

Fire Power: The History of the Olympic Flame and Torch Relay

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The attention generated by the Olympic Torch Relay and the subsequent lighting of the Flame at the Olympic Games Opening Ceremonies was never greater than in 1984. The first relay in 1936 was the brain child of Karl Diem, a devotee of the Olympic Games and a renowned Olympic historian. His idea of lighting the Olympic Flame from the rays of the sun at Olympia, Greece and having it transported to Berlin by a chain of runners through all the intervening countries was a brilliant stroke of showmanship. Flames had burned at previous Olympic Games but the relay was a new concept. No such relay or flame was part of the ancient Olympic Games although fires burned at various religious altars throughout the sacred altis of Olympia while the games were held. In other locations throughout Greece torch races, usually on horseback, were a part of fire-lighting ceremonies at altars during religious festivals. Diem's idea then, had some ancient inspirations only if one is determined to make such connections.

With the advent of world wide TV the relay and flame lighting has become a major feature of Olympic ceremonial. Members of the media reporting the event refer to the torch and flame as being symbolic of the Olympic Games even though they noticeably lack the ability to explain that symbolism in depth.

This paper will explore the origins of the use of flames burning at modern Olympic Games, investigate the motives and inspiration behind Diem's idea of a torch relay, identify possible connections to ancient practices, report on the characteristics of the torch relay as presented by different Olympic Games hosts, discuss the problems arising from the Los Angeles Torch Program, and examine the use and importance of the Torch Relay and Olympic Flame in today's Olympic Games.



Roberta Park and Bob Barney enjoyed, like other NASSH members, the pre-conference wine and cheese party.