The Olympic

Games

**Olympic Games**, athletic festival that originated in ancient Greece and was revived in the late 19th century. Before the 1970s the Games were officially limited to competitors with amateur status, but in the 1980s many events were opened to professional athletes. Currently, the Games are open to all, even the top professional athletes in basketball and football (soccer). The ancient Olympic Games included several of the sports that are now part of the Summer Games program, which at times has included events in as many as 32 different sports. In 1924 the Winter Games were sanctioned for winter sports. The Olympic Games have come to be regarded as the world’s foremost sports competition.



The Ancient Olympic Games

## Origins: Just how far back in history organized athletic contests were held remains a matter of debate, but it is reasonably certain that they occurred in Greece almost 3,000 years ago. However ancient in origin, by the end of the 6th century BCE at least four Greek sporting festivals, sometimes called “classical games,” had achieved major importance: the Olympic Games, held at Olympia; the Pythian Games at Delphi; the Nemean Games at Nemea; and the Isthmian Games, held near Corinth. Later, similar festivals were held in nearly 150 cities as far afield as Rome, Naples, Odessus, Antioch, and Alexandria.

## 

## Of all the games held throughout Greece, the Olympic Games were the most famous. Held every four years between [August](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/August) 6 and September 19, they occupied such an important place in Greek history that in late antiquity historians measured time by the interval between them—an Olympiad. The Olympic Games, like almost all Greek games, were an [intrinsic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intrinsic) part of a religious festival. They were held in honour of Zeus at Olympia by the city-state of Elis in the northwestern Peloponnese. The first Olympic champion listed in the records was Coroebus of Elis, a cook, who won the sprint race in 776 BCE. Notions that the Olympics began much earlier than 776 BCE are founded on myth, not historical evidence. According to one legend, for example, the Games were founded by Heracles, son of Zeus and Alcmene.

## Image result for the olympic games

Competition and status

At the meeting in 776 BCE there was apparently only one event, a [footrace](https://www.britannica.com/sports/sprint-running) that covered one length of the track at Olympia, but other events were added over the ensuing decades. The race, known as the [stade](https://www.britannica.com/science/stade-measurement), was about 192 metres (210 yards) long. The word stade also came to refer to the track on which the race was held and is the origin of the modern English word stadium. In 724 BCE a two-length race, the diaulos, roughly similar to the 400-metre race, was included, and four years later the dolichos, a long-distance race possibly comparable to the modern 1,500- or 5,000-metre events, was added. [Wrestling](https://www.britannica.com/sports/wrestling#ref8012) and the [pentathlon](https://www.britannica.com/sports/pentathlon)were introduced in 708 BCE. The latter was an all-around competition consisting of five events—the [long jump](https://www.britannica.com/sports/long-jump), the [javelin throw](https://www.britannica.com/sports/javelin-throw), the [discus throw](https://www.britannica.com/sports/discus-throw), a footrace, and wrestling.

[Boxing](https://www.britannica.com/sports/boxing) was introduced in 688 BCE and [chariot racing](https://www.britannica.com/sports/chariot-racing) eight years later. In 648 BCE the [pancratium](https://www.britannica.com/sports/pankration) (from Greek pankration), a kind of no-holds-barred combat, was included. This brutal contest combined wrestling, boxing, and street fighting. Kicking and hitting a downed opponent were allowed; only biting and gouging (thrusting a finger or thumb into an opponent’s eye) were forbidden. Between 632 and 616 BCE events for boys were introduced. And from time to time further events were added, including a footrace in which athletes ran in partial armour and contests for heralds and for trumpeters. The program, however, was not nearly so varied as that of the modern Olympics. There were neither team games nor ball games, and the [athletics](https://www.britannica.com/sports/athletics) (track and field) events were limited to the four running events and the pentathlon mentioned above. Chariot races and [horse racing](https://www.britannica.com/sports/horse-racing), which became part of the ancient Games, were held in the [hippodrome](https://www.britannica.com/technology/hippodrome-architecture) south of the stadium.

In the early centuries of Olympic competition, all the contests took place on one day; later the Games were spread over four days, with a fifth devoted to the closing-ceremony presentation of prizes and a banquet for the champions. In most events the athletes participated in the nude. Through the centuries scholars have sought to explain this practice. Theories have ranged from the [eccentric](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eccentric) (to be nude in public without an [erection](https://www.britannica.com/science/erection) demonstrated self-control) to the usual anthropological, religious, and social explanations, including the following: (1) nudity bespeaks a [rite of passage](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rite-of-passage), (2) nudity was a holdover from the days of [hunting](https://www.britannica.com/sports/hunting-sport) and [gathering](https://www.britannica.com/topic/hunting-and-gathering-culture), (3) nudity had, for the Greeks, a magical power to ward off harm, and (4) public nudity was a kind of costume of the upper class. Historians grasp at dubious theories because, in Judeo-Christian society, to compete nude in public seems odd, if not scandalous. Yet ancient Greeks found nothing shameful about nudity, especially male nudity. Therefore, the many modern explanations of Greek athletic nudity are in the main unnecessary.

The Olympic Games were technically restricted to freeborn Greeks. Many Greek competitors came from the Greek colonies on the [Italian peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italian-Peninsula) and in [Asia Minor](https://www.britannica.com/place/Anatolia) and [Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Africa). Most of the participants were professionals who trained full-time for the events. These athletes earned substantial prizes for winning at many other preliminary festivals, and, although the only prize at Olympia was a wreath or garland, an Olympic champion also received widespread [adulation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adulation) and often lavish benefits from his home city.



## [***Women***](https://www.britannica.com/topic/women)***and the Olympic Games***

Although there were no women’s events in the ancient Olympics, several women appear in the official lists of Olympic victors as the owners of the stables of some victorious chariot entries. In [Sparta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sparta), girls and young women did practice and compete locally. But, apart from Sparta, contests for young Greek women were very rare and probably limited to an annual local footrace. At Olympia, however, the Herean festival, held every four years in honour of the goddess [Hera](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hera), included a race for young women, who were divided into three age groups. Yet the Herean race was not part of the Olympics (they took place at another time of the year) and probably was not instituted before the advent of the [Roman Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Empire). Then for a brief period girls competed at a few other important athletic [venues](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/venues).

The 2nd-century-CE traveler [Pausanias](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pausanias-Greek-geographer) wrote that women were banned from Olympia during the actual Games under penalty of death. Yet he also remarked that the law and penalty had never been [invoked](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invoked). His account later incongruously stated that unmarried women were allowed as Olympic spectators. Many historians believe that a later scribe simply made an error copying this passage of Pausanias’s text here. Nonetheless, the notion that all or only married women were banned from the Games endured in popular writing on the topic, though the evidence regarding women as spectators remains unclear.

## 



Demise of the Olympics

Greece lost its independence to [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome) in the middle of the 2nd century BCE, and support for the competitions at Olympia and elsewhere fell off considerably during the next century. The Romans looked on athletics with contempt—to strip naked and compete in public was degrading in their eyes. The Romans realized the political value of the Greek festivals, however, and Emperor [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) staged games for Greek athletes in a temporary wooden stadium erected near the [Circus Maximus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Circus-Maximus) in Rome and instituted major new athletic festivals in [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and in Greece. Emperor [Nero](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nero-Roman-emperor) was also a keen patron of the festivals in Greece, but he disgraced himself and the Olympic Games when he entered a [chariot race](https://www.britannica.com/sports/chariot-racing), fell off his vehicle, and then declared himself the winner anyway.

Romans neither trained for nor participated in Greek athletics. Roman [gladiator](https://www.britannica.com/sports/gladiator) shows and team chariot racing were not related to the Olympic Games or to Greek athletics. The main difference between the Greek and Roman attitudes is reflected in the words each [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) used to describe its festivals: for the Greeks they were contests (agōnes), while for the Romans they were games (ludi). The Greeks originally organized their festivals for the competitors, the Romans for the public. One was primarily competition, the other entertainment. The Olympic Games were finally abolished about 400 CE by the Roman emperor [Theodosius I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodosius-I)or his son because of the festival’s pagan associations.



The Modern Olympic Movement

## Revival of the Olympics: The ideas and work of several people led to the creation of the modern Olympics. The best-known architect of the modern Games was [Pierre, baron de Coubertin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pierre-baron-de-Coubertin), born in [Paris](https://www.britannica.com/place/Paris) on New Year’s Day, 1863. Family tradition pointed to an army career or possibly politics, but at age 24 Coubertin decided that his future lay in education, especially [physical education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/physical-education). In 1890 he traveled to [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England) to meet Dr. [William Penny Brookes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Penny-Brookes), who had written some articles on education that attracted the Frenchman’s attention. Brookes also had tried for decades to revive the ancient Olympic Games, getting the idea from a series of modern Greek Olympiads held in [Athens](https://www.britannica.com/place/Athens) starting in 1859. The Greek Olympics were founded by Evangelis Zappas, who, in turn, got the idea from [Panagiotis Soutsos](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Panayotis-Soutsos), a Greek poet who was the first to call for a modern revival and began to promote the idea in 1833. Brookes’s first British Olympiad, held in [London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London) in 1866, was successful, with many spectators and good athletes in attendance. But his subsequent attempts met with less success and were beset by public [apathy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apathy) and opposition from rival sporting groups. Rather than give up, in the 1880s Brookes began to argue for the founding of international Olympics in Athens.

When Coubertin sought to confer with Brookes about physical education, Brookes talked more about Olympic revivals and showed him documents relating to both the Greek and the British Olympiads. He also showed Coubertin newspaper articles reporting his own proposal for international Olympic Games. On November 25, 1892, at a meeting of the Union des Sports Athlétiques in Paris, with no mention of Brookes or these previous modern Olympiads, Coubertin himself advocated the idea of reviving the Olympic Games, and he propounded his desire for a new era in international sport when he said:

*Let us export our oarsmen, our runners, our fencers into other lands. That is the true Free Trade of the future; and the day it is introduced into*[*Europe*](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe)*the cause of Peace will have received a new and strong ally.*

He then asked his audience to help him in “the splendid and beneficent task of reviving the Olympic Games.” The speech did not produce any appreciable activity, but Coubertin [reiterated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reiterated) his proposal for an Olympic revival in Paris in June 1894 at a conference on international sport attended by 79 delegates representing 49 organizations from 9 countries. Coubertin himself wrote that, except for his coworkers Dimítrios Vikélas of Greece, who was to be the first president of the International Olympic Committee, and Professor William M. Sloane of the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States), from the College of New Jersey (later [Princeton University](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Princeton-University)), no one had any real interest in the revival of the Games. Nevertheless, and to quote Coubertin again, “a unanimous vote in favour of revival was rendered at the end of the Congress chiefly to please me.”

It was at first agreed that the Games should be held in [Paris](https://www.britannica.com/place/Paris) in 1900. Six years seemed a long time to wait, however, and it was decided (how and by whom remains obscure) to change the [venue](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/venue) to Athens and the date to April 1896. A great deal of indifference, if not opposition, had to be overcome, including a refusal by the Greek [prime minister](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prime-minister) to stage the Games at all. But when a new prime minister took office, Coubertin and Vikélas were able to carry their point, and the Games were opened by the king of Greece in the first week of April 1896, on [Greek Independence Day](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-Independence-Day) (which was on March 25 according to the [Julian calendar](https://www.britannica.com/science/Julian-calendar) then in use in Greece).



Organization

## The [International Olympic Committee](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Olympic-Committee)

At the Congress of Paris in 1894, the control and development of the modern Olympic Games were entrusted to the International Olympic Committee (IOC; Comité International Olympique). During [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I)Coubertin moved its headquarters to [Lausanne](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lausanne), [Switzerland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Switzerland), where they have remained. The IOC is responsible for maintaining the regular celebration of the Olympic Games, seeing that the Games are carried out in the spirit that inspired their revival, and promoting the development of sports throughout the world. The original committee in 1894 consisted of 14 members and Coubertin.



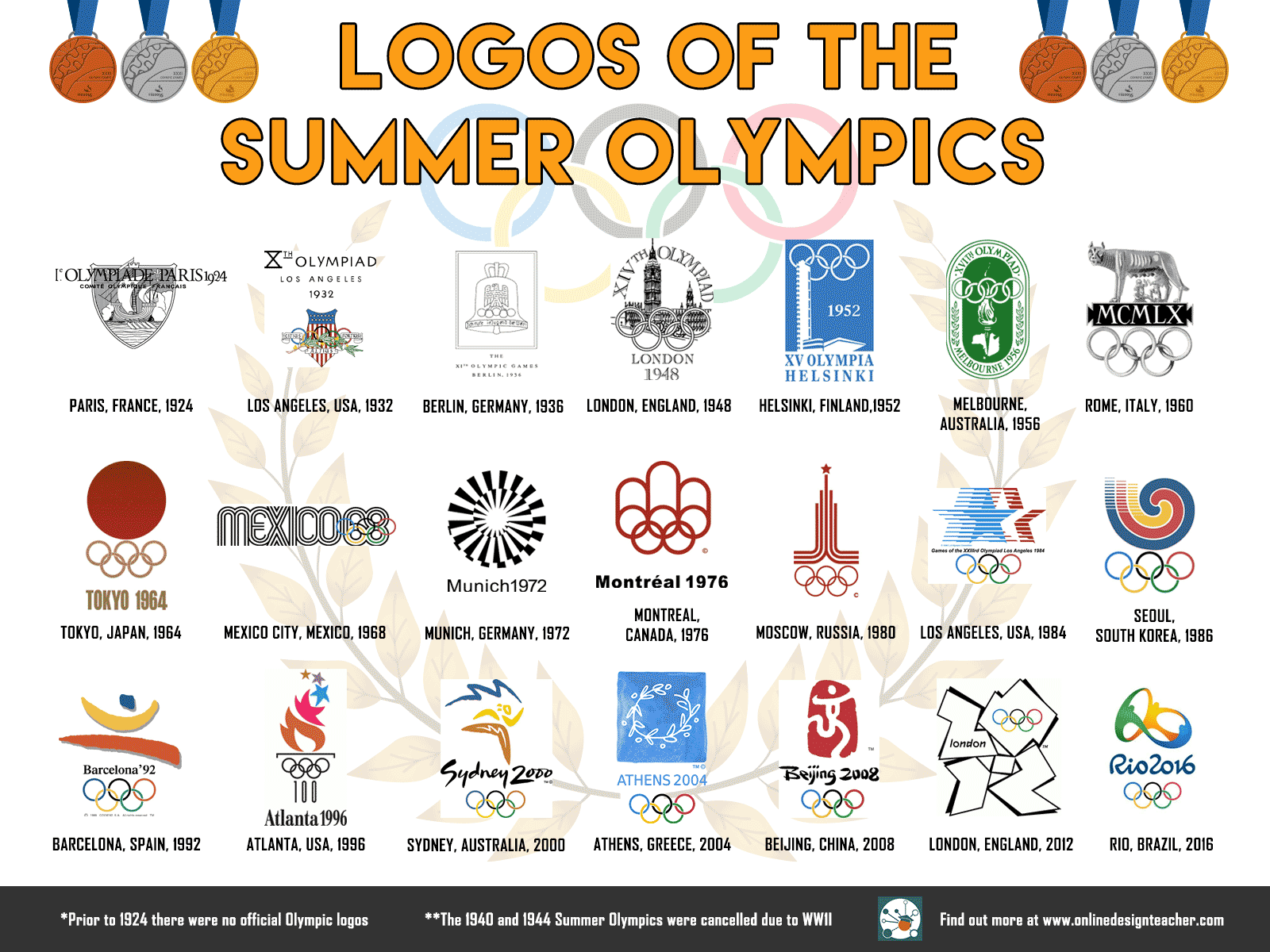
IOC members are regarded as ambassadors from the committee to their national sports organizations. They are in no sense delegates to the committee and may not accept, from the government of their country or from any organization or individual, any instructions that in any way affect their independence.

The IOC is a permanent organization that elects its own members. Reforms in 1999 set the maximum membership at 115, of whom 70 are individuals, 15 current Olympic athletes, 15 national Olympic committee presidents, and 15 international sports federation presidents. The members are elected to renewable eight-year terms, but they must retire at age 70. Term limits were also applied to future presidents.

The IOC elects its president for a period of eight years, at the end of which the president is eligible for reelection for further periods of four years each. The executive board of 15 members holds periodic meetings with the international federations and national Olympic committees. The IOC as a whole meets annually, and a meeting can be [convened](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/convened) at any time that one-third of the members so request.

The logos





In the 19th century, sporting organizations regularly chose a distinctive motto. As the official motto of the Olympic Games, Coubertin adopted “Citius, altius, fortius,” Latin for “Faster, higher, stronger,” a phrase apparently coined by his friend Henri Didon, a friar, teacher, and athletics enthusiast. Some people are now wary of this motto, fearing that it may be misinterpreted as a validation of performance-enhancing drugs. Equally well known is the saying known as the “credo”: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to participate.” Coubertin made that statement on a day when the British and Americans were bitterly disputing who had won the 400-metre race at the 1908 London Games. Although Coubertin attributed the words to Ethelbert Talbot, an American bishop, recent research suggests that the words are Coubertin’s own, that he tactfully cited Talbot so as not to appear to [admonish](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/admonish) personally his English-speaking friends.

Olympic Champions



