

The Olympic Games are an international sports festival that began in ancient Greece. The original Greek games were staged every fourth year for several hundred years, until they were abolished in the early Christian era. The revival of the Olympic Games took place in 1896, and since then they have been staged every fourth year, except during World War I and World War II.

Perhaps the basic difference between the ancient and modern Olympics is that the former was the ancient Greeks' way of saluting their gods, whereas the modern Games are a manner of saluting the athletic talents of citizens of all nations. The original Olympics featured competition in music, oratory, and theater performances as well. The modern Games have a more expansive athletic agenda, and for two and one-half weeks they are supposed to replace the rancor of international conflict with friendly competition. In recent times, however, that lofty ideal has not always been attained.

The earliest reliable date that recorded history gives for the first Olympics is 776 BC, although virtually all historians presume that the Games began well before then.

It is certain that during the midsummer of 776 BC a festival was held at Olympia on the highly civilized eastern coast of the Peloponnesian peninsula. That festival remained a regularly scheduled event, taking place during the pre-Christian golden age of Greece. As a testimony to the religious nature of the Games, which were held in honor of Zeus, the most important god in the ancient Greek pantheon, all wars would cease during the contests. According to the earliest records, only one athletic event was held in the ancient Olympics--a foot race of about 183 m (200 yd), or the length of the stadium. A cook, Coroibus of Elis, was the first recorded winner. The first few Olympics had only local appeal and were limited to one race on one day; only men were allowed to compete or attend. A second race--twice the length of the stadium--was added in the 14th Olympics, and a still longer race was added to the next competition, four years later.

When the powerful, warlike Spartans began to compete, they influenced the agenda. The 18th Olympics included wrestling and a pentathlon consisting of running, jumping, spear throwing, discus throwing, and wrestling. Boxing was added at the 23rd Olympiad, and the games continued to expand, with the addition of chariot racing and other sports. In the 37th Olympiad the format was extended to five days of competition.

The growth of the Games fostered "professionalism" among the competitors, and the Olympic ideals waned as royalty began to compete for personal gain, particularly in the chariot events. Human beings were being glorified as well as the gods; many winners erected statues to deify themselves. In AD 394 the games were officially ended by the Roman emperor Theodosius, who felt that they had pagan connotations.

The revival of the Olympic Games in 1896, unlike the original Games, has a clear, concise history. Pierre de Coubertin, a young French nobleman, felt that he could institute an educational program in France that approximated the ancient Greek notion of a balanced development of mind and body. The Greeks themselves had tried to revive the Olympics by holding local athletic games in Athens during the 1800s, but without lasting success. It was Baron de Coubertin's determination and organizational genius, however, that gave impetus to the modern Olympic movement. In 1892 he addressed a meeting of the Union des Sports Athletiques in Paris. Despite meager response he persisted, and an international sports congress eventually convened on June 16, 1894. With delegates from Belgium, Britain, France, Greece, Italy, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and the United States in attendance, he advocated the revival of the Olympic Games. He found ready and unanimous support from the nine countries. DeCoubertin had initially planned to hold the Olympic Games in France, but the representatives convinced him that Greece was the appropriate country to host the first modern Olympics. The council did agree that the Olympics would move every four years to other great cities of the world. Thirteen countries competed at the Athens Games in 1896. Nine sports were on the

agenda: cycling, fencing, gymnastics, lawn tennis, shooting, swimming, track and field, weight lifting, and wrestling. The 14-man U. S. team dominated the track and field events, taking first place in 9 of the 12 events. The Games were a success, and a second Olympiad, to be held in France, was scheduled. Olympic Games were held in 1900 and 1904, and by 1908 the number of competitors more than quadrupled the number at Athens--from 311 to 2,082.

Beginning in 1924 a Winter Olympics was included--to be held at a separate cold-weather sports site in the same year as the Summer Games--the first held at Chamonix, France. In 1992 about 2,174 athletes from 63 nations competed at Albertville, France, in a program that included Alpine and Nordic skiing, biathlon, ice hockey, figure skating, speed skating, bobsledding, and luge. But the Summer Games, with its wide array of events, are still the focal point of the modern Olympics. The standard events are archery, basketball, boxing, canoeing and kayaking, cycling, equestrian arts, fencing, field hockey, gymnastics, handball, judo, modern pentathlon, rowing, shooting, soccer, swimming and diving and synchronized swimming, track and field, volleyball, water polo, weight lifting, wrestling, and yachting. The Games are governed by the International Olympic Committee, whose headquarters is in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Although the Olympic Games have been increasingly politicized, the ideal of the world's best athletes competing against each other in the arena of so-called pure sport has been at least partially realized, especially from the athletes' point of view. And even though skill and courage are manifested by most Olympic participants, the great gold medalists are the ones who are most often remembered. This past summer the World commemorated the 100th Olympiad which was hoped to be held in Athens in recognition of the original, Ancient Olympics. Instead the 100th was held in Atlanta GA. Because of this fact, at least for us, we as a country, gave the best we had to offer. This was even more a advantage when the "home field advantage" is accounted for. And like I mentioned before the Gold medalists are most likely remembered. It will be awhile before people forget about Michael Johnson's 200 and 400 gold and him crushing the 200 world record he himself set at the trials. And who will ever forget Carl Lewis' final competition that ended in fitting fashion, with the gold draped around his neck. This just goes to show that the Olympics are not just for the Athletes who compete in it, but it is for the whole world which comes together for this short time every 4 (well, two now) years. That is why I believe that this is a great gift from Ancient Greece.

