

1896-1976: 80th anniversary of the first Olympic Games

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To commemorate this anniversary we are printing "Athens 1896", the first part of the lecture given by Mr. Otto Szymiczek to the 15th Session of the International Olympic Academy at Olympia. We would sincerely like to thank the author, who is Dean of the IOA, Technical Adviser of the Hellenic Olympic Committee, and President of the International Athletic Coaches Federation.

The ancient Olympic Games were recorded historically for the first time in the year 776 BC when the Elian Koroebos won the first Olympiad. These Games were held in Olympia, as testified by ancient writers who also mention the truce agreement which was signed in 884 BC between the Elians, the Pisans and the Spartans. After a glorious history which lasted for 1169 years the ancient Olympic Games were then abolished by a decree of Theodosius the Great.

The idea of reviving the ancient Olympic Games on a world-wide scale was not only due to a few cultivated admirers of the Greek past, but the result of the whole pedagogic ideology bequeathed to Europe by the classicism of the 17th century and the humanism of the 18th century through the dissemination and cultivation of the classic Hellenic education. When peace prevailed again in Europe after the Napoleonic wars, physical exercise began to play a major role in European customs, and gymnastic and athletic festivals began to be held in France, England, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, etc. The movement continually growing up around sport led to the idea that the beneficial effect of exercise could be used for the overall education of youth.

ORIGIN

The French historian and pedagogue, Pierre de Coubertin, understood the value of the

educational elements which are contained in the Olympic idea. He conceived the idea of reviving the Olympic Games and devoted his whole life to the development of Olympism. He presented his ideas for the first time in November 1892 with a concrete proposal for the revival of the Olympic Games.

This year, 80 years have elapsed since the time Coubertin, on 23rd June 1894, at the first International Congress of the Representatives of Sports Associations in the amphitheatre of the Sorbonne, succeeded in obtaining a unanimous decision on the revival of the historic institution of the Olympic Games. At the proposal of the Greek representative, the scholar Dimitrios Vikelas, it was decided that the first Games would be held in Athens in 1896. At this same meeting the first International Olympic Committee was set up with Dimitrios Vikelas as President, Pierre de Coubertin as Secretary General, and the following members: Ernest Callot (France), General de Boutowski (Russia), Colonel Victor Balck (Sweden), Prof. William M. Sloane (United States), Jiri Guth-Jarkovsky (Bohemia), Fr. Franz Kemény (Hungary), Lord Ampthill (Great Britain), C. Herbert (Great Britain), Prof. J. B. Zubiatur (Argentina), Leonard A. Cuff (New Zealand), Count Lucchesi Palli (Italy) and Count Maxime de Bousies (Belgium).

Coubertin initially wanted the first Olympic Games to be held in Paris in 1900, because he wished to combine the celebration of the Games with the world exhibition, scheduled for that year in order to give world-wide promotion to the Olympic idea. However, the proposal of the Greek Vikelas was accepted by the representatives at the Congress because it was thought that the revived Games should begin their new course through history in the country in which they were born, and Athens would constitute a strong link between the historic past and the new era.

PREMIERS JEUX OLYMPIQUES INTERNATIONAUX

ATHÈNES 1896

SOUS LA PRÉSIDENCE

DE S. A. R. LE PRINCE HÉRITIER DE GRÈCE

PROGRAMME

PREMIÈRE JOURNÉE

LUNDI 6 AVRIL

à 11 heures P. M.

STADE. OUVERTURE DES JEUX OLYMPIQUES.
Jeux Athlétiques.

LE SOIR

Retraite des Musiques Militaires et des bandes des Sociétés Philharmoniques.
Retraite aux flambeaux par les Corporations de la Ville

DEUXIÈME JOURNÉE

MARDI 7 AVRIL

10 heures A. M. ZAPPION. Assises (courretable et épée).
3 heures P. M. STADE-Jeux Athlétiques.

LE SOIR

Illumination de l'Acropole

TROISIÈME JOURNÉE

MERCREDI 8 AVRIL

10 h. 1/2 A. M. Inauguration des Salles du Tir-Commencement du Tir.
(Le tir sera continué les jours suivants)

4 heures P. M. VELODROME. Course de 100 kilomètres. Lawn-Tennis.

QUATRIÈME JOURNÉE

JEUDI 9 AVRIL

3 heures P. M. STADE. Gymnastique.
STADE-Grand Concert des Sociétés Philharmoniques réunies

CINQUIÈME JOURNÉE

VENDREDI 10 AVRIL

3 heures P. M. STADE-Jeux Athlétiques. Course de Marathon.

LE SOIR

AU PIRÉE. FÊTE VENÉTIENNE DANS LE PORT

9 h. 1/2 P. M. Illumination de la Ville, du Port et des collines environnantes

10 heures P. M. Retraite aux flambeaux.

10 h. 1/2 P. M. Feux d'artifice dans le port.

SIXIÈME JOURNÉE

SABEDI 11 AVRIL

10 h. 1/2 A. M. Concours de natation dans le port de Zea.

3 heures P. M. VELODROME-Courses de 2 et 10 kilomètres.

VELODROME-Continuation du Lawn-Tennis.

SEPTIÈME JOURNÉE

DIMANCHE 12 AVRIL

3 heures P. M. N. PHALÈRE. Grand Concert. Yachting. Course de Marathon des Cyclistes. Arrivée au Velodrome.

LE SOIR

Retraite aux flambeaux

HUITIÈME JOURNÉE

LUNDI 13 AVRIL

10 heures A. M. N. PHALÈRE. Régates. Embarcations des Sociétés.

3 heures P. M. Embarcations des navires de guerre.

LE SOIR

Illumination des Monuments de l'Acropole.

NEUVIÈME JOURNÉE

MARDI 14 AVRIL

3 heures P. M. STADE. Clôture des Jeux et proclamation des vainqueurs

Tous les soirs illumination de la ville et Musiques sur les Places.

Le Comité se réserve le droit de modifier le Programme en cas de besoin.

Athènes le 1 Avril 1896.

Par ordre de S. A. R. le Prince Héritier.

Le Secrétaire général.

TIMOLEON PHILIMON

PREPARATION

The idea of the revival of the Games was accepted by the Greek people with great enthusiasm. The Greek press praised the Congress of Paris for its decision. However the Government, headed by Prime Minister Harilaos Trikoupi, faced with the responsibility of organising this major international event at a time when it was plagued with considerable financial difficulties and on the brink of bankruptcy, refused any commitment and rejected the proposal. There followed a social and political uproar and the whole idea was in jeopardy. Coubertin arrived in Athens in November 1894; he convened a meeting of sports officials and set up an Organising Committee to which he entrusted the task of preparing and holding the Games. But the Organising Committee, influenced by the opposition and the fears of the Government, remained inactive and many of its members resigned. Crown Prince Constantine (1868-1923), grandfather of the sailing gold medalist at the Rome Olympic Games in 1960, decided to take matters in hand. He set up a new 12-member Committee under his chairmanship, and it held its first meeting on 13th January 1895.

In order to find the necessary funds for the organisation and the construction of sports facilities, the Committee organised collections inside the country and among the Greeks living abroad. For the reconstruction of the ancient Panathenean Stadium in marble the Greek Georgios Averof (1818-1899) donated 920,000 drs and the architect Anastasios Metaxas designed the plans.

The sale of the first Olympic stamps in the world brought in a sum of 400,000 drs. These stamps are of great value today to collectors and a unique collection can be found in the International Olympic Academy's Museum of the Modern Olympic Games in the village of Olympia. Vast sums were also collected from the sale of artistic commemorative medals and from gate-receipts.

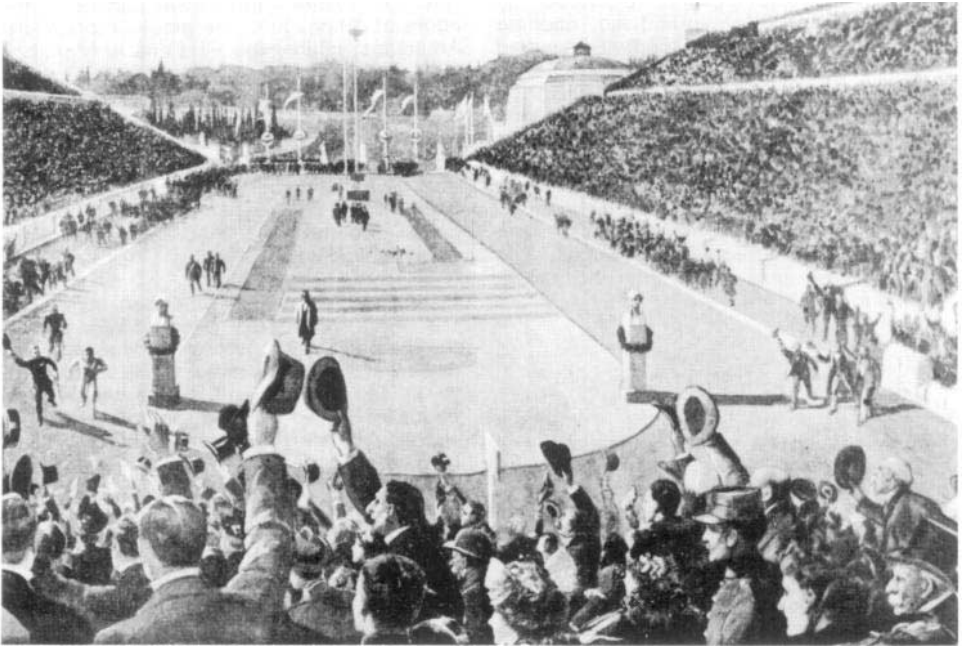
From the very beginning the Hellenic Olympic Committee met all organisation problems with decisiveness and promptitude due to its experience in staging regional Olympic, Pan-Hellenic and other games in previous years. In record time, only 14 months, all the committees managed to fulfil their allotted tasks by intensive work and real dedication. The programme of the Games was prepared, and the rules for the various events and circulars were issued in three languages, English, French and Greek.

A velodrome was built at Neon Phaleron and a shooting range in Kallithea, together with several other facilities for the organisation of the 43 events of the nine sports on the programme. Track and field events, gymnastics, wrestling and weightlifting were to be held at the Panathenean Stadium, shooting at the new Kallithea shooting range, fencing in the Zappeion exhibition building, swimming in the bay of Zea at Piraeus, cycling events in the new Neon Phaleron velodrome and tennis at the Athens tennis club, near the temple of Olympian Zeus. The restoration of the ancient Panathenean Stadium with marble from Mount Penteli near Athens was a real technical feat. The lower tier was completed within 14 months. The upper tier was perfunctorily arranged with wooden seats and the marble reconstruction was completed after the Games. The ancient Panathenean Stadium was first built in 329 BC. Heracleitus, son of Athmoneus, repaired it in 250 BC. During the 2nd century AD the Stadium was renovated and richly decorated by the Athenian sophist, Herod, son of Atticus. He also built the "Theatre of Herod Atticus" at the foot of the Acropolis, and he decorated the stadium of Delphi; his wife, Regilla, built the aqueduct by the Altis of Olympia.

311 athletes from the following 13 countries participated in the first Olympiad of Athens: Australia (1), Austria (4), Bulgaria (1), Chile (1), Denmark (4), Germany (19), France (19), Greece (230), Great Britain (8), Sweden (1), Switzerland (1), Hungary (8), USA (14). The large majority of foreign athletes came to the Games on their own initiative and at their own expense since very few countries had organised National Olympic Committees.

The first Olympic Games of the modern era began in Athens on 24th March 1896—5th April by the new calendar—Easter Sunday, with the unveiling of the marble statue of the benefactor Georgios Averof, erected in the square in front of the Panathenean Stadium, the work of the talented Greek sculptor Georgios Vrontos. On the following day, 25th March 1896—the day of the Greek national holiday—80,000 people gathered in the stadium, on the tiers and in the passages, and thronged the hills surrounding the stadium, the square in front of it and the adjacent streets.

After the arrival of the royal family, the Chairman of the Organising Committee,



1896 - *The Olympic Stadium*



Crown Prince Constantine, delivered an inspired speech. The grandiose opening ceremony of the Games of the first Olympiad deeply moved the crowds inside and outside the stadium. King George I declared the Games open and then the Olympic Hymn was played, a composition by the musician Spyros Samaras on a poem by the Greek national poet, Costis Palamas. The large choir and the bands of the army, navy, municipality of Athens and the provinces were conducted by the composer himself. The effect was so impressive that the crowd demanded an encore.

THE COMPETITIONS

At the end of the Hymn, the trumpeters sounded the arrival of the contestants and the beginning of the Games. The first event was the 100 metres in three heats. Then came the triple jump, won by the American James Connolly with 13.71 m., who was thus the first Olympic victor of the modern Games. His performance was written on a special board while the American flag was hoisted on a high pole at the entrance of the stadium.

During the first Olympic Games, only the names of the first and second winners were given. The first received a diploma, a silver medal and an olive wreath, the second a diploma, a bronze medal and a laurel wreath. All participating athletes received a commemorative medal. The winners' medal was designed by the French sculptor Jules Chaplain, the commemorative medal by the Greek sculptor and engraver, Nikiphoros Lytras and the diploma by the famous Greek painter, Nicolaos Gyzis. All the prizes were presented by King George I on the last day of the Games (the tenth day), 3rd April.

Among the sports events on the programme, Greek discus throwing and the marathon race were held for the first time. The rules for Greek discus throwing were drawn up on the basis of a description by Philostratos in his work "Eikones" in the 2nd century AD. The marathon race was introduced on the proposal of Michel Bréal who also offered a special prize for the winner. Such an event was not included in the programme of the ancient Games. The longest distance that was run in Olympia was the 24 stadia (about 4,500 m.) of the dolichos race. The French writer and philhellene, Michel Bréal, was inspired by the historic event of the

Athenian soldier who arrived panting in the agora of Athens after the great victory of the Athenians against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC) and after shouting the words "Rejoice, we have won", died, and Bréal proposed that a long-distance race be held from Marathon to Athens. Coubertin accepted the proposal and the event caused great enthusiasm among the crowds of the first Olympiad. Today, the marathon race is considered the most important event of the Olympic Games.

The superiority of the American athletes in the track and field events was evident throughout the competitions. The most important American athletes were Burke (100 m. in 12 seconds and 400 m. in 54.2 seconds), Curtis (110 m. hurdles in 17.6 seconds), Clark (high jump with 1.81 m. and long jump with 6.35 m.), Hoyt (pole vault), Connolly (triple jump with 13.71 m.) and Garrett (discus with 29.15 m. and shot put with 11.22 m.). The Australian Flack won the 800 m. and 1500 m. races and the Greek Spiridon Louys the marathon race.

It is true that the performances achieved during the Games were not in any way spectacular; world records at that time were at much higher levels. Of course no comparison can be made with present records because of the great progress achieved in the field of training and preparation and the improvement in technical facilities, tracks, etc.

As regards performances during the Athens Games it should be stressed in particular that the shape of the track of the ancient stadium could hardly contribute to good results, especially during the races, because of the sharp turns and the difference of 1.90 m. in level existing between the entrance and the opposite end of the stadium. In addition the track had just been completed and could not provide sufficient resistance to the runners. There was a reason why the ancient stadium was built with these sharp turns; the ancient Greeks were not interested in records and performances but in the Games and the competition, and they wanted to allow the crowds of spectators to be close to the athletes, to feel and share their effort.

Weightlifting included two events: lifting with one hand and lifting with two hands. The events were won by the Englishman Elliott and the Dane Jensen. Wrestling was

held for only one class, which was won by the German Schumann. The Frenchmen and Greeks distinguished themselves in fencing and cycling, while the shooting events were won by the Greeks and the American Paine brothers. A marathon cycle race was also held, over a distance of 87 km, won by the Greek Constantinidis, as well as a 12-hour cycle race won by the Austrian Schmall. The German athletes won most of the gymnastic events, but the Swiss Zutter won the rings. The Hungarian Hajos won the swimming event and the Englishman Boland was the winner in lawn tennis. The rowing and sailing events were cancelled due to inclement weather, as were the cricket and water polo events for lack of participation.

During the 1896 Olympics many athletes entered for several events, often unrelated to one another. At that time athletes did not specialise in one event as they do today and some peculiar facts could thus be observed. It is said that the American athlete Garrett, the winner of the discus event, only learned to throw the discus a few days before the beginning of the Games. He succeeded in beating his Greek teachers by a few centimetres, thanks to an excellent throw, to the dismay of the Greek throwers Paraskevopoulos and Versis, who however impressed the crowd with their plastic and rhythmic movements.

The Dane Vigo Jensen won the weightlifting with one hand and obtained the second place in weightlifting with two hands and pistol shooting at 30 m., the third place in shooting with military rifles at 300 m., and the fourth place in rope climbing. The Dane Holger Nielsen for his part won the third place in both pistol shooting and fencing with sabres. The German Carl Schumann, in spite of his small build, obtained four first places: three in gymnastics and one in wrestling.

The athletes entered for the various events rather perfunctorily, on the spot, without any of the strict formalities which are required today. This explains how the Englishman John Boland won the lawn tennis singles while being in Athens as a tourist. On hearing that the Games were to be held he decided to take part. He also won the doubles with the German Friedrich Thraun.

The American Thomas Curtis, winner of the 110 m. hurdles, recounted that he had seen a French athlete who arrived at the starting

line wearing white gloves. When he asked him why he wore gloves, the Frenchman answered: "Of course I wear gloves, since I shall be running in front of the King." Curtis then asked him in what event he would be competing and the answer was "in the 100 m. and the marathon race."

"And how do you train for such different events?" The Frenchman answered: "One day I run a short distance at a very high speed and the next day a long distance very slowly."

CONCLUSION

All the events were held with exemplary order under the continuous applause of the spectators. The marble tiers of the Panathenian Stadium were completely full for the whole length of the Games.

During the ten-day celebrations several artistic events were also held, performances of ancient drama ("Medea", "Antigone"), a torch procession, receptions, concerts, and the whole city of Athens was lavishly illuminated at night.

The first Olympic Games of the modern era were so successful that the fact that they were almost cancelled during the preparatory stage was soon forgotten. Pierre de Coubertin saw that his expectations were fulfilled and with renewed courage started to plan the future of the Games.

If one were to compare the performances of today's athletes with those of Athens, one would immediately observe the primitive nature of the first Olympic Games. It is however improbable that the world will ever again witness such unbridled enthusiasm, the frenzy of the Greek crowds which relived in the days of March-April 1896 their historic past, 2,500 years old.

In 1896 Athens marked the glorious beginning of the history of the modern Olympic Games.

O. S.

