

Aesthetics and Sport in the Olympic Flame Torch Relay: An Historical Analysis from 1936-1996

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Introduction

The 1996 Centennial Olympic Games are now history--memories carefully tucked away by those athletes who "struggled and fought well"; by those whose names will be recorded forever as Olympic champions; by countless spectators who proved once again the phenomenal drawing power of the Games; by the media, always eager to report; by the IOC, VIPs, and organizers; and by the ever enthusiastic volunteers, the collective heartbeat of a successful festival. Olympic memorabilia are now proudly displayed by tens of thousands in homes and offices worldwide--Olympic pins, acquired through the "sport" of trading; the ubiquitous T-shirts adorned with a myriad of Olympic-related logos; colorful posters hailing the centennial event; even graceful replicas of Olympic torches whose flame was once lit by the Peloponnesian sun in the sacred altis of Ancient Olympia.

Origin and Symbolism of the Torch Run

Various relics from antiquity offer evidence of the torch being used in what one may label a run, race, or relay. The most descriptive term is relay, since most sources specify that a team of runners was involved. Examples are a fourth century B.C. frieze in which officials of a winning team (8 members and 2 officials) offer the torch to the goddess Artemis, a fifth century B.C. pottery piece portraying a victorious team of 8 figures relaxing after a torch race, and a small fifth century B.C. red-figured vase depicting the hand-off from one runner to the next. Torch races on horseback were also known in Ancient Greece, but it is the "lampadeidromía" by foot which are pertinent to this paper.

The ancient torch relay was the one running event which also influenced modern athletics. The runners

were given a lighted torch, and in order for a team to win, the torch had to remain lighted until the end of the race. The torch, in essence, became our modern day baton. It is interesting to note that the torch relay was not a part of the athletic program at Olympia, and might never have even taken place in a stadium. These relays were held at separate festivals, one of the most famous being the Panathenaia in Athens. The time chosen for the torch run was night, and the course of the relay wound through the streets of the city, commencing at Plato's Academy (today, the western part of Athens), along the Sacred Way, and culminating on the acropolis at the Altar of Pallas Athena.^{2, 3}

These torch runs were primarily religious in nature and only secondarily athletic contests. The flame itself originated with the mythical Prometheus, who stole a portion of divine fire from the Olympian gods, hid it in an empty stalk, and brought the heavenly flame to earth for man, thus making him ruler of all the elements. Prometheus was punished for his deed, but civilization took a great step forward because a "torch" had been ignited by the fiery rays of the sun. In Ancient Greece, fire became synonymous with light, truth, purity, and knowledge. In the sacred altis at Ancient Olympia, a temple (Prytaneion) was dedicated to the goddess Estía and the priestesses of her altar, the Estiades, who were responsible for keeping the sacred flame lit at all times.^{4,5}

Religious connotations continue to be associated with fire today. How often does one light a candle in church for a loved one, or for personal supplication or thanksgiving? And who has traveled in Greece without noting the roadside shrines, carefully enclosing a vigilant flame next to an icon, and often placed on a steep mountain curve? Symbolism is powerful; it has always been and remains so today. Although the secular aspect of fire often ignores the religious aspect, there remains a specialness whether it be a cozy fireplace in winter or brilliant fireworks in the night sky. Fire is power; fire is beauty. Fire in the Olympic Flame Torch Relay is an undisputed symbol of the modern Olympic Games.

Coubertin and Diem: Collaborators

Pierre de Coubertin, the French pedagogue and historian generally credited with the revival of the

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modern Olympic Games, was fond of symbols. His entire adult life was known to lie within the realm of the five interlaced rings, for he pursued an international goal with a singular focus--the Olympic Games and their contribution to the betterment of mankind. According to Borgers, the tradition of the torch became a part of the Olympic movement as early as the 1900 Paris Olympic Games. The commemorative plaque of the Paris Exposition, within which context the Olympic Games were held, "shows a female representation of the 19th century handing over the torch to the genius of the 20th century. Also in the prize medal and certificates, torch motives (sic) can be found."⁶

Coubertin's works, as is generally known by Olympic historians, mention the ancient torch theme more than once. He was enamored with the idea of heightening the effect of sporting festivals by the use of fire and torches. The Olympic Flame was incorporated for the first time in the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. It is not known exactly whose idea it was to propose that an Olympic Flame burn, on a specially constructed tower within the Olympic Stadium, but this brilliant symbol quickly found its niche in Olympic history. In addition to an Olympic Flame, "the reverse side of the commemorative medal of the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam shows a man and a women holding a torch over a burning tripod."⁷

When the team of Coubertin and Diem was formed a few years later, it was a mutually beneficial union. As president and secretary of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, it is widely accepted that Carl Diem proposed the idea of an Olympic Torch Relay from Olympia to Berlin. He wanted the flame kindled by the sun's rays in the sacred altis of Olympia, and then transported by a relay of athletes from adjacent countries as it made its way to the host city of Berlin for the Opening Ceremonies. Both Coubertin and Diem desired the Olympic Games to be great festivals, not merely sporting contests. They wanted a blend of aesthetic pleasure with sporting pleasure; they wanted ceremony to add solemnity to this international gathering. According to Liselott Diem, "Ceremonial acts draw attention to an event; only in this way do the forms and laws of a contest achieve dignity and solemnity. The CEREMONY attests to the importance of the event; it invests it with spirit and soul."⁸

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With the blessing of Coubertin, approval by John Ketses of the Hellenic Olympic Committee, and the enthusiastic IOC members, the Olympic Flame Torch Relay became one of the greatest symbols of our 20th century.

It is interesting to note that, according to German archivist Borgers, "The first torch relay to be found in connection with Carl Diem was staged by students of the Deutsche Hochschule fur Leibesübungen in 1922 to commemorate his 40th birthday and simultaneously the beginning of the Deutsche Kampfspiele, a kind of national Olympics."⁹ Were Diem's students, therefore, his inspiration for what was to become his legacy to the modern Olympic Games?

But was it, in reality, Carl Diem who should be credited with the idea for the Olympic Flame Torch Relay? Have historians ignored, or been oblivious to, words recorded in the visitors' book of a 1934 International Olympic Committee meeting in the Greek village of Tegea? According to Kritsinelis, the visitors' book in Tegea is the only authentic text and the first person to speak in favor of the "kindling and relay" for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games was the Duke of Magdeburg and not Carl Diem.¹⁰ This conversation took place on 22 May 1934 in the village of Tegea, eight kilometres from Tripolis in the Peloponnese. Members of the IOC, with President Count Baillet-Latour, had attended a meeting in Olympia and stopped at Tripolis to take part in a local festival in honour of the town's patron saints. The mayor of Tripolis gave a dinner for the IOC officials in Tegea and among the group were the Germans Carl Diem and the Duke of Magdeburg. The Duke is quoted:

Gentlemen, one hundred years ago, a member of my family came to Greece and died fighting for its freedom. I, who have come here one hundred years later, after getting to know the place and its people can truly say that any sacrifice would be justified for such a nation. Participants, a thought has just come to my mind and I swear before you that I shall implement it before the beginning of the next 11th Olympiad to be celebrated, in 1936, in my

hometown, Berlin. I want to organize a grandiose relay race between adjacent states during which athletes from these countries will carry to our Stadium the Olympic Light from the sanctuary of Olympia. It is only right that Greece should once again bring the light to the West.¹¹

The Duke's words were enthusiastically received and the IOC accepted the proposal. The Tegea Association built a marble plaque at the site of this auspicious gathering to commemorate the day. Will this historical note alter future opinion regarding Diem's role in the creation of the Olympic Flame Torch Relay?

Aesthetics and Sport: Definitions

Before describing the symbiosis of aesthetics and sport in the Olympic Flame Torch Relay, it is essential to define both terms. Aesthetics is a broad term, but there are certain aspects pertinent to this paper. According to the New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th edition, the mother discipline of aesthetics is philosophy. Aesthetics may be described in general terms as the study of beauty, or more specifically, the science of the beautiful. Included are the arts: visual and theatre arts, music, dance, and literature. Art often communicates feelings and ideas as well, and one must remember that "In the ancient world, there was no clear distinction between aesthetic and useful art."¹² George Santayana, the Spanish-born Harvard naturalist, is noted for his reference to symbols making aesthetic contributions through "meaning," not merely the beauty of symbol itself.¹³

Sport, on the other hand, is defined by Metheny as an organization of effective actions in an attempt to make something move in space. Although this is decidedly general in scope, each form of sport is characterized by its own set of rules, its particular group of actions, its meaningful terminology, and its own body of performers.¹⁴

The symbiosis of aesthetics and sport are actually more similar than dissimilar if one looks at the Olympic Flame Torch Relay as a total picture.

Aesthetics of the Torch

Each Olympic torch, from its inception in the 1936 relay from Olympia to Berlin, has enjoyed its own distinctive design. The variety of artistic forms, however, have centered around the basic shape of a Greek column. Different materials have been used to construct the torches over the years, but because problems arose with some torches provided by organizing committees for the lighting ceremony in Olympia, the Greeks created a torch of solid silver in 1992, to be used exclusively for this purpose. An exact replica of this torch is housed at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.¹⁵

Although "beauty is often in the eye of the beholder," one must acknowledge the exceptionally graceful lines of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Torch. Designed by a Greek-American, the 22 slim aluminum reeds, each representing one of the host cities from 1896- 1996, are bound together by a thick gold band. The reeds flare slightly at the top, protecting the flame gently as it reaches upward. A handle fashioned of Georgia hardwood complements the silver and gold Greek column motif, thus creating a harmonious link between Atlanta and Athens. This centennial torch is the tallest (32 inches) and the heaviest (3 ½ pounds) to be used in the Modern Olympic Games.

In addition to the centennial torch, a second torch was fashioned in Greece of simpler design, for use in the "100 years of Olympic Games" celebration at the Panathenaic Stadium on 6 April 1996. For this special occasion, the Hellenic Olympic Committee planned an International Torch Relay, to be comprised of Olympic medalists and representatives of the Olympic Games' host cities from 1896-1996. Each torch, whether evaluated as simple or intricate in terms of artistic beauty, has carried the same message from one Olympiad to the next: that of unity throughout the world.¹⁶

Although it is an undisputed fact that the torch itself is of aesthetic value, it is the Olympic flame which completes the picture. Pouret described it well when he said, "One of the major symbols of the flame is precisely its verticality: it runs absolutely straight, like new thought. It constitutes for each one the dynamic element of a true life."¹⁷

The Relay: 1936-1996

Much has been written about the 1936 Olympic Flame Torch Relay; it is well-documented and remembered for many reasons, not the least of which is Leni Riefenstahl's brilliant film, "Olympia." Her creative endeavors remain a tribute to both art and sport, accentuating the symbiosis between the two that has existed since the first torch relay.

On 20 July 1936, in the sacred altis of Olympia, the Olympic Flame was lit by the sun's rays at high noon, and taken by the first high priestess, Koula Pratsika, to be transferred to a receptacle from which the first runner would ignite his torch. Clad in archaic Greek dress and gathered around the mirror where the flame was lit, the talented Koula Pratsika and students of her Amateur Dance School created a simple choreography.¹⁸ This was soon to become a most significant pre-Olympic event, marking the beginning of each modern Olympic Games and its link with the past.

The 1936 torch run involved 3,075 runners from 7 countries and covered 5,758 kilometres in 12 days. From Olympia to Athens, north to Thessaloniki and east to the Bulgarian border they ran through Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria and Czechoslovakia, and finally on to Germany, where the flame entered the Olympic Stadium in Berlin on 1 August 1936, and burned on the "altar" for the duration of the Games.¹⁹ According to Pouret, Carl Diem made the following note during the 18 May 1934 IOC Session in Athens: "In the important localities, altars would be erected on which the flame would burn through the night, while performances of songs, dances, and folklore games would be held."²⁰ Diem's desire, therefore, to combine art and sport was ever present and he worked diligently to enhance this ceremonial prologue to the 1936 Olympic Games.

The lighting ceremony for the London Olympic Games, which took place in Olympia on 17 July 1948, was marred by the Greek civil war raging throughout the country. The high priestess was a local tourist guide, Martha Angelakopoulou, from nearby Pyrgos. Since the former priestesses could not travel to Olympia, the ceremony was a simple one, without the other priestesses or choreography. The flame was relayed by runners to

the port of Katakolo near Pyrgos, and from there it was transported via British warship to the island of Corfu. From Corfu, a frigate of the British Navy carried the flame to Italy, where runners continued the torch relay to Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, and Belgium. The flame was then taken by boat to Dover and run to Wembley Stadium, arriving at 4:00 pm on 27 July 1948. The journey had included over one thousand runners covering over three thousand kilometres.²¹

Of historical note is the fact that the original high priestess, Koula Pratsika, took part in a flame-lighting ceremony at the temple of Poseidon at Sounion. This ceremony was not authentic; it was staged for the purpose of a film on the 1948 Olympic Games. This scenario, of course, would not be allowed today.²²

For the Helsinki Olympic Games in 1952, the lighting ceremony was again simple, yet effective, and conducted by the prominent Greek actress, Aleka Katseli, assisted by Maria Diamantidou for the choreography. The relay was conducted over 25 days by 3,372 runners and covered 7,870 kilometres. The flame was carried by three different modes of transportation, runners, airplane, and boat.²³

At the lighting of the Olympic Flame for the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, a "chemical" lighting was used because of overcast skies. Aleka Katseli was again the high priestess who lit the torch. The flame was run to Athens and then placed in a safety lamp on a Quantas airplane to Australia. A total of 3,180 runners covered 4,528 kilometres in 21 days before it reached the Olympic Stadium in Melbourne. It should be noted that, today, the lighting of the flame is done only by the sun, not by chemical process. If there is a chance of overcast skies on the day of the ceremony, the flame is lit earlier by the sun, videotaped for authenticity, and kept in a safety lamp to be transferred to the official ceremony.²⁴

As reigning high priestess, Aleka Katseli ignited the Olympic flame for Rome in 1960. After reaching Athens via torch relay, the flame continued to Pireaus where it was taken aboard the clipper Americo Vespucci which sailed to Italy via Sicily and hence relayed to Rome, where it arrived at 9 p.m. on 24 August. The next day it was taken to a special altar atop a tower near the Olympic Stadium after an 8-day journey by 1200 runners.²⁵

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The year 1964 marked a turning point in the Olympic Flame ceremony. Maria Horsch, the youngest student from Koula Pratsika's Amateur Dance School and a priestess in the 1936 ceremony, created the choreography for the first time. Hailed as a great classical choreographer, Maria Horsch was the one who chose the area in front of the temple of Hera as the most sacred spot for the lighting ceremony. From this site in the altis, the procession of priestesses solemnly moved to the stadium where the flame was handed to the first torch runner. This year was also the first time that the poetic work, "Light of Olympia," by Takis Doxas, was recited as part of the official ceremony, and hence became tradition.²⁶

Since 1964, Maria Horsch's choreography of the torch lighting ceremony has thrilled millions of people around the world. She has offered her services gratis, for both the summer and winter Games, and according to the technical director of the lighting ceremony, Maria Horsch is a sweet but demanding person who coaches her girls to "look grave, but not sad. This does not mean, however, that you can laugh. Your joy, when you receive the light from the sun, must be seen in your steps, in your walking, in your stance."²⁷

The 1964 Olympic Flame was run to Athens and then carried by plane to Okinawa, with intermediate stops and ceremonies along the way. Creativity was part of the plan. Upon reaching Okinawa, 4 torches were lit, and then carried by plane to 4 sites in Japan. The plane then followed 4 different itineraries; the runners reached Tokyo on the eve of the opening Ceremony. The final runner in the Opening Ceremony was the son of a family which had survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.²⁸

In 1968 the Olympic Flame was lit by the new high priestess, Maria Moscholiou. After the flame reached Pireaus by relay, it was taken aboard a Greek cruiser to Genoa, Italy, the birthplace of Christopher Columbus. The relay then continued to Palos, Spain, the port from which Columbus had left to discover America. Fifty days later, and after 2,728 runners had covered 13,536 kilometres, the flame arrived at the Aztec Stadium in Mexico City in the hand of a female athlete. It was a significant historical journey for the flame, from the Old World to the New World.²⁹ The main event of the flame relay, however, was the ceremony in Teotihuacan, an ancient town 40 kilometres outside Mexico City where two sacred Aztec pyramids, those of the sun and moon,

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remained. The people of Teotihuacan had traditionally celebrated the eternal life cycle by lighting a new flame every 52 years and then delivering it, by runners, to all parts of the country. The Olympic Flame was brought by the Mexicans, in honor of their ancestors, to this sacred town and the flame was lit in the bowl of the Moon Pyramid, reputed to be as old as the Ancient Olympic Games.³⁰

The Olympic Flame for the 1972 Munich Olympic Games was lit again by Maria Moscholiou, and runners carried the flame through Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Austria prior to entering Germany. The final runner was accompanied by 4 runners from the remaining continents.³¹

The year 1976 signaled a technological change in the Olympic Flame Torch Relay. In his address to the 15th Session of the International Olympic Academy, Mr. James Worrall of Canada stated,

"The flame will reach Canada through a blending of ancient traditions and modern technology. Tradition will be observed here with a relay of runners to carry the torch from Olympia to Athens. Then technology will take over. Particles of the flame will be transformed into electrical impulses which will be transmitted by satellite to Ottawa, the Canadian capitol, where a laser beam will reconvert the impulses into flame. Canadian runners will then carry the torch to Montreal."³²

As in 1972, high priestess Maria Moscholiou lit the flame in the sacred altis during the traditional ceremony. Maria Horsch added the choreographic touches as usual,³³ aided by the dozen or more priestesses in archaic Greek dress.

A 30-day "marathon" from Olympia to Moscow's Lenin Central Stadium commenced on 19 June 1980 when Maria Moscholiou performed her role for the final time as high priestess during the flame-lighting at the Temple of Hera.³⁴ The solemn ceremony was accompanied by the sounds of pipe music played by the priestesses.³⁵ During the torch relay in Greece, an impact was made on the Soviet psyche:

“In many Greek cities and villages, the torchbearers, on the way to Olympic Moscow, ran down roads strewn with roses. In the first, and longest, stage of the relay from Olympia to Athens, when the athletes ran without stopping for 32 hours, people seemed to forget that one is supposed to sleep at night. Live corridors of people along the roads did not disperse until dawn. The peasants of one village came out to greet the Flame with palm-tree branches symbolizing peace. In another village, people sang Kalinka.”³⁶

The rich folklore traditions throughout the USSR were highlighted when the symbol of hospitality, that of offering bread and salt, became a common theme throughout the torch relay. In cities and villages of Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Russia, great crowds gathered to partake in colorful celebrations: folkloric dance and music performances in traditional costume, gymnastic exhibitions, and numerous other sport festivals. One 50-year-old Soviet athlete, Pyotr Bolotnikov, received the flame from a Romanian runner at the border and said upon completion of his run, “After 20 years, I felt I was young again. As if I was running along the ‘Foro Italico’ once more. No, not even like that, I hadn’t been so excited then. Today has been a new start in life for me.”³⁷ The 1980 Olympic Torch Flame Relay was a special one, with 4,500 runners sharing the road to Moscow ‘80.

Unfortunately, the 1984 ceremony was marred by controversy over the United States Olympic Committee’s “sale” of the torch relay in America for \$3,000 per kilometre. Even though the Americans said that half the money would be donated to disabled children in an African country, the Greeks did not approve. Anti-American sentiment ran high. The IOC became involved, stating that the Olympic Flame must be delivered in spite of ill feelings, and that if the Greeks refused, the flame would be given from Lausanne. According to Kritsinelis, however, “there has never been a ceremony for the transporation of the Flame from Olympia to Lausanne.”³⁸ The ceremony did, indeed, take place in the traditional manner, but without a torch relay and without a ceremony to hand the flame to the Los Angeles Organizing

Committee. On 7 May 1984 the flame was lit by the new high priestess, Katerina Didaskalou, accompanied by Maria Horsch and her priestesses.³⁹ The kindling of the Flame was watched only by Mr. Kritsinelis, Mr. Pericles Paclatzides, and Mr. George Moysides. IOC members Georgio di Stefani (ITA) and James Worrall (CAN) waited in the ancient stadium, along with HOC/IOC members Nikolaos Nissiotis and Nikolaos Filaretos, the Greek Minister of Internal Affairs, Apostolos Lazaris, and the Prefect of Elis, Iracles Papadopoulos. The LAOC representative, Mr. Sargent, was also present. The flame was given by the high priestess to Professor Nissiotis, who in turn gave it to Mr. Di Stefani and then to Mr. Sargent.⁴⁰ The flame was taken by helicopter to Athens Airport and then flown to the USA for a flame relay worth \$3,000 per kilometre.⁴¹ Had commercialism made its impact on this great Olympic symbol?

Katerina Didaskalou once again lit the Olympic flame for the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. After the flame reached Athens, it was continued by relay to the Acropolis where it was kept overnight. The next day a special ceremony was held in the Panathenaic Stadium and the flame was passed to the Seoul organizers. A chartered plane carried the Flame to Korea’s Sezu island, where “the Flame was received with splendor; the Koreans who are also a people of tradition honored the flame in the best possible way. In all the cities, in all the countryside, one could hear the rhythmic sounds of percussion instruments; dragon fights were staged, there were balloons, colours, dancing everywhere, all creating a wonderful atmosphere of joy, enthusiasm, and respect.”⁴² It is safe to say that the Seoul organizers obliterated the commercialism of the 1984 torch relay and reinforced the Olympic Spirit. After 21 days of a successful torch relay, the marathon winner of the 1936 Olympic Games, Kitei Son, entered the Seoul Stadium to light the altar--an emotional moment for all who watched.⁴³

The 1992 Olympic Flame lighting was another successful ceremony conducted by a new high priestess, Maria Pambouki. The torch relay arrived in Athens via Patras and Corinth, and once again, a ceremony was held in the Panathenaic Stadium to hand the flame to Barcelona representatives. After traveling by boat to Spain, the torch relay crossed the entire country. Upon reaching the stadium, the world was thrilled when a disabled athlete lit the altar by shooting an arrow, on the tip of which burned the Olympic Flame.⁴⁴ This scene will probably be

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recorded as the most artistic climax to any Olympic Flame Torch Relay in history.

If the 1984 Olympic Flame Torch Relay was a bitter disappointment to the Greeks, the 1996 Olympic Flame Torch Relay was a highly respected and honoured event in the hands of the Atlanta Organizing Committee. The “touch of the flame” occurred in Ancient Olympia at noon on Saturday, 30 March, in front of the Temple of Hera, after a rain-soaked Friday and a dubious early morning sky. Those in attendance were concerned about the capricious weather, but by mid-morning the Greek sun shone bright and warm. The Olympic gods appeared to be in charge of this centennial event.

High priestess Maria Pambouki lit the Olympic Flame according to tradition, and all 20 priestesses moved quietly across the ground of the sacred altis, traversing the hill in measured procession, down to the ancient stadium. A crowd of thousands had waited patiently for the appearance of the Olympic Flame. Many arrived one to two hours early to secure a vantage point from which to observe or to capture the ceremony on film. Most of the crowd were relegated to standing on the hillside in the heat of the sun, the same hillside where the Priestess of Demeter had once reigned over the ancient Olympic Games. VIPs enjoyed a slight respite in chairs on the stadium proper, while television crews and photographers from around the world roamed freely.

The veteran choreographer, Maria Horsch, slowly and deliberately beat her drum while six of the priestesses performed a simple, yet elegant, dance on the stadium floor. They moved as one, flowing from lines of what might be interpreted as temple pediment figures, to circles symbolizing unity and strength. The vast crowd demonstrated its appreciation by a reverent silence. According to Kritsinelis, this centennial ceremony was the first time for which a dance choreography had been created.⁴⁵

When the first runner, Olympic winner Kostas Koukodimos, received the Olympic Flame from Maria Pambouki, it was the beginning of the longest flame relay ever held in Greece: 2,500 kilometres, 800 runners,* and 52 ceremonies in cities and villages throughout Greece.⁴⁶ After covering nearly the entire country, a ceremony of “100 years of the Olympic Games” was staged in the Panathenaic Stadium on Saturday, 6 April. The nearly six

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hour celebration included the following: a marathon race (from Marathon to the Panathenaic Stadium), symphonic band and flag parade, track and field competitions simulating those contested in the Athens 1896 Olympic Games, presentation of medals to winners, entrance of the Marathon runners, entrance of the final Olympic Flame Torch Relay runner, lighting of the altar and entrance of priestesses, Olympic and Greek national anthems, and speeches by dignitaries (IOC President, HOC President, Mayor of Athens). The final event to take place was the International Torch Relay, in which Olympic medalists and representatives of Olympic Games host cities since 1896 took part. Each participant ran 200 metres with the Olympic Flame burning on Greek torches designed especially for this occasion. The relay was based upon the idea of Unity espoused by IOC President Samaranch during the Paris Centennial Olympic Congress in August/September 1994.⁴⁷

After the Olympic Flame was passed “from Athens to Atlanta,” there followed recitations, music, and traditional Greek dances to highlight the end of the day’s celebration--just prior to the brilliant fireworks in the night sky of Athens. It was a fitting climax to the centennial celebration of the Olympic Flame Torch Relay. From its inception in 1936 to the present day, an obvious symbiosis of sport and aesthetics was evident in this great Olympic symbol.

Conclusion

To conclude what is “sport” in the Olympic Flame Torch Relay is rather uncomplicated; it is the physical act of running with a torch in hand. Whether it is running for 200 metres or several kilometres, there is an aspect of “sport” involved.

But what about aesthetics? Can this be easily recognized and does it overlap with “sport”? The ceremony of the lighting, the choreography of the ceremony and transference of the flame to the torch of the first runner, the subsequent relay of the flame from one runner to the next, and the entrance of the final runner into the Olympic Stadium lie within the realm of aesthetics. Even the physical aspects of “light” (sun, clouds, haze) and the elegance of the torch itself contribute to the aesthetics of the experience. The reciting of “Light of Olympia” by Takis Doxas is another aesthetic phase. The mere act of choosing a high priestess to light the flame strengthens

the aesthetic meaning of the symbol. "Have you ever thought what would have been the fate of this most important symbol of Olympism, if the flame had been lit, for the first time, with a match or a lighter or even a mirror, by some well-dressed gentleman?"⁴⁸

After speaking with runners in the 1996 Olympic Flame Torch Relay, both in Greece and the USA, it became apparent that some participants experienced an "aesthetic run." A feeling of spirituality, of Olympism, overwhelmed some runners (both male and female); others experienced only a "good run" or merely "a run." What is important is that each individual had his or her own individual experience, and occasionally, two runners shared a common bond at the moment the torch passed from one hand to another. More than one runner alluded to an "out-of-body experience" as the body and torch "floated" over the ground. Undoubtedly, with the thousands of torch runners from 1936 to 1996, individual accounts would yield a multitude of responses. It is the author's belief that the vast majority would claim it as an "aesthetic run."

A common denominator in both the 1936 and the 1996 Olympic Flame Torch Relay was the use of an olive branch from Olympia. As a meaningful symbol to those of us who have experienced the idyllic setting of Olympia, this was one of the most poignant aesthetic details. In 1936, the final runner to enter the stadium was Spyros Louis, winner of the Marathon race in the 1896 Athens Olympic Games. He held the Olympic Torch in one hand and an olive branch from Olympia in the other.⁴⁹ On 30 March 1966, members of the International Olympic Academy Alumni Association ran on Mt. Taygetos; each torch runner was accompanied by six escorts carrying olive branches from Olympia. Aesthetics and sport had blended together in a perfect union--a symbiosis that could not be dissolved.

Endnotes

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4. "Olympic Torch Relay Atlanta 1996," pamphlet produced by the Hellenic Olympic Committee citing history, programme and route of the Olympic Torch Relay in Greece (Athens: Hellenic Olympic Committee, 1996).

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22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

27. Ibid., p. 10.
28. Ibid., pp. 10-11.
29. Ibid., p. 11.
30. The Olympic Flame (Moscow: Planeta Publishers, 1981), no pagination.
31. Kritsinelis, p. 12.
32. James Worrall, "Preparation for the Games of the XXI Olympiad in Montreal 1975," Report of the IOA 15th Session July 1975 (Athens: Hellenic Olympic Committee, 1976), p. 257.
33. Kritsinelis, p. 12.
34. Ibid.
35. The Olympic Flame.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Kritsinelis, p. 13.
39. Ibid.
40. Kritsinelis (FAX), pp. 1, 2.
41. Kritsinelis, p. 14.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., pp. 14-15.
45. Conversation with Nassos Kritsinelis, International Olympic Academy, Ancient Olympia, Greece, 28 June 1996.
46. Kritsinelis, pp. 18-19.
47. "100 Years of Olympic Games," p. 22.
48. Kritsinelis, p. 5-6.
49. "The Olympic Flame" (Athens: Executive Committee for the Candidacy of Athens for the 1996 Olympic Games, English edition, 1996) no pagination.

***Forty members of the International Olympic Academy Alumni Association took part in the 1996 Olympic Flame Torch Relay at the gracious invitation of Athanassios Kritsinelis and the Hellenic Olympic Committee. A 12 kilometre stretch was awarded the members over Mt. Taygetos, between Kalamata and Sparta. Fourteen countries were represented in this 40-member group: Austria, Canada, China, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sri Lanka, and the USA. The group was also invited to the Centennial Ceremony in the Panathenaic Stadium on Saturday, 6 April.**

