient Olympics, hosted the first modern Olympics in 1896. Thousands of proud Greek citizens crowded into the rebuilt stadium to watch. Two hundred athletes from fourteen countries took part in the Games. As in the ancient Olympics, only men could compete in these Games. Athletes competed in track and field (running, jumping, and throwing), tennis, weightlifting, cycling, wrestling, swimming, and gymnastics. The winner of each event received an olive branch, a certificate, and a silver medal.



Athletes run in the men's marathon during the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing, China.



The Olympic flag is lowered at the closing ceremony of the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing, China.

The next two Olympics, in Paris (1900) and St. Louis (1904), were less successful. The host cities did not build Olympic grounds or “villages,” so the athletes had poor housing and equipment. Many outdoor events were delayed or canceled because of bad weather. The Games did not include any official women’s events, even though women began competing unofficially in 1900.

The early Games were not well advertised, so people took little notice and attendance was low. Organizers learned from their mistakes, however, and the Games slowly grew into the amazingly successful Olympics we know today.

THE OLYMPICS EVOLVE

In 1906, at Games held during an off-schedule year, Olympic organizers revived the ancient tradition of an opening procession. Athletes paraded around the stadium behind the flags of their nations before the competition began. From then on, each Olympics included a colorful opening ceremony. The 1920 Olympics were the first to use the Olympic flag, which is white with five colored rings. The interlocking rings on the flag represent the five settled continents of the world working together in peace. At least one color on the flag can be found on the flag of every nation.



Posters for the 1900 Summer Games held in Paris, France, and the 2004 Summer Games held in Athens, Greece

The first Olympic Winter Games were held in 1924 in Chamonix (sham-oh-NEE), France. More than 250 athletes from 16 nations competed, including 11 women. The Winter Games in 1924 included speed skating, cross-country skiing, ski jumping, and ice hockey. The Winter Olympics were a big success.

One of the female skaters competing in 1924 was Norway's twelve-year-old Sonja Henie (SOHN-yuh HEN-ee). She fell during her race and finished last. But falling and failing at



Norwegian skater Sonja Henie

age twelve did not stop Henie. She became one of the greatest athletes of the early Winter Olympics and one of the most famous athletes of all time. Henie won gold medals at the 1928, 1932, and 1936 Winter Games. She went on to star in spectacular ice shows and in films.

At the 1928 Summer Games in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, women were officially allowed to compete for the first time. Following the Amsterdam Games, the number of sports in which women could compete kept growing.

The first Olympic torch was lit in 1928. In 1936, the tradition of running the torch relay began. To honor the origin of the Games, the torch is lit in Olympia using magnified sunlight. Runners carry the torch from Olympia to the new host city. The runners pass the torch as it moves through countries and across oceans. At the opening ceremonies, the final runner passes the relay torch to a special guest. This guest is often a former Olympic champion. The guest uses the relay torch to light the Olympic flame, which burns for the duration of the Games.



American boxing legend Muhammad Ali lights an Olympic torch as part of the relay before the 2002 Olympics. Ali won a gold medal in the 1960 Games in Rome, Italy.

In the 1960s, the Games began to be broadcast on television, and advertisers began placing their logos on Olympic equipment. The IOC still raises large sums of money for the Games by allowing companies to use the Olympic logo on their products, such as cereals and candy bars.

The IOC also decides which sports will be allowed in the Olympics. The total number of Olympic events keeps growing as more sports become popular. For example, snowboarding has been included since the 1998 Winter Games in Nagano, Japan. For the 2008 Games, the IOC cut women's boxing and added open-water swimming and women's **steeplechase**.

After the 1992 Games, IOC officials decided to start holding the Summer Games and Winter Games in different years, two years apart. The 1994 Winter Games held in Lillehammer, Norway, were followed by the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta, Georgia.

IOC officials slowly relaxed the rules that kept professional athletes out of the Games. This change came about in part because many countries train their Olympic athletes as if they were professionals.



Jesse Owens set several world records and became famous as a college track star before competing in the Olympics.

Everyone hopes the Olympics will always be peaceful. But war and politics have sometimes interfered. Three Olympics were canceled because of World Wars I and II. At the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the ruling **Nazis** wanted to prove that white Germans were a superior race of people. They spent millions of dollars promoting their **racist** ideas and their athletes. But their plans were upset by the amazing gold-medal performance of runner Jesse Owens, an African American.

In 1972, **terrorists** kidnapped nine athletes from Israel's Olympic team. Seventeen people were killed in the kidnapping and in the failed rescue attempt. At the 1996 Games, one person was killed and over one hundred people were injured when a bomb exploded at a concert.

TODAY'S OLYMPICS

The Olympics have changed in many ways since they were revived in 1896. The Games have grown into a huge spectacle and have become enormously competitive. Training to be in the best condition is a full-time job. Most early gold-medal winners would not be able to **qualify** for a modern Olympics. For example, in 1924, the winner of the men's 50-kilometer (31 mi) cross-country ski race finished in 3 hours and 45 minutes. In 2006, the winner of the same event finished in just over 2 hours and 6 minutes.



Italy's Giorgio di Centa won the gold medal in the 50-kilometer (31 mi) cross-country ski race in Turin, Italy, in 2006.

In order to compete at the Olympic level today, athletes must train harder than ever before. To be contenders for medals, Olympic athletes must use the latest equipment and find the best trainers and sponsors. Athletes often begin their training at an early age. These athletes devote a great deal of personal time to improving their skills. Many countries maintain special Olympic training centers to support athletes during their training process.



Monique Henderson helped her team win a gold medal in the 4x400 meter relay race in the 2008 Summer Games.

Olympic competition is so strong that some athletes cheat. They think they need even more of an edge than nature and training can provide. In recent years, some Olympic athletes, often with the help of team trainers or doctors, have secretly used drugs to win. The use of banned substances by these athletes has damaged the image and reputation of the Olympics.

Since the mid-1970s, Olympic officials have routinely tested athletes for drug use. Olympic champions who fail a drug test can be stripped of their medals. For example, Marion Jones, the great American track star, had to return the five medals she had previously won in the 2000 Summer Olympics because she admitted to using **steroids**.

Controversies have also arisen concerning judges of figure-skating and diving competitions. Some judges may have awarded undeserved points to athletes from their own countries or agreed to trade points with other judges.

The flawless performance of Canadian figure-skating pair Jamie Sale and David Pelletier was finally awarded gold after a judging scandal was uncovered.



Olympic organizers work hard to keep the Games honest and fair for everyone. The Olympics continue to grow bigger and more popular each time they are held. Each Olympics includes the world's best athletes, a new host country, and often some amazing surprises. Every two years, the Olympic Games offer new opportunities for athletes to become known as the best in the world. And few Olympics pass without world records being broken.

Like the ancient Olympics, the modern Games continue to represent the ideal of sportsmanship and peaceful competition among nations.



Janica Kostelic (YON-it-suh KAW-stel-itch) became a national hero in Croatia when she won three gold medals and one silver medal in the 2002 Winter Games.



GLOSSARY



| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| archaeologists (<i>n.</i>) | scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures (p. 10) |
| athlete (<i>n.</i>) | a person trained in sports, games, or other activities that require strength, speed, and skill (p. 4) |
| ceremonies (<i>n.</i>) | formal acts or rituals (p. 8) |
| city-states (<i>n.</i>) | countries that each contain one major city and its surrounding territory (p. 6) |
| competitors (<i>n.</i>) | people or teams that take part in contests (p. 4) |
| controversies (<i>n.</i>) | disagreements over an issue (p. 21) |
| motto (<i>n.</i>) | a phrase that represents a guiding idea of a person or group (p. 4) |
| Nazis (<i>n.</i>) | members of the ruling political party in Germany from 1933 to 1945 (p. 18) |

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|-----------------------------------|--|
| procession (<i>n.</i>) | an orderly, formal parade (p. 8) |
| qualify (<i>v.</i>) | to show a high enough level of skill to be allowed to compete in a difficult event (p. 19) |
| racist (<i>adj.</i>) | relating to the belief that some races are superior to others (p. 18) |
| sauna (<i>n.</i>) | a room designed for steam bathing (p. 8) |
| site (<i>n.</i>) | the location where something is found or took place (p. 10) |
| steeplechase (<i>n.</i>) | a race that requires jumping over obstacles (p. 17) |
| steroids (<i>n.</i>) | performance-enhancing drugs with dangerous side effects (p. 21) |
| terrorists (<i>n.</i>) | people who use terror as a political weapon (p. 18) |
| truce (<i>n.</i>) | an agreement not to fight (p. 8) |