

The Victory Ceremony of the Olympic Games

by Nina K. Pappas



Speed Skater Eric Heiden (USA) between Norwegians Kay Arne Stenshjemmet (left) and Tom Öxholm, 2nd and 3rd in the 500 m.

While the athletic events fulfill partially Coubertin's *raison d'être* for the revival of the Olympic Games, Coubertin believed that *"It is primarily through the ceremonies that the Olympiad must distinguish itself from a mere series of world championships. The Olympiad calls for a solemnity and a ceremonial..."*

In addition, the ceremonies should have, he believed, an appearance of true nobility and eurythmy. To accomplish this, Coubertin drew on his own understanding and appreciation of art forms. He frequently chose even the music and lighting and commented on the clothing or movement patterns. He attempted to use ceremony to establish 'and inner harmony and a programme completely aesthetic in nature. The rituals for the Opening, Closing, and Victory Ceremonies have evolved gradually over the years into their present memorable form. The Opening and Closing Ceremonies will be treated separately while

the development and present form of the Victory Ceremony will be discussed here.

Honouring of the victors began in antiquity. In the modern Olympic Games until 1932, with the exception of 1904 and 1920, the victors were honoured during the Closing Ceremony. This custom began during the first Games in 1896. On the last day of the Games in Athens, all the Olympic victors were gathered by a herald; and King George I presented a diploma, silver medal, and an olive wreath to each first place winner, and a diploma, bronze medal and laurel wreath to each second place winner. The medal was designed by the French sculptor, Jules Chaplain; the diploma, by the Greek painter, Nicolaos Gyzis. It is also noteworthy that when the American, James Connolly, won the triple jump and became 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 to the stadium.

In 1900 there was no official presentation of awards. "The medals were sent to the victors many months after their return to their respective countries (Szymiczek 1975)."

In 1904 at St. Louis, the prizes were awarded immediately after each event when the champions received, in addition to their medals, cups or trophies. Some of these were considered to be quite magnificent.

It was in Athens in 1906 that the awards were standardised with gold, silver, and bronze medals presented to the first, second, and third place winners. Gold medal winners also received an olive branch and a diploma.

In addition, the national flags of the three winners were raised on three poles (Szymiczek 1975).

The Victory Ceremony was slightly improved in 1908 in London where Queen Alexandra presented gold medals to the first place winners with other royal ladies presenting silver and bronze medals to the second and third place winners. The winners also received, from Windsor Forest, a sprig of royal oak as the band played "See the Conquering Hero Comes." Coubertin, generally, was dissatisfied, and wrote in 1910:

"Hitherto the distribution of awards has taken place in the most vulgar and hideous fashion, with the laureates appearing in town clothes, in disorder and without concern for aesthetics.

London innovated slightly. Most of the young people appeared in the costume of their respective events and this simple fact completely transformed the appearance of the ceremony."

A herald announced the names of the winners in 1912. King Gustavus then presented the first place winners with a gold medal and an oak wreath; the crown prince and Prince Carl, the medals for second and third place respectively. In addition, the King also presented trophies donated by Coubertin and European royalty for the marathon, pentathlon, decathlon, military horsemanship, horse-riding, horse-jumping, and the modern pentathlon.

Many athletes did not wait for their prizes in 1920. While the main sports were completed by August 23rd, King Albert and his sons did not present the prizes until August 30th.

Coubertin expressed his views on the Victory Ceremony again in 1922.

"...A dangerous reef, on which it is difficult not to run aground; a ceremony which usually lacks dignity and into which banality forever threatens to intrude..."

Great strides toward the improvement of the Ceremony were made in 1932 in Los Angeles where it was held each day and included the flag raising along with the presentation of medals. The platform with the three steps for the winners was utilised for the first time.

When the three winners of each event appeared before the tribune of honour in 1936, they received medals and a small oak tree in an earthen pot with the inscription, "Grow in honour of victory. Inspire to further deeds." They were also crowned with a laurel wreath by German girls.

Later, it was decided that since the differences in achievement among the competitors was usually negligible, in addition to the medals accorded the first three winners, the first six winners would be awarded diplomas.

The Organising Committee has the responsibility of providing all the necessary awards.

The protocol for the Victory Ceremony as prescribed in the "Olympic Charter" is as follows : The President of the IOC (or his designate) accompanied by the President of the IF (or his designate) concerned shall present the medals immediately after the event at the site of the competition if possible. The winners, dressed in their official uniforms, shall stand on the stadium facing the stand of honour. The first place winner shall be slightly above the second who is on his right, and the third who is on his left. The flag of the winner's delegation shall be hoisted on the central flagpole and those of the second and third on adjoining flagpoles on the right and on the left as they face the arena. Meanwhile, and abbreviated version of the anthem of the winner's delegation is played while the three competitors and the spectators shall face the flags.

Modifications may be made to the Victory Ceremony in the future due to the concern that the playing of the national anthems lends too much nationalism to the Games.

The pros and cons of this have been debated many times and will not be repeated here.

Following the close of the Games, the victors not only become prominent internationally, but their names are engraved for posterity on the walls of the stadium. This was done for the first time in Berlin in 1936 at Coubertin's request, for he believed this would serve "...as a witness to their deeds", and the victors "...should be ensured of the civic reward which antiquity conceived and realised (Diem, 1964)."

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