The Olympic Games and South Africa

# What are the Olympic games?

The Olympic Games (according to Wikipedia) is an international event featuring a variety of winter and summer sports. This also includes the Paralympic games where athletes with disabilities can compete for gold, silver and bronze medals.

The games take place every four years in different countries all over the globe. The Ancient Olympic Games took part in Greece from 776 BC to 393 AD.

# Ancient Olympic Games

These competitions were held in Olympia, Ancient Greece in hour of the god Zeus. They also ereected a huge statue of Zeus to stand guard over the proceedings. Sadly, this statue no longer exists. There are however detailed desciptions and images on old coins. The statue was created of ivory and gold plated bronze.

The athletes would gather every four years to compete and a peace truce would be declared so that people could travel safely to Greece. People came together from all over to watch, and also to display their works of art and waeres at the Olympic Games.

The winners received laurel leaves arranged into whreaths. They also received free lodging and food for life and were heroes of their respective countries. They were heralded in poems and other pieces of literature.

Interestingly the games are said to have started from a foot race for young women to honour the goddess Hera. Later on only free men who could speak Greek were allowed to take part. In the beginning, there was only one event, a sprint the length of the stadium, and later on this was lengthened to approximately a 3 mile race.

As the years passed, more sports were added, boxing, wrestling and so on. The sporting events were very brutal and vicious (maybe because it was male orientated?) and the competitors competed in the nude as a celebration of the male body, which was covered in olyve oil to make it more appealing to the crowds.

The ancient Olympic Games went on for about 1200 years and were abolished because of religious reasons by Theosodius I, a Christian Roman emperor.

# Modern Olympic Games

About 1500 later, a Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic Games. He did this purely because he wanted to revive interest in sport. At a meeting of the Union des Sports Athlétiques in Paris on November 25, 1892, Coubertin stated,

*“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 the cause of Peace will have received a new and strong ally. It inspires me to touch upon another step I now propose and in it I shall ask that the help you have given me hitherto you will extend again, so that together we may attempt to realise [sic], upon a basis suitable to the conditions of our modern life, the splendid and beneficent task of reviving the Olympic Games.”*

After lobbying for a few years, de Coubertin got enough interest in the idea of the Olympic Games’ return that a committee was formed: The International Olympic Comittee.

# History of the Modern Games

The first games in 1896 was sponsored by a wealthy architect and was a huge success, much more so than the second games in 1900, which was a failure as it was part of the World Exhibition and poorly organised. The next event was in 1904 and not hugely successful because of a fight between the two proposed host cities, Chicago and St Louis.

In 1908 London was the host city, and almost failed because of bickering between the British and other countries regarding the rules and regulations. The Swedes had a well organised Olympics in 1912. Although all wars were interrupted with a truce due to the Games, this tradition was not honoured with the modern Olympics. The 1916 Games were canceled due to the World War 1. Because of the devastation of the First World War, the 1920 games was not a big success and was held in Belgium. The losers of the war were not allowed to compete. This included Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey.

In 1924, both the Summer and Winter Olympics were held in Paris. Although this Olympics Games was counted as a success, again the behaviour of the host country led to some countries lobbying for the end of all Olympics.

The 1928 Olympics was held in Amsterdam and was successful, but moving across the Atlantic in 1932, the Great Depression put a damper on the Games. The games in Los Angeles saw the introduction of a photofinish camera and automatic timing.

When Berlin was chosen for the 1936 Olympics, the rest of the world was still oblivious to the potential danger of Hitler’s coming to power. Although the Jews asked for a boycott, it went ahead anyway. It was the first televised Olympics.

Japan won the hosting for the 1940 Olympics, but it was revoked when they invaded China. In 1948, London got the chance to host the Games, although public opinion was that it was a waste of money. It went well, although a few communist athletes used this opportunity to defect to the west, as this was the first time the communist countries were allowed to compete.

Scandinavia did such a good job of organising the Olympics in 1952 that some people suggested that all future games be hosted there. It was also the first year USSR took part.

The Games in 1956 moved to Melbourne, Australia but was hampered by two boycotts and was not well attended. The Pope was one of the most famous spectators in 1960 at the Rome Olympics.

1964, and the Games in Tokyo went on without a hitch. In 1968, in Mexico, the Olympics was disrupted by political unrest and strikes. It also saw the introduction of sex tests for women.

Montreal hosted the Games in 1976, Africa refused to take part and due to bad planning, the city of Montreal suffered great financial loss.

In 1980, the boycotts went on when Jimmy Carter pulled the American teams out of the Moscow Olympics in protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Moscow spectators also rivalled the French as the wortst spectators in the history of the games.

Following ‘tradition’ the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles was boycotted in a revenge action by the Soviets. It didn’t stop the Games as going down in history as very successful!

1988 saw the Games in Seoul, which was boycotted by North Korea and a few other nations, but they got top marks for hospitality.

1992 in Barcelona, South Africa took part again. Estonia took part as independent states and after all the political upheaval of the past Olympics, it was a welcome relief to all participants.

1996 took place in the USA and it was the first time the Summer games was staged in a different year than the Winter games. Sidney hosted the 2000 games and it was only the second time that the games were hosted in the Southern Hemisphere.

The Olympics went home in 2004 to Greece, Athens and was hugely successful with 201 countries taking part. The motto was “Welcome Home”. The 2008 Olympics took part in Beijing. More than 11000 athletes from 204 National Olympic Committees took part in this event. China also won the most gold medals (51). There was criticism about the host city, because of China’s human rights record and there were some protests during the torch relay.