

The Olympics: Past and Present

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THE OLYMPICS: PAST AND PRESENT

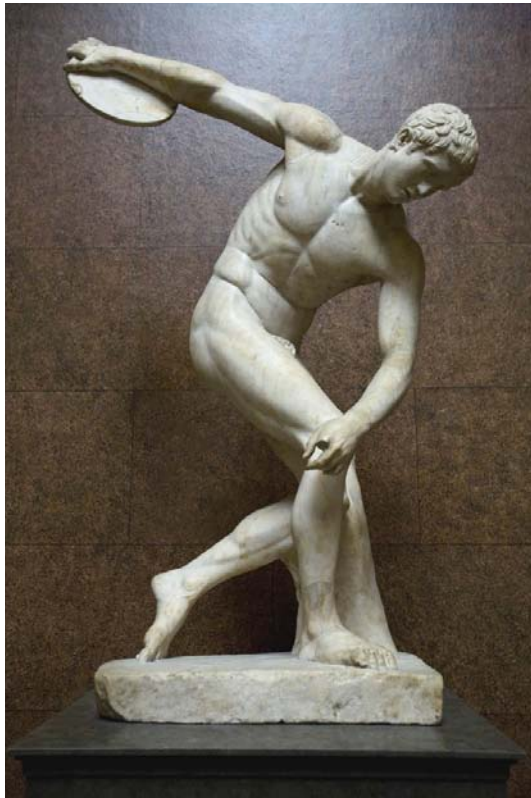


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Written by Katherine Follett and David Dreier

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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

Every two years, top **athletes** from around the world meet to play against each other in the Olympic Games. Hundreds of countries compete in this huge sporting contest. The winner of each Olympic event receives a gold medal. A silver medal is given for second place and a bronze medal for third place.

Did you ever wonder where the Olympic Games came from? The Olympic Games began almost 2,800 years ago in **ancient** Greece.



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

THE ANCIENT OLYMPIC GAMES

Long ago, Greece was divided into several regions called *city-states*. Each city-state had one main city. These city-states often fought wars against each other.

In 776 BC, the people of Olympia, Greece, created the first Olympic Games. The best athletes from all the city-states gathered to compete against each other. The Games honored Zeus, the king of all the Greek gods.

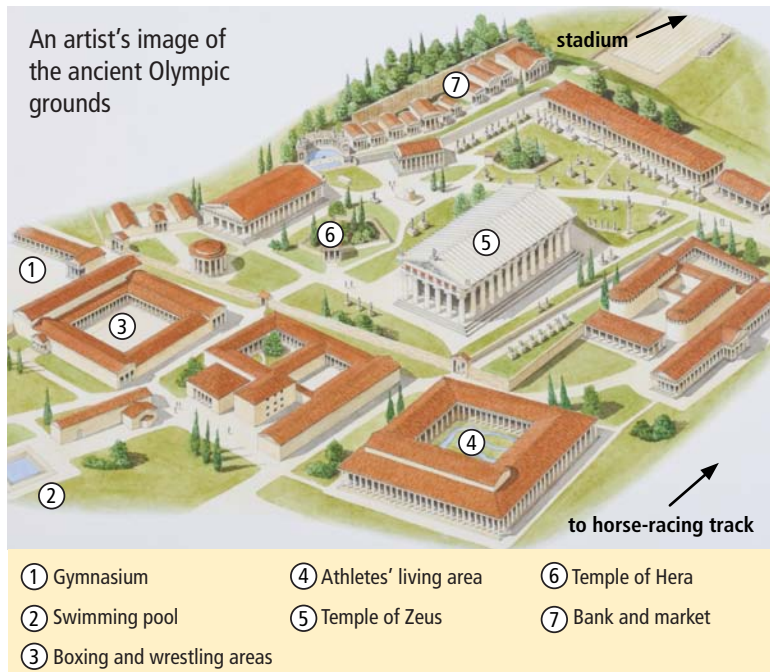


Chariot races were violent; some athletes died while racing.

At first, the only events at the Olympics were races. But soon the Games grew to include fourteen different events. Most contests took place in a stadium, but the chariot races were held on a special racetrack. Some of the events were dangerous. Athletes were often hurt or even killed while competing in the ancient Games.

Word Wise

People often call the Olympic Games the *Olympics*. The Games are named after the city where they began—Olympia, Greece.

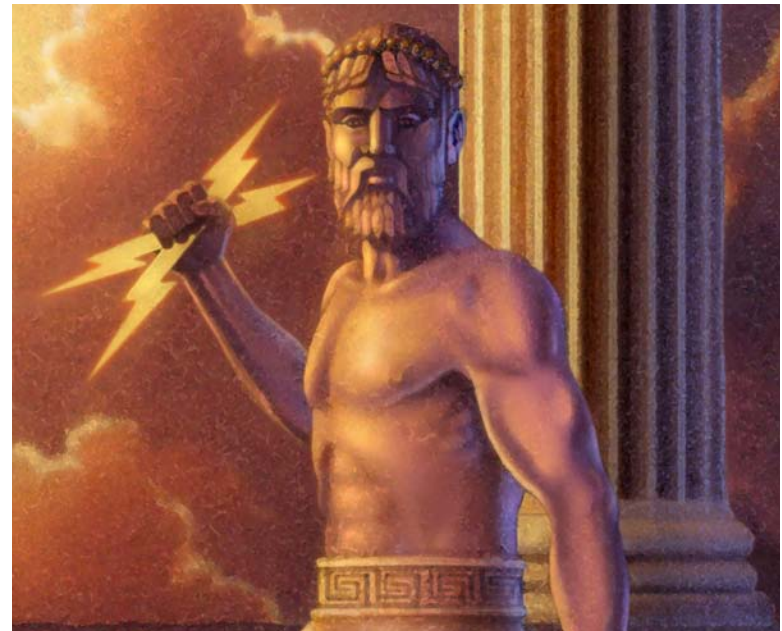


The prize for first place was a simple olive branch. But the winners were honored throughout Greece. Olympic champions were often given money by their hometowns to celebrate their victories.

The Olympic Games brought the ancient Greeks together. Visitors to the Games gathered at the hotel, swimming pool, and **sauna** in Olympia. The Olympic grounds also included a market and a bank. People often made business deals or held family reunions while they were in Olympia to see the Games.

For some people, the Games had religious meaning as well. Many people visited the huge statue of the god Zeus in the temple in Olympia. Others enjoyed the **procession**, or parade, of all the athletes. And everyone came to a large feast.

Most importantly for all Greeks, the Olympics were a time of peace. The city-states agreed never to fight during the Games. People felt safe to travel throughout Greece each time the Olympics were held.



To the ancient Greeks, Zeus was the god of the sky and thunder. He is often shown holding a lightning bolt.

Originally, all Olympic athletes were men. The Greeks did not allow adult women to compete in the Games or even to watch them. However, young girls were allowed to watch the Games. In 470 BC, the Greeks created a separate festival for female athletes.

In 146 BC, the Roman Empire took over Greece, but the Games continued. Then around AD 393, the Roman leader Theodosius (thee-oh-DOH-shuhs), a Christian, ended the Games. He stopped all festivals that honored the Greek gods. People no longer came to Olympia for the Games. But the legend of the Games was kept alive in the pottery, statues, and writings of the time.



In the early Games, most Olympic athletes competed nude or wearing only small shorts. Some of the ancient footraces required runners to carry heavy shields as they ran.

THE OLYMPICS START AGAIN

More than one thousand years later, people still heard stories about the Olympics. Many historians wanted to find the location of Olympia. In the 1700s, teams began searching for the Olympic grounds. By the 1890s, historians had found most of the old buildings.

A man who lived in France became interested in the search for Olympia. He had heard about the ancient Games. He liked the fact that they stood for peaceful competition. He wanted to start a new worldwide sporting contest. He 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.

The International Olympic Committee decided that the new Olympic Games would focus on peaceful competition and the love of sports. In keeping with the spirit of the ancient Games, the IOC didn't want athletes to compete for money. Champions would get a silver medal and an olive branch. Professional (paid) athletes would not be allowed to compete in the Games.

Greece held the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. Thousands of people came to watch. Two hundred athletes came from fourteen countries to compete. The new Games were a success!



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

Olympics Trivia

The marathon race featured in the first modern Olympics comes from the story of Pheidippides (fy-DIP-ih-dees), a Greek soldier. After the Greeks won a great battle on the fields of Marathon, Pheidippides was told to run to Athens—over 40 kilometers (26 mi) away—to tell the city about the victory. Pheidippides ran the entire way to the city, shouted out the news, and fell down dead of exhaustion. Modern marathons cover the same distance that Pheidippides ran.

The next two Olympics were not as successful. The athletes lived in poor conditions. Bad weather ruined many events. Organizers learned from their mistakes, and the new Olympic Games eventually became famous and popular around the world.



A poster for the 1900 Summer Games held in Paris, France

THE OLYMPICS GROW

In 1906, the Olympics adopted the ancient tradition of an opening parade. Athletes carried the flags of their countries as they walked into the stadium. From then on, each Olympics included a colorful opening ceremony.

In 1920, a new Olympic flag was used in many ceremonies. The connected rings on the flag represent the settled continents of the world working together in peace.



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

France hosted the first Olympic Winter Games in 1924. More than 250 athletes, including 11 women, came to compete. One female ice skater was 12-year-old Sonja Henie (SOWN-yuh HEN-ee) from Norway. She fell and finished last in her event.

But Henie came back four years later. She won gold medals in the 1928, 1932, and 1936 Winter Games. Henie became famous and went on to star in films and large ice shows.

In 1928, women officially began to compete in the Summer Games. After that, the list of events for women grew every year.



Norwegian Olympic skater
Sonja Henie

In 1936, the torch relay began. Now at the opening ceremony of each Olympics, the final runner in the relay hands the torch to a special guest. This guest uses the torch to light the Olympic flame that burns during the Games. The guest is often a past Olympic champion.



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.

Olympics Trivia

The first symbolic Olympic torch was lit in 1928. In 1936, the tradition of running the torch relay began. The relay torch is lit in Olympia. Then, runners carry the torch from Olympia to the new host city. Each runner passes the torch by hand to the next. The torch travels through several countries and across oceans before arriving at the Games.



The Olympic flag

The Olympics cost a large amount of money to organize. The IOC raises money by selling products related to the Olympics. Many companies pay the IOC for permission to broadcast the Olympics on television. Others pay for the right to put the Olympic logo on their products.

The IOC decides which sports will be in the Olympics. The IOC also schedules the Games. The Summer Games and Winter Games are now held two years apart.

Sometimes the peaceful goal of the Olympic Games is threatened. Wars have canceled three Olympics. At the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the **Nazis** tried to use the Games to spread their **racist** ideas. Their plans were upset by the amazing gold-medal triumph of runner Jesse Owens, an African American.

In 1972, **terrorists** took nine of Israel's Olympic athletes hostage. Seventeen people were killed. At the 1996 Games, a bomb killed one person and hurt more than one hundred others.



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

TODAY'S OLYMPICS

Today's Olympic athletes are stronger than ever because of advances in equipment and training. In 1924, the winner of the men's 50-kilometer (31-mi) cross-country ski race won in 3 hours and 45 minutes. In 2010, the winner of the same race finished in 2 hours and 5 minutes.

For many Olympic athletes, training is almost a full-time job. Athletes often begin their training while they are still young. Many countries have built special Olympic training centers for their athletes to use.

The pressure to win can be strong. Some athletes try to gain an unfair advantage by cheating. Some have secretly used drugs to win.



Young American gymnasts practice at a training center.

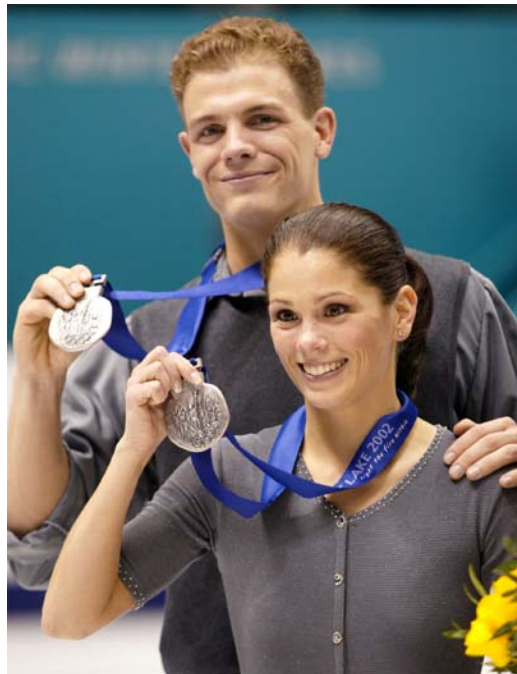


Monique Henderson helped her team win a gold medal in the 4x400 meter relay race in the 2008 Summer Games.

Officials test Olympic athletes for drug use. Winners who fail a drug test can lose their medals. Marion Jones was a great track star from the United States who won five medals at the 2000 Summer Olympics. She had to return all her medals when she admitted using drugs to run faster.

Judges sometimes cheat to help their countries win. Some give the wrong points to athletes on purpose. Other judges cheat by trading points with judges from other countries.

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. Many people enjoy watching the world's best athletes compete. And the Games often have amazing surprises.

But the wonder of the Olympics comes from their rich history. The Olympics show that peaceful sporting contests among different countries are still exciting, even after all these centuries!



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

ancient (<i>adj.</i>)	from a long time ago; very old (p. 4)
athletes (<i>n.</i>)	people trained in sports, games, or other activities that require strength, speed, and skill (p. 4)
Nazis (<i>n.</i>)	members of the ruling political party in Germany from 1933 to 1945 (p. 18)
procession (<i>n.</i>)	an orderly, formal parade (p. 8)
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. 7)
terrorists (<i>n.</i>)	people who use terror as a political weapon (p. 18)

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