

The Olympic Games

The Olympic Games, which originated in ancient Greece as many as 3,000 years ago, were revived in the late 19th century and have become the world's preeminent sporting competition. From the 8th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D., the Games were held every four years in Olympia, located in the western Peloponnese peninsula, in honor of the god Zeus. The first modern Olympics took place in 1896 in Athens, and featured 280 participants from 13 nations, competing in 43 events. Since 1994, the Summer and Winter Olympic Games have been held separately and have alternated every two years.

The Olympics in Ancient Greece

The first written records of the ancient Olympic Games date to 776 B.C., when a cook named Coroebus won the only event—a 192-meter footrace called the stade (the origin of the modern “stadium”)—to become the first Olympic champion. However, it is generally believed that the Games had been going on for many years by that time. Legend has it that Heracles (the Roman Hercules), son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene, founded the Games, which by the end of the 6th century B.C. had become the most famous of all Greek sporting festivals. The ancient Olympics were held every four years between August 6 and September 19 during a religious festival honoring Zeus. The Games were named for their location at Olympia, a sacred site located near the western coast of the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece. Their influence was so great that ancient historians began to measure time by the four-year increments in between Olympic Games, which were known as Olympiads.

After 13 Olympiads, two more races joined the stade as Olympic events: the diaulos (roughly equal to today's 400-meter race), and the dolichos (a longer-distance race, possibly comparable to the 1,500-meter or 5,000-meter event). The pentathlon (consisting of five events: a foot race, a long jump, discus and javelin throws and a wrestling match) was introduced in 708 B.C., boxing in 688 B.C. and chariot racing in 680 B.C. In 648 B.C., pankration, a combination of boxing and wrestling with virtually no rules, debuted as an Olympic event. Participation in the ancient Olympic Games was initially limited to freeborn male citizens of Greece; there were no women's events, and married women were prohibited from attending the competition.

Decline and Revival of the Olympic Tradition

After the Roman Empire conquered Greece in the mid-2nd century B.C., the Games continued, but their standards and quality declined. In one notorious example from A.D. 67, the decadent Emperor Nero entered an Olympic chariot race, only to disgrace himself by declaring himself the winner even after he fell off his chariot during the event. In A.D. 393, Emperor Theodosius I, a Christian, called for a ban on all “pagan” festivals, ending the ancient Olympic tradition after nearly 12 centuries.

It would be another 1,500 years before the Games would rise again, largely thanks to the efforts of Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) of France. Dedicated to the promotion of

physical education, the young baron became inspired by the idea of creating a modern Olympic Games after visiting the ancient Olympic site. In November 1892, at a meeting of the Union des Sports Athlétiques in Paris, Coubertin proposed the idea of reviving the Olympics as an international athletic competition held every four years. Two years later, he got the approval he needed to found the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which would become the governing body of the modern Olympic Games.

The Olympics Through the Years

The first modern Olympics were held in Athens, Greece, in 1896. In the opening ceremony, King Georgios I and a crowd of 60,000 spectators welcomed 280 participants from 13 nations (all male), who would compete in 43 events, including track and field, gymnastics, swimming, wrestling, cycling, tennis, weightlifting, shooting and fencing. All subsequent Olympiads have been numbered even when no Games take place (as in 1916, during World War I, and in 1940 and 1944, during World War II). The official symbol of the modern Games is five interlocking colored rings, representing the continents of North and South America, Asia, Africa, Europe and Australia. The Olympic flag, featuring this symbol on a white background, flew for the first time at the Antwerp Games in 1920.

The Olympics truly took off as an international sporting event after 1924, when the VIII Games were held in Paris. Some 3,000 athletes (with more than 100 women among them) from 44 nations competed that year, and for the first time the Games featured a closing ceremony. The Winter Olympics debuted that year, including such events as figure skating, ice hockey, bobsledding and the biathlon. Eighty years later, when the 2004 Summer Olympics returned to Athens for the first time in more than a century, nearly 11,000 athletes from a record 201 countries competed. In a gesture that joined both ancient and modern Olympic traditions, the shotput competition that year was held at the site of the classical Games in Olympia.

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