

The Olympics: Past and Present

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THE OLYMPICS: PAST AND PRESENT

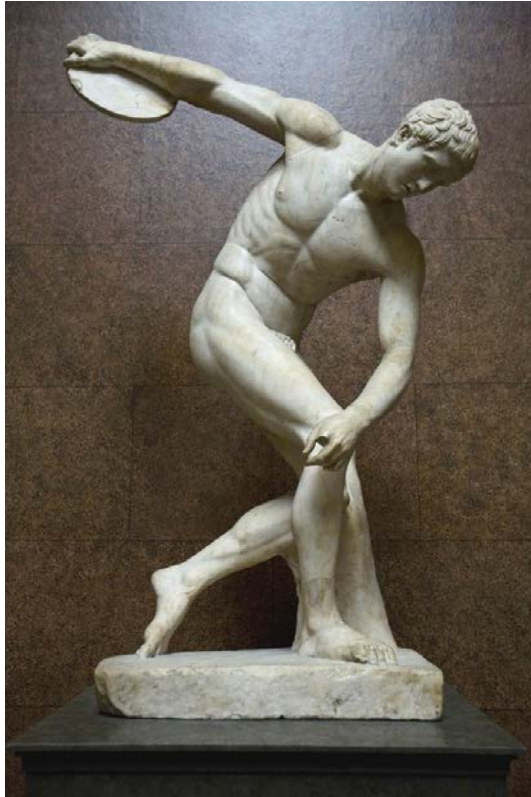


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María Colón of Cuba throws to win the women's javelin final. She set a world and Olympic record of 68.4 meters on July 25, 1980.

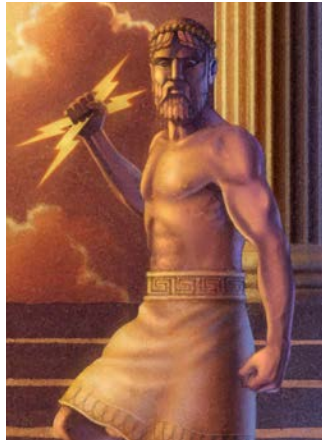
TO BE THE BEST **IN THE WORLD**

Citius, Altius, Fortius. These three Latin words, meaning “Faster, Higher, Stronger,” are the **motto** of the Olympic Games. All athletes who excel in any sport strive to outperform their **competitors**. But in Olympic competitions, 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 Olympics 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.

ANCIENT OLYMPIC GAMES

The ancient Greeks held regional athletic competitions throughout Greece for centuries, and many of the events were intended to honor important Greek **deities**. Each city-state in Greece had its own government and laws as well as its own army. City-states **clashed** with one another frequently—both in war and in athletic contests.



Zeus was the god of the sky in Greek mythology.

Ancient writings say that a central, organized festival of competition began 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 honoring a different god. The Olympics was just one competition of the cycle, 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 god of the Greek **pantheon**, the Olympics quickly became the most important athletic competition.



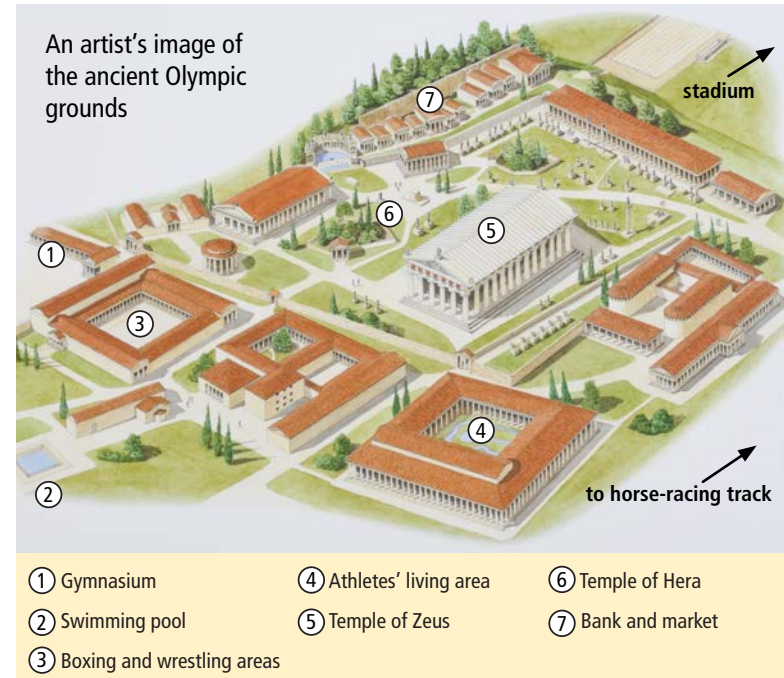
Map of ancient Greece around the time of the first Olympic Games

The earliest Olympics only included footraces, but the Games quickly expanded to include fourteen separate contests. Competitions in running, boxing, discus throwing, javelin throwing, wrestling, and jumping were held in a racetrack called a **hippodrome**. The ancient contests were much more **freewheeling** and violent than today's events. Wrestlers could kick, punch, pull hair, and break bones, while charioteers often crashed into each other with painful and bloody results, especially at turns in the racetrack. Serious injuries and even deaths were common.

Thousands of spectators traveled from all across Greece to see the Games. Athletes trained for months, or even years, and were showered with glory when they won. The only official prize was an olive branch from a sacred tree. But Olympic champions were often given money by their hometowns to celebrate their victories. Champions were also excused from paying taxes ever again.

The ancient Games provided important opportunities for trade and communication. People sold food and supplies, and provided lodging to visitors. Because great numbers of people came from all over Greece to see the Games, Olympia was a popular place to hold business meetings and to attend family reunions. The Olympic grounds had luxuries including a hotel, a swimming pool, a **sauna**, a marketplace, and a bank, in addition to the stadium, gymnasium, and horse-racing arena.

Many religious, civil, and social functions were part of the early Greek Olympics. A temple and an enormous gold-and-ivory statue of Zeus stood on the grounds. The ceremonies included a **procession**, or parade, of all the athletes and officials, followed by a **sacrifice** of as many as one hundred white oxen and a celebration feast.



But most importantly, the Games signaled a time of peace in Greece. During every Olympics, the city-states observed a strictly enforced **truce**. The Games allowed the city-states to compete with one another on peaceful terms. No one was allowed to carry a weapon into the city of Olympia during the Games. While the Games were being held, people could travel freely throughout Greece without fear of war among the city-states.

Olympics Trivia

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

Most Olympic athletes competed nude or wore only small shorts. The Greeks believed that a strong body was meant to be shown off and that loose clothing could trip up an athlete.

A strict civil law prohibited adult women from participating in, or even watching, the Games—on pain of death. However, the Greeks allowed young girls to attend the Games as spectators. In 470 BC, the Greeks created a separate women’s athletic festival to honor the goddess Hera, the wife of Zeus.



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

The ancient Olympic Games were wildly popular for centuries. The Games continued even after the Roman Empire conquered the Greeks in 146 BC. But around AD 393, the Roman emperor Theodosius (thee-uh-DOH-shee-us), a Christian, put an end to all **pagan** festivals, including the Olympics. Olympia and the Olympic grounds were abandoned. After hundreds of years of neglect, war, earthquakes, and floods, the ancient Olympic grounds were buried and forgotten.

THE OLYMPICS REVIVED

Although the site of the Olympics was lost in time, legends about the Games continued to interest many historians. In the 1700s, **archaeologists** began searching for the Olympic grounds. By the 1890s, they had located and **excavated** most of the major buildings at Olympia.

A Frenchman named Pierre de Coubertin (duh coo-bair-TAHN) was fascinated by the ancient Olympics. He liked the idea of using sports instead of warfare to compete, and he thought that being athletic helped a person to develop good **character**. Coubertin promoted the idea of reviving the Olympics as a worldwide sporting competition. 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 had strong beliefs about how the Games should be organized. He hoped that the modern Olympics would be a time of peace, when nations would put aside politics and warfare, as the Greeks had done for the ancient Games.

Coubertin was **adamant** that all of the athletes should compete out of love for the sport, not out of a desire for prizes. For that reason, modern champions, like their ancient **counterparts**, receive only a **symbolic** prize rather than money or goods. The IOC also made a rule that only amateur athletes—those who did not make money from their sports—could compete 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. Over two hundred athletes from fourteen countries registered for the Games. However, as in the original Olympics, only men could participate in the 1896 Games. Athletes competed in track-and-field events (running, jumping, and throwing), tennis, weightlifting, cycling, wrestling, swimming, and gymnastics. The winner of each event in these new Games received an honorary olive branch, a certificate, and a silver medal.



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



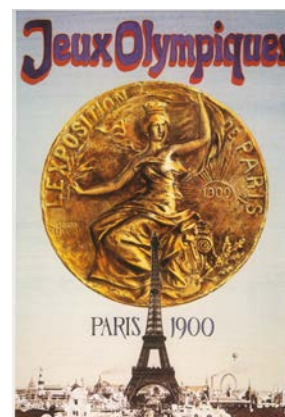
The Olympic flag is lowered at the closing ceremony of the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing, China.

The next two Olympics, in Paris (1900) and in 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 were not promoted or advertised well, so people took little notice of them and attendance was low. The Games also had to compete for audiences with the world’s fairs that took place in the Olympic host cities in 1900 and 1904. Organizers learned from their mistakes, however, and the Games slowly grew into the amazingly successful Olympic Games we know today.

THE OLYMPICS EVOLVE

In 1906, at Games held in 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 and **elaborate** opening ceremony.

Coubertin also designed the Olympic flag, first flown in 1920, 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 and harmony. 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

Chamonix (sham-oh-NEE), France, hosted the first Olympic Winter Games in 1924. More than 250 athletes from 16 nations competed, including 11 women. The first Winter Games had sixteen events, including speed skating, cross-country skiing, ski jumping, and ice hockey. The Winter Olympics grew to become very popular.

One of the female skaters at the 1924 Winter Games was Norway's twelve-year-old Sonja Henie (SOHN-yuh HEN-ee), who fell and finished last in her event. But falling and failing at age twelve did not **deter** Henie. She became one of the greatest competitors 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 and went on to star in spectacular ice shows and in films.



Norwegian skater Sonja Henie

The year 1928 was a milestone for female athletes. That year in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, women were officially allowed to compete in the Summer Games for the first time.

Officials began using the Olympic torch 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, passing the torch from one to the next as it moves through countries and across oceans. At the opening ceremonies, the final runner hands the relay torch to a special guest. This guest is often a former Olympic champion. He or she 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 were first broadcast on television, and advertisers began placing their logos on Olympic equipment. The IOC still raises large sums of money for the Games from companies that pay for the right 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 athletic 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 **steplechase**.

IOC officials also schedule the Games. 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 in Lillehammer, Norway, were followed in 1996 by Summer Games in Atlanta, Georgia.

The IOC has made other important changes as well. It slowly relaxed the rules that kept professional athletes out of the Games. This change was made 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.

War and politics sometimes disrupt the Games. Three Olympics were canceled because of World Wars I and II. At the 1936 Berlin Games, 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 they were humiliated by the amazing gold-medal performance of runner Jesse Owens, an African American.

In 1972, Palestinian **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 in Atlanta, one person was killed and more than one hundred people were injured when a bomb exploded at a concert.

TODAY'S OLYMPICS

The modern Olympics have changed in many respects since they resumed in 1896. The Games have grown into a huge spectacle and have become enormously competitive. Training to be in the best physical condition is a full-time job. Most early gold-medal winners would not even **qualify** for a modern Olympics. Today's athletes routinely perform at levels that would have astonished those earlier competitors.

Consider, for example, cross-country skiing.

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.



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

In order to compete at the Olympic level today, athletes must train harder than ever. 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 as coaches help them develop their natural abilities. Athletes who want to compete in the Olympics devote a great deal of time to **honing** their skills. Many countries maintain special Olympic training centers to support athletes while they train.



Young American gymnasts practice at a training center.

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 performance-enhancing drugs to win. The use of prohibited substances by these athletes has **tarnished** 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 won in the 2000 Summer Olympics because she admitted to using **steroids** to run faster.

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. Few Olympics pass without world records being broken. The modern Olympic Games **encompass** centuries of history and provide an opportunity for breathtaking individual and team efforts. 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

adamant (<i>adj.</i>)	resistant to pressure (p. 11)
archaeologists (<i>n.</i>)	scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures (p. 10)
character (<i>n.</i>)	the moral strength of a person (p. 10)
clashed (<i>v.</i>)	entered into conflict (p. 5)
competitors (<i>n.</i>)	people or teams that take part in contests (p. 4)
controversies (<i>n.</i>)	disagreements over an issue (p. 21)
counterparts (<i>n.</i>)	things that are similar and have the same function as each other (p. 11)
deities (<i>n.</i>)	gods and goddesses (p. 5)
deter (<i>v.</i>)	to discourage; to keep from moving forward (p. 15)
elaborate (<i>adj.</i>)	having many parts and details (p. 14)
encompass (<i>v.</i>)	to include in a larger group (p. 22)
excavated (<i>v.</i>)	uncovered; dug out (p. 10)
freewheeling (<i>adj.</i>)	free from formal rules (p. 6)
hippodrome (<i>n.</i>)	an ancient Greek word for a horse-racing track (p. 6)
honing (<i>v.</i>)	sharpening; improving (p. 20)
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)
pagan (<i>adj.</i>)	relating to non-Christian religions of Greece and Rome (p. 9)
pantheon (<i>n.</i>)	the gods and goddesses of a particular culture (p. 5)
procession (<i>n.</i>)	an orderly, formal parade (p. 7)
qualify (<i>v.</i>)	to demonstrate 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)
sacrifice (<i>n.</i>)	an offering to a deity of something valuable, such as an animal, especially when killed on an altar (p. 7)
sauna (<i>n.</i>)	a room designed for steam bathing (p. 7)
steeplechase (<i>n.</i>)	a race that requires jumping over obstacles (p. 17)
steroids (<i>n.</i>)	dangerous drugs sometimes taken by athletes to enhance performance in sports (p. 21)
symbolic (<i>adj.</i>)	representing an idea (p. 11)
tarnished (<i>v.</i>)	disgraced; made less shiny, polished, or pure (p. 20)
terrorists (<i>n.</i>)	people who use terror as a political weapon (p. 18)
truce (<i>n.</i>)	an agreement to keep the peace (p. 8)