Table of Contents

The Olympic Games and South Africa

What are the Olympic Games?

The Olympic Games (according to Wikipedia) is an international event featuring a variety of winter and summer sports. This also includes the Paralympic games where athletes with disabilities can compete for gold, silver and bronze medals.

The games take place every four years in different countries all over the globe. The Ancient Olympic Games took part in Greece from 776 BC to 393 AD.

Ancient Olympic Games

These competitions were held in Olympia, Ancient Greece in hour of the god Zeus. They also erected a huge statue of Zeus to stand guard over the proceedings. Sadly, this statue no longer exists. There are however detailed descriptions and images on old coins. The statue was created of ivory and gold plated bronze.

The athletes would gather every four years to compete and a peace truce would be declared so that people could travel safely to Greece. People came together from all over to watch, and also to display their works of art and wares at the Olympic Games.

The winners received laurel leaves arranged into wreaths. They also received free lodging and food for life and were heroes of their respective countries. They were heralded in poems and other pieces of literature.

Interestingly the games are said to have started from a foot race for young women to honour the goddess Hera. Later on only free men who could speak Greek were allowed to take part. In the beginning, there was only one event, a sprint the length of the stadium, and later on this was lengthened to approximately a 3 mile race.

As the years passed, more sports were added, boxing, wrestling and so on. The sporting events were very brutal and vicious (maybe because it was male orientated?) and the competitors competed in the nude as a celebration of the male body, which was covered in olive oil to make it more appealing to the crowds.

The ancient Olympic Games went on for about 1200 years and were abolished because of religious reasons by Theosodius I, a Christian Roman emperor.

Modern Olympic Games

About 1500 later, a Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic Games. He did this purely because he wanted to revive interest in sport. At a meeting of the Union des Sports Athlétiques in Paris on November 25, 1892, Coubertin stated,

Let us export our oarsmen, our runners, our fencers into other lands. That is the true Free Trade of the future; and the day it is introduced into Europe the cause of Peace will have received a new and strong ally. It inspires me to touch upon another step I now propose and in it I shall ask that the help you have given me hitherto you will extend again, so that together we may attempt to realise [sic], upon a basis suitable to the conditions of our modern life, the splendid and beneficent task of reviving the Olympic Games.

After lobbying for a few years, de Coubertin got enough interest in the idea of the Olympic Games’ return that a committee was formed: The International Olympic Committee.

History of the Modern Games

The first games in 1896 was sponsored by a wealthy architect and was a huge success, much more so than the second games in 1900, which was a failure as it was part of the World Exhibition and poorly organised. The next event was in 1904 and not hugely successful because of a fight between the two proposed host cities, Chicago and St Louis.

In 1908 London was the host city, and almost failed because of bickering between the British and other countries regarding the rules and regulations. The Swedes had a well organised Olympics in 1912. Although all wars were interrupted with a truce due to the Games, this tradition was not honoured with the modern Olympics. The 1916 Games were cancelled due to the World War 1. Because of the devastation of the First World War, the 1920 games was not a big success and was held in Belgium. The losers of the war were not allowed to compete. This included Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey.

In 1924, both the Summer and Winter Olympics were held in Paris. Although this Olympics Games was counted as a success, again the behaviour of the host country led to some countries lobbying for the end of all Olympics.

The 1928 Olympics was held in Amsterdam and was successful, but moving across the Atlantic in 1932, the Great Depression put a damper on the Games. The games in Los Angeles saw the introduction of a photo-finish camera and automatic timing.

When Berlin was chosen for the 1936 Olympics, the rest of the world was still oblivious to the potential danger of Hitler’s coming to power. Although the Jews asked for a boycott, it went ahead anyway. It was the first televised Olympics.

Japan won the hosting for the 1940 Olympics, but it was revoked when they invaded China. In 1948, London got the chance to host the Games, although public opinion was that it was a waste of money. It went well, although a few communist athletes used this opportunity to defect to the west, as this was the first time the communist countries were allowed to compete.

Scandinavia did such a good job of organising the Olympics in 1952 that some people suggested that all future games be hosted there. It was also the first year USSR took part.

The Games in 1956 moved to Melbourne, Australia but was hampered by two boycotts and was not well attended. The Pope was one of the most famous spectators in 1960 at the Rome Olympics.

1964, and the Games in Tokyo went on without a hitch. In 1968, in Mexico, the Olympics was disrupted by political unrest and strikes. It also saw the introduction of sex tests for women.

Montreal hosted the Games in 1976, Africa refused to take part and due to bad planning, the city of Montreal suffered great financial loss.

In 1980, the boycotts went on when Jimmy Carter pulled the American teams out of the Moscow Olympics in protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Moscow spectators also rivalled the French as the worst spectators in the history of the games.

Following ‘tradition’ the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles was boycotted in a revenge action by the Soviets. It didn’t stop the Games as going down in history as very successful!

1988 saw the Games in Seoul, which was boycotted by North Korea and a few other nations, but they got top marks for hospitality.

1992 in Barcelona, South Africa took part again. Estonia and Latvia took part as independent states and after all the political upheaval of the past Olympics, it was a welcome relief to all participants.

1996 took place in Atlanta and it was the first time the Summer games was staged in a different year than the Winter games. Sidney hosted the 2000 games and it was only the second time that the games were hosted in the Southern Hemisphere.

The Olympics went home in 2004 to Greece, Athens and was hugely successful with 201 countries taking part. The motto was “Welcome Home”. The 2008 Olympics took part in Beijing. More than 11000 athletes from 204 National Olympic Committees took part in this event. China also won the most gold medals (51). There was criticism about the host city, because of China’s human rights record and there were some protests during the torch relay.

Symbols of the Olympic Games

The Olympic Flag

Obviously not an event purely created to honour Zeus, the modern Games got a brand new flag, created by none other than Mr de Coubertin in 1914. The five rings interconnecting on the white background symbolises the five continents, Antarctica is excluded, and the Americas are considered one continent. The colours are from left to right: blue, yellow, black, green, and red.

This flag, still used today, was flown in 1920 for the first time. The first flag lasted until 1984, when it was replaced with a new one made from Korean silk.

The Olympic Motto

Citius, Altius, Fortius ("Swifter, Higher, Stronger")

The Olympic Oath

"In the name of all competitors, I promise that we shall take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules that govern them, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honour of our teams."

The Olympic Creed

"The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."

The Olympic Flame

The flame actually originated in the ancient Olympic Games. In ancient Greece the flame was ignited by the sun and kept burning for the length of the games, but the relay of the flame we now know as part of the games, was instituted in 1936, where the flame is ignited at the original ancient site in Greece and a team of runners carry it to the venue of the current Olympic Games.

The flame signifies purity (amongst other things) and serves as a link from the ancient games to the modern games.

The flame is lighted several months before the event at the original venue in Greece and eleven women (representing the vestal virgins) perform a ceremony. It is then transported to the host city by a series of athletes, and it is great honour to be asked to be part of this relay.

The Olympic Medals

The last pure gold medals were awarded in 1912, so the athletes today do not receive a pure gold medal, but rather a gold plated medal! Each host country designs the medals for the games held in their country that year. The medals must be at least 3 mm thick and 60 mm in diameter and the gold and silver must be mostly silver with the gold medal covered with 6g of gold.

The Olympic Procession

In another nod to the ancient games and its origin, the procession is always led by the Greeks, followed by the other countries in alphabetical order (according to the home language of that country). The host country is always the last team out.

The Olympic Hymn

Composed by two Greeks, Spyros Samaras and Kostis Palamas, was played from the first modern games and from 1957 it is the official hymn for the games.

The lyrics of the version sung in English are as follows:

Olympian flame immortal

Whose beacon lights our way

Emblaze our hearts with the fires of hope

On this momentous day

As now we come across the world

To share these Games of old

Let all the flags of every land

In brotherhood unfold

Sing out each nation, voices strong

Rise up in harmony

All hail our brave Olympians

With strains of victory

Olympic light burn on and on

O'er seas and mountains and plains

Unite, inspire, bring honour

To these ascending games

May valour reign victorious

Along the path of golden way

As tomorrow's new champions now come forth

Rising to the fervent spirit of the game

Let splendour pervade each noble deed

Crowned with glory and fame

And let fraternity and fellowship

Surround the soul of every nation

Oh flame, eternal in your firmament so bright

Illuminate us with your everlasting light

That grace and beauty and magnificence

Shine like the sun

Blazing above

Bestow on us your honour, truth and love

South Africa

When did South Africa take part?

South Africa was there at the 1904 Olympics and competed strongly until 1960, when we were barred because of politics.

We were welcomed back into the Olympic Games in 1990 after the fall of apartheid. We also took part in the Winter Olympics in 1960 and from 1994 and the Paralympics from 1964 to 1976, when we were kicked out until 1994.

Our medals up to now

South Africa has won 74 medals up to now (9/8/2012):

* Swimming – 15
* Athletics – 23
* Boxing – 19
* Tennis – 6
* Cycling – 8
* Rowing – 2
* Shooting – 1.

In this group there were 23 gold, 25 silver and 26 bronze medals.

Bibliography