

HISTORY OF THE OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES

In February 2002, amidst the splendour of the Rocky Mountains, the XIX Olympic Winter Games take place in the United States, in Salt Lake City. On this occasion, let us journey back to the past so that we can better understand the formidable evolution of winter sports.

First of all, let us imagine these superb Greek athletes who faced one another in the sanctuary of Olympia, dominated by Mount Kronion, and with the eyes of the judges and their coaches upon them. Once the competition was over, like true professionals, they travelled some 100 kilometres to the centre of Peloponnese, near Tripoli and Kalavrita, to compete in the winter sports arena at an altitude of more than 2,000 metres. Can this, somewhat unusual, hypothesis, of athletes whose bodies were covered with furs and not smothered in oil, using instruments to slide across the snow be validated? We can, indeed, think so when considering the numerous discoveries made by researchers on the subject

The origin of snow sports

According to historical sources, this practice, which we shall already call 'skiing', could be as old as mankind itself. Sliding was an essential means of survival for the individual as it allowed him to move quickly from one place to the next, hunt and emigrate to follow animals or tribes. This tendency was very well represented by Pierre Bruegel the Elder in his painting entitled *"The Hunters in the Snow"* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) which shows men with skis returning from hunting in the foreground.

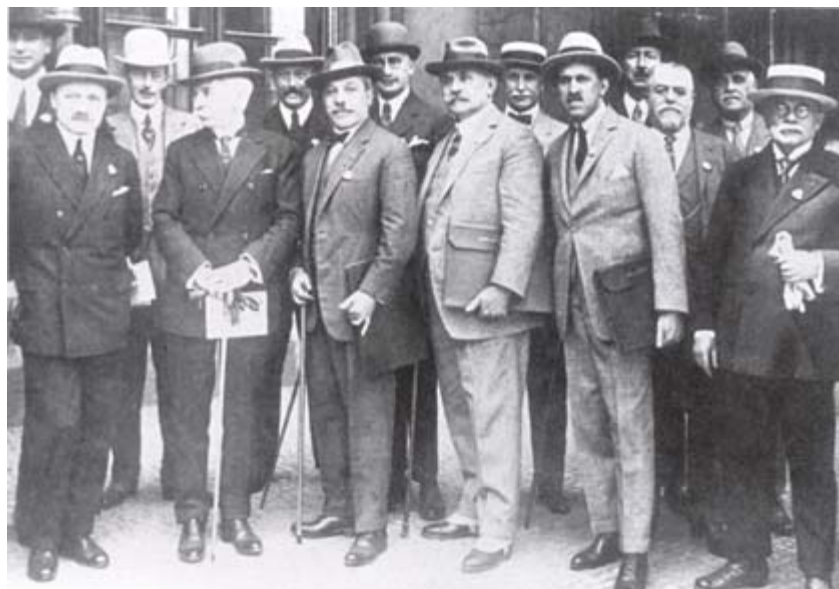
However, the term *winter sport* or *winter game* does not go back to the dawn

by Eric Monnin*



of time because, according to some historians, it appeared in the 1860s. But let us, more precisely, look right back to the start of this practice which appeared almost concomitantly with the birth of humanity. Historical discoveries have allowed researchers to fix a rough date for the appearance of skiing. Cave drawings from the prehistoric age show men wearing skis. Let us remem-

ber, among others, the famous inscriptions discovered at Zalavrouz, on the banks of the White Sea, in Russia, dating from 10,000 to 12,000 BC, where three men on skis are moving with the help of sticks. We can also note that it was in Norway, in peat bogs, that the oldest skis in the world have been discovered, dating from 2,500 BC. On a stone found in Ballingsta, Sweden, dating from 1,050 BC, there is a description written in the ancient runic alphabet of a hunter equipped with skis, a bow and some arrows. Linguists are particularly interested in the appearance of words which characterise the practice of skiing. It is in this way that they discovered that Nomadic tribes, during their different migrations, used this term more than 10,000 years ago. In 456 BC, Herodotus explained that, in order to move from one place to the next with greater ease, certain people slid on 'golden arrows' over vast expanses of



Pierre de Coubertin (2nd from left, 1st row) and several IOC members at the IOC Congress in Prague in 1925.

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snow. In 552, after a voyage in Scandinavia, the historian Procopius of Caesarea described these men who moved around by gliding and called them 'Skridfinnae', which means "gliding Finns".

It was in the 9th century that skis appeared together with a large stick, allowing people to keep their balance. At that time, there were different types of skis. There were often ones which were the same size but were broad, rather like the ones which cross country skiers use today. The skis, covered with animal skin, seal for example, allowed the users to stop sliding backwards on slopes, and push themselves forwards. Another type of ski, more specialised and made from three-metre long boards, was used to glide. Others, much smaller and named *andor*, propelled the individual and were also covered with skin so as not to slide backwards when pushing.

Many stories and legends, particularly in Scandinavia, show this 'gliding' past. Lemminkainen, heroine of a Finnish epic, and Skadi, a ski goddess in Iceland, are part of Scandinavian skiing history. A drawing dating from 1555 shows the goddess Skadi with Njord, the Sea God and Ullr, the Snow God.

The ski, an instrument for moving from one place to the next and hunting, gradually became a means of defence, and from the 12th century, the Scandinavian and Russian armies were equipped with skis. In fact, the military quickly understood the importance and the usefulness of skis. A sketch by A. C. Brooke, dating from 1822, shows the Norwegian army in training. It is moving in several rows, and each soldier is equipped with a pair of skis, broad at the front, narrow at the back, and is carrying a stick to push himself along. The hand left free enables the weapon to be carried.

On this subject, Norway celebrates an event which took place in 1219. At this time, the country was gripped by a



Anna Hubler and Heinrich Burger, Olympic ice skating champions in London in 1908

large-scale civil war between two sides: the partisans of Birkebeiner and those of Bagler. The latter managed to capture King Haakon's son, who was aged two at the time. However, thanks to two talented skiers, Foersten and Skerva, the prince was saved. Alongside this historical 'adventure' can be placed one which took place in Sweden in 1522, and which gave its name to the famous Vasaloppett. At that time, Sweden was occupied by Danish invaders, but found a 'saviour' in the form of Gustave Vasa, who revolted and tried to convince the people of Dalecarlie to join him. His revolt was unsuccessful and he had to flee from Mora and go to Norway. However, the people of Dalecarlie soon realised that, without their leader, their freedom was somewhat compromised. They decided to send two of their best skiers from Mora in search of Vasa. They finally found him at Salen, 90km away. On his return, Vasa succeeded in convincing the people to unite in order to drive out the enemy. The revolt was a success, so much so that the Swedes, as a sign of gratitude, proclaimed Vasa King of Sweden, with the name of Gustave Vasa the First, in 1523.

Like the Norwegians, the Swedes have celebrated this historic event by organising the Vasaloppett since 1920. This

skiing race is held at the same place where Vasa fled, between Salen and Mora. Every year, thousands of competitors take part in the race, which is one of the events of the World Cup for long distance skiing.

Let us now take a look at the interesting accounts of two great travellers, Francesco Negri and Johan Scheffer. The first produced a very detailed painting of people from the north using skis around 1670. The second, in his book *History of Lapland*, in 1678, describes in detail how Laplanders used their skis to travel around. This book, which includes illustrations, describes the Lapp hunter wearing large skis, feet fastened with straps, pushing himself along with a large stick, leaving the other hand free to hold his crossbow. It also describes the sledge pulled by a moose which the Laplander directs in a semi-recumbent position. The Dutch painter Hendrick Avercamp (1585-1634) immortalised, in one of his works, a winter scene where people are having fun on the ice skating and playing by passing a ball between them with sticks-here, we see hockey's ancestor, *bandy*.

The origin of sports disciplines

It took quite a while before sliding games were recognised as sports disciplines. The first sport was curling, in 1607. In 1652 the first ice skating club was created in Edinburgh, Scotland, and in 1763, the first speed skating race took place in England. One then has to go to Scandinavia, and more precisely the region of Telemark, to discover, in 1840, the "flying men" who went ski jumping. Sondre Nordheim's feat was a jump of 30.5 metres. Telemark, this small village near Oslo, Norway, gives its name to a technique which enabled the first Alpine skiers to do turns in order to limit the speed caused by the mountain slope. Faced with the skiing craze and the increase in the number of meetings and competitions, clubs were created. It was in this way, and at this time, that

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the Christiania ski club, which would become a large club in the future, was set up in the Norwegian capital in 1877. The first federations were also created, starting with the Swiss Federation in 1904, then the Norwegian and Swedish Ski Federations in 1908, and the International Ice Hockey Federation.

At the end of the 19th century, skiing was no longer simply a means of moving from one place to the next or defence, but was also a pastime. Moreover, it provided individuals with the opportunity to show their sports prowess. This was the case for Norwegian explorer and oceanographer Fridtjof Nansen who, in 1866, successfully crossed Greenland with five companions. This feat, which the explorer recounts in his book *The First Crossing of Greenland* helped to promote skiing among a wider public. This expedition was certainly successful and, in 1952, during the VI Olympic Winter Games in Oslo, the honour of lighting the Olympic cauldron was given to his grandson, Egil Nansen. Before him, in 1884, Lans Tvorda was victorious in a 220 km race with a time of 21 hours 22 minutes.

These quite extraordinary achievements made skiing, as well as all the other sports linked to it (hockey, figure skating and speed skating) very popular. In 1892, the International Skating Union (ISU) was created, which groups together figure and speed skating.

Olympic recognition

On 23 June 1894, during the Union of French Athletic Associations (USFSA) Congress, Pierre de Coubertin, in the great Sorbonne amphitheatre in Paris (France), announced the establishment of the modern Olympic Games. On this occasion, faced with the popularity of ice sports, the Congress adopted ice skating as an Olympic event. As for skiing, it would have to wait until the Chamonix Games in 1924.

Two years later, the first Olympic Games were staged in Athens from 6 to 15 April



The finish line of the bobsleigh event in Chamonix in 1924.

1896. Some 245 athletes participated in the events. Following the Congress's decisions two years previously, ice skating should have appeared amongst the disciplines on the Games programme. However, this was not the case as it was not possible to provide an artificial rink or frozen lakes. It would perhaps have been wiser to organise these events separately.

There were other attempts made to try to include ice sports in the Games but there were always many difficulties. In 1908, at the Games of the IV Olympiad in London, organised from 27 April to 31 October, ice skating made its debut as an Olympic discipline. Three types of events were organised: men's, women's and pairs. The supremacy of the Swedes, the famous Ulrich Salchow in particular, the Germans and the English could be seen in the individual women's and pairs events. In his *Olympic Memoirs*, Baron Pierre de Coubertin mentions these Games in London which for him were not very satisfactory through being split into two parts: the summer Games and the autumn Games, with skating taking place during the latter. According to Coubertin "this was not an ideal solution, but prejudices existing in England concerning sports seasons had made it necessary".

At the following Games, held from 5 May to 27 July 1912 in Stockholm, figure skating was cancelled. The Scandinavians were completely against organising Winter Games. The Norwegians and the Swedes greatly feared the competition of these Games with those they had organised since 1901, called the *Nordic Games*. Some even suggested calling them the *Winter Games* and numbering them like the Olympic Games. Pierre de Coubertin, in his *Olympic Memoirs*, underlines the difficulties encountered by these *Winter Games*. London, which had an 'ice palace', had been able to organise the events satisfactorily in 1908. However, in 1912, the city of Stockholm anxiously argued that it had no infrastructure to organise the skating events. Thus the Scandinavians avoided the end of the Nordic Games. However, for Pierre de Coubertin, it seemed inevitable that winter sports would be included on the Olympic programme because so many nations practised them. But how could summer and winter sports be included on the same programme? It was not feasible to ask "organising countries of the Olympic Games to erect a mountain range, bought second hand or made specially for the occasion". Pierre de Coubertin thought that a sort of autumn

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cycle needed to be established which was linked to the Summer Games. *"This was clearly the only solution, but full of disadvantages all the same."* During the Games of the VIII Olympiad in 1920, organised from 20 April to 12 September in Antwerp, skating, with its three events, reappeared, accompanied, from that time on, by ice hockey. [...] The Scandinavians were increasingly irritated by these types of events and were opposed to any attempts to integrate winter sports into the Summer

Games. Pierre de Coubertin had a major concern of how to establish equality between each sport. From that time on, winter sports were just as important as summer sports. However, the Norwegians, Finns and Swedes under no circumstances wanted another nation to manage these events. The Scandinavians wanted to maintain their monopoly over snow events through their Northern Games. Moreover, they thought that no-one else was as competent as they were to

organise these Games. During the 7th Olympic Congress in Lausanne, in June 1921, Pierre de Coubertin, set up, very diplomatically, a meeting between Winter Games specialists. Finally, at the end of the Congress, it was decided not to create any Winter Games so as not to offend the Scandinavians, but, simply, to organise a "winter sports week". This was described quite clearly in Pierre de Coubertin's *Olympic Memoirs*: *"Finally it was agreed that France - if it were selected (which was not the case*

Brief history of sports/events on the programme of the Olympic Winter Games

Sports and events	Introduced	Removed	Re-introduced	Demonstration sports events
Bandy*				1952 (M)
Biathlon	1960 (M), 1992 (W)			
Bobsleigh	1924 (M), 2002 (W)	1960	1964	
Sleigh ride				1932 (M)
Curling	1924 (M), 1998 (W)	1928	1998	1932, 1936, 1964, 1988, 1992 (M) 1988, 1992 (W)
Ice hockey	1924 (M), 1998 (W)			
Luge	1964 (M, W)			
Figure skating	1924 (M, W)			
Speed skating, long-track	1924 (M) 1960 (W)			1932 (W)
Speed skating short-track	1992 (M, W)			1988 (M, W)
Military Patrols	1924 (M)			1928, 1936, 1948
Winter pentathlon**				1948 (M)
Skeleton***	1928 (M, W)	1932, 1936, since 1952	1948 and 2002	
Nordic combined	1924 (M, W)			
Ski jumping	1924 (M)			
Freestyle skiing	1992 (moguls/M, W) 1994 (jumps/ M,F)			1988 (moguls/M,W) 1988, 1992 (jumps/M,W)
Alpine skiing	1936 (M, W)			
Cross country skiing	1924 (H), 1952 (W)			
Speed skiing				1992 (M)
Snowboard	1998 (M, W)			
Ski-joring****				1928 (M)

*Bandy: team game similar to ice hockey, played especially in Scandinavian countries.

**Winter pentathlon: 18 km Nordic skiing, shooting, downhill skiing, fencing and horse-riding.

*** Skeleton: discipline controlled, at the time, by the Bobsleigh and Tobogganing International Federation.

****Ski-joring: a pairs event with a skier pulled by a man on horseback.

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as yet) - would be entitled to organise, in Chamonix in 1924, a week of winter sports to which the IOC would give its patronage, but which would not be an actual part of the Games". This decision delighted many countries surrounded by mountains such as Germany and Austria, which showed great enthusiasm for winter sports. Pierre de Coubertin then wrote that "the Winter Games were finally founded in spite of the Scandinavians who ended by abandoning their objection and realising that in view of the roles of Switzerland and Canada in particular they could no longer lay claim to the practical monopoly they had exercised for so long".

The 8th Congress, which took place in Prague from 29 May to 4 June 1925,

was, in fact, a double congress: educational and technical. The Winter Games were on the agenda of the Technical Congress, which gave the victory to Pierre de Coubertin over the Scandinavians. In fact, the International Olympic Committee then recognised the "International Winter Sports Week" as the 1st Olympic Winter Games. Pierre de Coubertin stated that "the Winter Games were a complete victory. Our Scandinavian colleagues, convinced and converted, had completely come round to the idea. I was pleased, having always wanted to see this winter annex duly legalised, but I criticise myself for having allowed a text which could create confusion enter into my codes, in the form of the Winter Games Charter

Any separate numbering should have, on the contrary, been prohibited and these competitions should have been given the number of the current Olympiad."

The Olympic Winter Games were finally recognised in their own right, in the same way as the Summer Games. After these quarrels over influence, Chamonix became the first winter sports resort to organise this world event. For this reason, 1924 marks the great debut of the Olympic Winter Games era.

* Physical Education teacher, Belfort-Montbéliard Technology University, (France); French judo champion and former member of the French team; author of "A Century of Olympism in Winter - Chamonix to Salt Lake City".

Summary table of the Olympic Winter Games

City	Year	Dates	Days	Sports	Events	NOC	Men	Women
Chamonix	1924	25.01-05.02	12	6	16	16	247	11
St-Moritz	1928	11-19.02	9	5	14	25	438	26
Lake Placid	1932	04-15.02	10	4	14	17	231	21
Garmisch-Partenkirchen	1936	06-16.02	11	4	17	28	566	80
St-Moritz	1948	30.01-08.02	10	5	22	28	592	77
Oslo	1952	14-25.02	12	4	22	30	585	109
Cortina d'Ampezzo	1956	26.01-05.02	11	4	24	32	687	134
Squaw Valley	1960	18-28.02	11	4	27	30	521	144
Innsbruck	1964	29.01-09.02	12	6	34	36	892	199
Grenoble	1968	06-18.02	13	6	35	37	947	211
Sapporo	1972	03-13.02	11	6	35	35	801	205
Innsbruck	1976	04-15.02	12	6	37	37	892	231
Lake Placid	1980	13-24.02	12	6	38	37	840	232
Sarajevo	1984	08-19.02	12	6	39	49	998	274
Calgary	1988	13-28.02	16	6	46	57	1122	271
Albertville	1992	08-23.02	16	6	57	64	1313	488
Lillehammer	1994	12-27.02	16	6	61	67	1215	522
Nagano	1998	07-22.02	16	7	68	72	1389	787
Salt Lake City	2002	08-24.02	17*	7	78			

Sources: Wolf Lyberg, *The Book of Facts on the Olympic Winter Games, 1908 - 1994* (1994). Nikolai Gueorguiev, *National Participation in the Olympic Winter Games 1924 - 1998* (1998).