
The Significance of the Olympic Games for Greece in the 19th Century

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For modern Greece the concept of the “Olympic Games” was something more than simply a sporting idea or the primitive organization of sports events. In the tradition of the Greeks, the panhellenic contests of antiquity were not simply a memory, but rather a vivid recollection. For both the warriors of antiquity and the resistance fighters during the Turkish occupation, athletic performances were an essential complement to moral qualities. Bravery, strength, and love for freedom were combined with special physical skills like foot speed, shooting accuracy, etc. Even though sports contests held during ancient religious festivals were guided by “unwritten laws” and rules strangely similar to those of modern competitions, the “new” Greeks had no conscious knowledge of these procedures.

Since the 19th century, however, Greek scholars, through the study of classical literature, were able to give specific shape and form to the recall of ancient competitive tradition. For them, the ancient Olympic Games, which combined ideals set forth by the Enlightenment (friendship, emulation, unity of purpose), were one of the major institutions of classical times, the revival of which would bring about the awakening and rebirth of the enslaved Greek nation. As a characteristic example of the attitude of Greek scholars, we can quote the words of Rigas Feraios in the prologue to the translation of his work *Olympia* by Petro Metastasion, who describes the exploits of the revolution fighters with those of the ancient Games, clearly wishing to emphasize the continuity of the Greek competitive tradition.

After the Greek revolution of 1821 and the creation of the modern Greek state (1832), Greek intellectuals and political leaders were continuously searching for a national cultural identity through classical education. As the largest part of the Greek population still lived outside the confines of the new state - in Thessaly, Epirus, Macedonia, the islands of the Aegean, Asia Minor, Crete, Cyprus, etc. - the “memory mechanisms,” if we may use this expression, would contribute to the preservation of national cohesion and unity among all Greeks of the Diaspora. This was also the spirit of Panagiotis Soutzos’ proposal to re-establish the “Olympic Games” with the aim of promoting common institutions (economic, political, cultural) and closer ties among Greeks. The royal decree of 1837, on the “strengthening of national industry, agriculture and cattle breeding,” was to lay the foundations of such a movement. A little later, in 1858, Evangelis Zappas’ contribution would give life to Soutzos’ inspired proposal.

The progress of the “Zappas Olympia” clearly reflected the evolution of the Greek state’s ideology in the second half of the 19th century in respect to the “Olympic Games” as a political and cultural institution. The “Olympia” acted suc-

cessfully as an instrument which promoted the awareness of national independence and stronger ties and relations among Greeks all over the world and as an expression of progress through the combination of past imperatives with present requirements. The competitions of 1875 were confronted by the quarrel between physical education, seen on the one hand as an occupation for aristocratic youth, and, on the other hand, as a means for training competent soldiers who would effectively defend their country's interests. Finally, in 1888-1889, the Olympia had become established as a cultural institution in the conscience of Greeks all over the world. This fact, combined with the needs of the 1880s, led to the idea of international competitions - an idea which had already been formulated by A. Kaftantzoglou in 1880 - thus giving to the Olympia a pacifist character, an attribute which Pierre de Coubertin would give a little later to the international Olympic Games. The royal decree of 1890 for the establishment of the Olympia reflected the intention of the Greeks to further develop this institution.

Outside Greece, however, sport had developed at all levels. There were sports associations and organized competitions in England, France, Germany, the United States and other countries. Some of these were even called "Olympic." A characteristic figure of the sports movement at that time, who promoted both the study of the classics and sports educational values, was Dr. William Penny Brookes who had initially organized competitions in his home town for the progress of the labour class and had finally been able to launch his "Olympic movement" throughout England, thus becoming the first man to formulate the idea of internationalized Olympic Games to be held in Athens.

The efforts which were being made in Greece, England and elsewhere, would be unified under the inspired guidance of Pierre de Coubertin, a man of vision and talent. His progressive ideas which were liberally enriched by those of ancient Greek athletics influenced his thinking towards the idea of reviving the Olympic Games as a means to promote the physical and mental development of individuals, as well as peaceful coexistence among people.

The ideological context in Greece was ready to accept and hold the first international Olympic Games in 1896, according to the proposal and wish of the Congress (Paris 1894). Of course the interest in Greece did not focus so much on the educational aspect of sport, but rather on the significance of the Games as a confirmation and recognition of the cultural heritage and political substance of modern Greece.

The selection of the date for the Olympic Games leaves no doubts about their political significance. The 25th of March 1896, day of the feast of the Annunciation and celebration of the Greeks' insurrection against the Turks, which would be the opening date of the Olympic Games in Athens, was the perfect blend between the two cultural poles of the modern Greek state: the living memory of the ancient past and modern religious posture. On the anniversary of its first 75 years of existence, the modern Greek state was not alone, but surrounded by many personalities from all the civilized and developed world (e.g. the king of Serbia, Alexander, etc.) who came to honour the new state with their presence. In this way, modern Greece would acquire an equal position among them, whilst its status as the only direct heir and rightful perpetrator of the ancient Greek tradition was being confirmed. And this was by no means insignificant. Greece, as a political nation, consolidated its position among the civilized nations of the West and, because of its geographic situation, took on the role of mediator between them and the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean region and the Balkans. The deeper meaning of the organization of the Olympic Games for the Greeks at that particular moment in time, can be clearly seen in the description of the diploma of the Games, designed by Nicolaos Gyzis: "Whilst the phoenix of the Olympic Games is reborn from its ashes, Greece, inspired by a reminiscence of its past glory, is encouraged and supported by the Wingless Victory."

In addition to their political and cultural significance, however, the Olympic Games of Athens in 1896 provided the Greeks with a unique opportunity to demonstrate, in a tangible way, their unity of purpose and their social mobilization and cohesion. In the period between the Congress of 1894 and the beginning of the Games in 1896, for the success of the great task entrusted to them, Greek citizens from various social and economic backgrounds, political affiliations, and educational levels, would unite their efforts, forgetting the things that divided them. The concern of the Greeks, evoked by the Crown Prince in his opening speech before the Central Organizing Committee, made the Games "a product of the contribution and effort of all the Greeks." The Greeks of the Diaspora were of course part of this joint effort. With their generous contributions and moral support, they played a decisive role. Thus, Olympic Games became for Greeks living abroad not just a sports competition but a national festival, a wonderful opportunity for a pilgrimage to their homeland. This high patriotic feeling was a source of encouragement to those Greeks who still lived under a foreign yoke, strengthening their desire to become reunited to the motherland. The revived institution of the Olympic Games, in addition to the continuity of the race and the cohesion of Hellenism through the times, also revealed the ability of modern Greeks to make the "Great Idea" a reality.

Another benefit, larger than the moral infusion, was the country's promotion abroad for staging the Games. This not only confirmed Greece's past, but also its present, a present which had been severely tested following the major economic problems that had led the country to bankruptcy in 1893 and provoked the animosity of its European creditors.

Although communications with the other countries of Europe were not highly developed, Greece was moving closer to them, becoming more familiar as a tourist destination. Its archaeological sites, which had aroused so much interest after the excavations, began to receive their first visitors from trips organized by travel agencies. Tourists were thus able to admire, in addition to the ancient past, Greece's hospitable present. Combined with the success of the Games, this fact allowed the new state to hope that in the future it would be welcoming many travellers. In effect, visiting athletes and tourists would act as missionaries of Greek culture when they returned to their homes.

The staging of the Games in 1896 was good publicity for Greece. The country showed that it was capable of organizing an outstanding sports competition in a short period of time. Despite the fact that there was no previous experience of such an international gathering, and that both the Greek Organizing Committee and the International Olympic Committee were still being formed, the Greek organizers managed: (1) to find the addresses of foreign sports clubs and associations, (2) to send the invitations and the programme of the Games on time, (3) to establish the rules for individual sports, (4) to hold qualifying preliminaries for the selection of the best Greek athletes, (5) to lay down the eligibility criteria for foreign competitors, (6) to build the necessary venues (velodrome, shooting range, renovation of the Panathenean Stadium), and (7) to provide an agreeable stay for the visitors who came to the young and growing capital of Greece, the city of Athens, which was much improved for the occasion of the Games. What should be particularly stressed is the establishment of the individual rules for each sport. The Central Organizing Committee was able to establish rules which combined the different regulations applied in individual countries in a manner which made it possible to overcome any initial objections and disagreements.

But these were not the only benefits from the point of view of sport. The Games allowed athletes from different countries to meet and see for themselves the results of other training systems. The Americans, for example, gave inspiration for better future performances in track and field events, the Germans in gymnastics, etc. This comparison which was done for the first time in Athens made it possible to identify the advantages and disadvantages of individual sports systems, thus contributing to the overall development of sport.

At the same time, the International Olympic Games showed the need for a larger sports organization. In spite of the fact that there were sports facilities in most countries, it proved impossible to hold qualifying preliminaries for the selection of the best athletes worldwide, as recommended by the Congress. In addition, the Olympic Committees which had to be created, were unable to become sufficiently organized so as to help in staging the Games. This is why there was a rather limited response to the approximately 2500 invitations sent by the Athens Central Organizing Committee. On the other hand, the organization of the Olympic Games in Greece triggered a series of reforms which led to the restructuring and improvement of sports activities in the country.

On the neutral territory of Athens, however, an event of far-reaching importance was taking place. In the competition venues, "old scores" which had alienated countries were forgotten. In the streets of Athens, nationalist differences which plagued the international scene were put aside. A spirit of harmony prevailed at all events, inside and outside the competition venues and in the brightly lit streets of Athens, all inspired by the Olympic Games themselves. This informal truce among competitors, as well as citizens of different states, showed that a new era of peaceful relations among people could be dawning. The impressive atmosphere of Athens, which appeared as a symbol of cultural and spiritual unity, seemed to be giving such a promise. The people who had taken part in the Olympic Games had managed to overcome their prejudices. This noble spirit prevailed during the first parade of athletes at the closing ceremony of the Games. The Olympic victors belonged to all, not only to the countries from which they came.

The political significance which a sports event can effect was not only seen in the pacifist climate which surrounded the Games. It had already become apparent before the opening of the Games when Germany threatened to "pull out" because of misunderstandings and prejudices in its relations with France following the French-German war in 1870. But in Greece, too, the organization of the Games and the related disagreement between the Royal Family and Prime Minister Harilaos Trikoupi, might have been the deeper and unseen cause for the latter's resignation which brought Theodoros Deligiannis to power and laid the staging of the Games with full governmental backing.

There is no question that the celebration of the Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 was an event with far-reaching consequences for Greece. In addition to the moral benefits which it derived, as reflected in its enhanced political status and national unity, Greece was able to achieve more. The Games offered a pleasant interlude to its suffering citizens which strengthened their self-confidence. The unity of purpose which was attained showed to the Greeks that they could overcome their differences, but that they were also capable of achieving great things, in spite of the fact that the country's economic situation was far from good. Through the Games, they could claim the position that was theirs, attract admiration, and make their visions come true. Of course, any overassessment of their capabilities could prove disastrous, as was unfortunately the case a few months later during the Greek-Turkish War of 1897.

For the Greeks, the organization and celebration of the Olympic Games of 1896 was a culminating point in their history. The revival of an institution from their glorious past allowed Greeks to show the rest of the world their status as a state, their national identity, their social cohesion, and their cultural dynamism. Greece sent messages of peace, unity, and friendship to the world. They were able to show that sport and its greatest manifestation, the Olympic Games, were not an institution of the past which had been nostalgically revived, but a strong and dynamic driving force for present and future developments and achievements.

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