

OLYMPIC LAURELS

At the meeting of the International Society of Olympic Historians (ISOH) during the Games of the XXVII Olympiad in Sydney, a participant asked why the IOC does not recommend other awards additional to the medals any longer like, for example, the little oak trees at the Games of the XI Olympiad in Berlin in 1936. When the discussion went to the oak trees as political symbols, I gave a short outline about the history of 'Olympic Laurel' on the basis of my research on the history of awards and victory ceremonies,

Antiquity

To all appearances there are two phases of the victory ceremony at Olympia that have to be distinguished. Immediately after the end of the competition, the winner - and only the winner(!) - is proclaimed by the herald at the crowd of spectators, after a trumpet player has attracted the spectators' attention and silenced them. During the ceremony, a woollen bandage (Tainia) is put around the winner's temples and a palm branch given as a sign of victory. The presentation of the woollen bandage, that could also be put around the femoral, is often represented on red or black attic vases.

The emotions during this first victory ceremony were surely greater than during a second one, which took place the fifth or sixth day in the course of the ending celebration programme in Olympia. This honouring was closely connected to the awarding of an olive wreath. Pausanias refers to the olive branch two times in his work *'Description of Greece'*. In the description of the temple of Zeus, he mentions a tripod which was placed in the anteroom. It had served for the storage of

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the wreaths for the winners until a table not further described was used for it, which was so well-known that it is named 'the table'. Later, in chapter 20 of the fifth book, Pausanias speaks of the table again, that was stored among other votive presents at the temple of Hera. It was made of gold and ivory. Presumably, the crowning of the victorious athletes took place in the anteroom of the temple of Zeus. At another point, it is reported where the crowns came from. They are descended from a wild olive tree (kōtinós) that was growing at the wall of the temple of Zeus.



An athlete with the regalia of victory: chaplet of olive and woollen bandages.

Pindar ascribes the planting of the wild olive tree to Heros Herakles, and it can be withdrawn from the antique Pindar commentary that the cutting of the branches of this tree was done by a boy with a golden sickle. The meaning of the ceremony emerges from the care which was exercised to choose the mower. Both parents of the boy had to be alive.

Athens 1896

When Baron Pierre de Coubertin restored the Olympic Games in 1896, he used the antique role model. But the antique victory symbols became only additions. The winners at the first Olympic Games of the modern era in 1896 got the silver medal as highest award, the second received copper. In addition, a diploma was awarded to the winner, kept in a roller, which was held in the 'Greek' colours, blue and white. Besides, the winner got an olive branch, the second a laurel branch and some outstanding athletes received special cups. The honouring of all laureates took place on 15 April (according to the then in force Julianic calendar it was 3 April) at 10.30 in the Panathenic Stadium, where a tribune in honour of King George I had been erected. Together with the Organizing Committee and the IOC, the athletes lined up in front of it, and after the herald's call climbed up the stairs one by one in order to be decorated by the King.

London 1908

At the victory ceremony at the end of the 'stadium days' on 25 July, the gold medal winners were lead to the loge in a long parade with musical accompaniment. They received their medals sep-



The American Thomas Burke, winner of the 100m and 400m race, with his rewards: diplomas, medals, cups and branches of the olive.

arately from Queen Alexandra. On leaving the loge, they got their diploma and a bouquet of oak foliage from *Windsor Park*, decorated with a silk Union Jack flag, donated by the King. The Official Report gives the explanation that this was done in analogue to the olive branch of the Games in Greece. The oak was supposed to represent Great Britain.

Stockholm 1912

At the victory ceremony in Stockholm in 1912, oaks also played a role. During the closing ceremony, the medal winners, dressed in festive clothes, entered the stadium in three lines: The Olympic champions in the middle, flanked by the silver and bronze medal winners. They gathered up in front of the provided podiums. The King himself handed over the gold medals and an oak wreath and, as the case may be, the corresponding challenge cup. In doing so, the King was standing on a podium, right in front of the Royal loge in the interior of the stadium. His



The statue 'The victorious athlete', given to Olympic medallists at the Games in Antwerp in 1920.

slightly raised position relieved the 'attachment' of the victory wreaths. Those who finished in second placed received their awards from the Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf and the third placed from Prince Carl, the King's brother, yet they got a 'one and only' prize - a medal.

From Antwerp 1920

to Los Angeles 1932
During the Games of the VII Olympiad in Antwerp in 1920, the IOC awarded the numeral challenge cups, symbolically donated since 1906. Afterwards, they were drawn back completely and stored in the Olympic Museum of



A Sèvres vase produced for the Olympic champions at the Games in Paris in 1924.

Lausanne. For the Organizing Committee of Antwerp one medal was not enough. Each of the single winners, both winners of the tennis double and the steersmen of the victorious rowing boats got in addition a little statuette, 'The victorious athlete' by the sculptor Léandre Grandmoulin, that holds a crown of laurel in his upraised right hand. Four years later in Paris the winners received, in addition to the medal, a vase from the 'manufacture nationale de Sèvres'. During the Games in 1928 in Amsterdam, and then in Los Angeles in 1932, the victorious athletes received only the 'permanent' winner medal, created by Guiseppe Cassioli.

Berlin 1936

As never before, the people responsible for the Games of the XI Olympiad in Berlin tried to draw parallels to antiquity. The Organizing Committee decorated the medal winners with victorious wreaths, which were given to them in accompanied by a plaquette and a certificate during the official ceremony by

Culture

the hostesses work virgins". This oak crown, open on the front side, were true copies of the victorious wreaths, which were awarded to the Roman charioteers. The execution was taken over by the Berlin garden company Rothe, which delivered the fresh wreaths each day at the fixed hour. It meant something fairly new and a witted honour to the winners that Rothe's proposal, to give all the winners a small oak tree as a reminder of their success in Berlin and as a symbol of German hospitality, had been realized. Annual small seedlings, from the oak *quercus pedunculata*, growing in the Holstein marsh area, and were placed in horticultural cultivation from the spring of 1935 in pots decorated with the Olympic Bell and a banner stating 'Grow in honour of the victory - call for

further deeds'. After the presentation to the winners, they were packed in handy boxes, particularly manufactured for easy transport, in order to go on a journey abroad. The planting pot had been created by Otto Douglas Douglas-Hill, who belonged to the most significant ceramic artists of his time.

In 1934, Carl Diem had written in a press release from Olympia: "*The foliage of the sturdy oaks of the marsh will decorate the winners in the year 1936 not less than the leaves of the Greek olive.*"

From Cortina d'Ampezzo 1956 to Montreal 1976

During the Winter Games, 'laurel' was also awarded in a symbolic way. At the VII Olympic Winter Games in Cortina



The oak planted in 1936 by Toni Merkens, Olympic champion (1km time trial), photographed 60 years later, near the cycling track in Cologne.



The winning team from Finland (3x5km cross country relay) at the VII Olympic Winter Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1956 with medal, diploma, bronzi and edelweiss.

d'Ampezzo in 1956, all medal winners, after leaving the podium, received the so-called *Bronzini*, a little bronze vessel with some edelweiss, from the hostesses who had assisted during the victory ceremony. However, it was not an honour prize of the IOC but a gift of the town where the Games were realized, therefore the presentation took place after leaving the podium.

During the ceremonies at the Games of the XIX Olympiad in Mexico City, the winners received a casket containing an olive branch from Greece, in addition to the gold medal. King Constantine, still an honorary IOC member, had also proposed this additional gift for the Games in Munich in 1972, but this was rejected by the Executive Board and the Session. As in Berlin, the Montreal Organizing Committee presented a sapling again, but this time it was a maple seedling – symbolic to Canada – already packed in wooden cases. Meanwhile, these little seedlings have grown into sturdy trees.

Today - flower bouquets instead of olive branches

For several decades, during the Olympic Winter Games, all medal ceremonies took place on the evening of the competition at the marketplace and flower bouquets were given to the medal winners. The flower bouquet also belonged to the

medal ceremonies of the Games of the Olympiad. Not only were the medals and diplomas designed with much consideration (attention to detail, artistic expertise and symbolism) but also the entire medal ceremony. This care for detail is perfectly illustrated by the example of the flower wreaths of the Games in Sydney: Each flower had its own meaning. In the bouquet there were twelve flowers and herbage: In the centre of the bouquet *Waratah* (*Telopea speciosissima*), the symbol

flower of New South Wales, then *Waxflower*, that grows mainly in western Australia, two yellow *Kangaroo paws*, from the same region, the multicoloured *Bush Games*, named this way because of the Olympic Games, the hybrid flowering *Gravillea Silvia* and *Golden Yul-lo*, which is counted among the oldest plants of the country, *Gravillea baileyana*, which comes from the rainforest of the interior, *Flannel flower* from the sandy soil of the coast, *Billy Buttons*, which grows in the alpine regions, and several *eucalyptus leaves*.

Over 15 florists composed the more than 2,000 identical bouquets, which were created by designers in the years leading up to the Games.

Whether the winners, who threw their bouquets in the crowd after the honouring, would have even done this if they had known with what care and consideration the bouquets had been created?

In four years time, at the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad in Athens, there are again bouquets to be presented during the medal ceremony. With the olive branch already in the logo of the Games, it can be presumed that it will dominate the bouquet as a symbol of connection to the ancient Games.

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Cathy Freeman with medal and bouquet at the victory ceremony after the 400m race in Sydney.