The Olympic Games are unique; and athletes from across the world take part in them. Their achievements are followed, directly or from afar, by hundreds of millions of people.

Organised every four years, the Games are the largest sporting event by dint of the number of sports on the programme, the number of athletes and the number of individuals from various nations coming together at the same time in the same place. The athletes compete in a wide variety of events on tracks, roads and grass, in the water, on the water, outdoors and in multisport halls.

The Games are a one-off event, but they fit into the wider framework of the Olympic Movement. The mission of this Movement is to encourage the practice of sport worldwide and to promote its values. It is precisely in this spirit that the Olympic Games are organised and celebrated.

Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin was the person behind this major project. Others before him tried, but always in vain. Inspired by the Olympic Games of Antiquity, Baron de Coubertin decided to create the modern Olympic Games. He founded the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Paris in 1894 with the aim of organising the first Games of the modern era.

1896 marked the start of an amazing adventure, which has now lasted for over a century!
The first edition of the Olympic Games of the modern era brought together athletes from 14 countries.

On 6 April 1896, the USA’s James CONNOLLY won the triple jump and became the first Olympic champion in over 1,500 years.

An Olympic Anthem, composed by Spiros SAMARAS (music) and Kostis PALAMAS (lyrics), was played in the Panathenaic Stadium.

For the long-distance swimming event, the swimmers were transported by boat out to sea and left to swim the required distance back to shore.
The Paris Games competitions were organised during the World’s Fair. They were spread out over more than five months, and the Olympic status of the events was so underpromoted that some athletes did not even know they were competing in the Games!

Women competed for the first time.

The big star of these Games was the USA’s Alvin KRAENZLEIN, winner of the 60m, 110m hurdles, 200m hurdles and the long jump.
For the first time, bronze medals were awarded to those finishing in third place.

Boxing, freestyle wrestling, decathlon and weightlifting joined the Olympic programme.

Thomas HICKS (USA) won the marathon after the disqualification of his fellow countryman, Fred Lorz, who was guilty of covering a large part of the race in a car, and getting out just before the finish!

Archie HAHN (USA), nicknamed the Milwaukee Meteor, took victory in the 60m, 100m and 200m.

100-yard swim
© 1904 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

A weightlifting event
© 1904 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)
The 1908 Games were initially set to take place in Rome. But owing to delays by the city, London was tasked with organising them.

Unusually, they were held in four different phases. The final “Winter Games” phase – which took place in October – featured boxing, football, rugby, field hockey, lacrosse and figure skating.

The Organising Committee fixed the distance of the marathon at 42,195 km – 42km representing the distance between the city of Marathon and Athens – with the last 195 metres being added on to ensure the race finished below the royal box in the London stadium!

The first parade of athletes, dressed in sportswear walking behind their national flag, was organised.

First swimming events in a pool
© 1908 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

The parade of athletes
© 1908 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

Ray EWRY (USA) added two new gold medals to his haul of six medals won in standing jumps (high, long and triple jumps).
© 1908 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

Assisted by officials to finish the marathon, Dorando PIETRI (ITA) was eventually disqualified, with the gold medal going to John HAYES (USA).
© 1908 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)
A model of efficiency, the Games in Stockholm were the first to use automatic timekeeping systems for track events, plus photo-finish cameras and a public address system.

For the first time, athletes from five continents took part in the Games.

Jim THORPE (USA) easily won both the pentathlon and the decathlon. But he was later disqualified on the grounds that, shortly before the Games, he had earned a modest sum of money from playing baseball. In 1982, the IOC decided to reverse this decision, and gave his medals to his daughter.

The Games programme grew with the inclusion of arts and letters competitions. The medals awarded had the same status as those given to the athletes.

Rudolph LEWIS (RSA) won the road race which, at 320km, is the longest cycle race in Olympic history.

Women's swimming and diving made their Olympic debut, as did men's modern pentathlon.

The Opening Ceremony
The 1916 Games, scheduled to take place in Berlin, were cancelled because of the First World War. The 1920 Games were held in Antwerp, in tribute to the heavy toll suffered by the Belgians during the conflict.

During the Opening Ceremony, the Olympic flag, with its five rings symbolising the universality of the Games, was raised for the first time.

Nedo NADI (ITA) won five of the six gold medals on offer in the fencing events.

At 72, Sweden’s Oscar SWAHN won the silver medal in the 100m team running deer double shot event. He became the oldest medallist in the history of the Olympic Games.

Suzanne LENGLEN (FRA) won three tennis medals, including two golds.

Figure skating and ice hockey, on the programme of the 1920 Games, were incorporated into the Winter Games programme in 1924.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>ATHLETES</th>
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<th>EVENTS</th>
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<td>29</td>
<td>156</td>
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PARIS 1924

The Paris Games saw the first Closing Ceremony in the style that we know today. Three flags were flown in the Stadium: those of the IOC, the host country and the next host country.

The athletes were housed in a village built especially for the occasion: a simple group of wooden cabins.

Finnish runner Paavo NURMI took home five medals, adding to the three he had already won in 1920.

Swimmer Johnny WEISSMULLER (USA), who went on to play Tarzan in 12 films a few years later, won three gold medals.

For the first time, an emblem was created with a design that sought to capture the identity of the host city. Uniquely, the Paris emblem did not include the Olympic rings. It featured the city’s coat of arms and a galley sailing down the Seine.
For the first time, a symbolic flame was lit during the Games. The flame burned in a cauldron at the top of a column outside the Stadium.

At the Opening Ceremony, the Greek team led the parade of athletes, while the Dutch brought up the rear. Greece at the front, the host nation at the back: this protocol would continue to be respected in the future.

From 1928 to 1968, the Summer Games medals, designed by Giuseppe CASSIOLI, were identical.

In rowing, Henry PEARCE (AUS) entered the history books. He stopped in the quarter-final to let a family of ducks pass by... before winning the race and the gold medal!

From 1928 to 1956, the Indian men's hockey team won six gold medals in a row.
In 1932, the duration of the Games was set at 16 days. The editions that followed respected this format (between 15 and 18 days).

Attendance records were broken, with 100,000 spectators at the Opening Ceremony. The Coliseum Olympic Stadium thrilled everyone with its sheer scale and the quality of the facilities.

Male athletes were housed in the Olympic Village, while female athletes stayed at the Chapman Park Hotel.

Japan’s Kusuo KITAMURA, 14, won the 1,500m freestyle swimming event and became the youngest gold medallist in an individual event.

In a wonderful gesture of fair play, Judy GUINNESS (GBR) pointed out to the judges that they had missed two of her opponent’s hits in fencing leading her to collect the silver medal instead of gold.

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<th>DATE</th>
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The Berlin Games are best remembered for Adolf Hitler's failed attempt to use them to prove his theories of Aryan racial superiority. The hero of these Games, Jesse OWENS, was an Afro-American – he won four gold medals.

These Games saw the introduction of the Torch Relay: a flame lit at the ancient site of Olympia (GRE), passed from hand-to-hand to the Stadium where the Games took place.

For the first time, the Games were filmed and broadcast in 25 places around Berlin to allow the public to follow the events free-of-charge.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>ATHLETES</th>
<th>NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEES</th>
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<td>3,963</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 August</td>
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The London Games were the first to be televised, even if few British households had a television set.

In the sprint, starting blocks were used for the first time; while the Empire Pool was the first covered swimming pool in the history of the Games.

All eyes were on sprinter Fanny BLANKERS-KOEN (NED), who excelled in each of the four events in which she competed.

Burma, Ceylon, Lebanon, Puerto Rico, Syria and Venezuela took part for the first time.

Micheline OSTERMEYER (FRA), a famous pianist, dominated the throwing events of shot put and discus, and also took bronze in the high jump.

© 1948 / International Olympic Committee (IOC) / RÜBELT Lothar

© 1948 / International Olympic Committee (IOC) / RÜBELT Lothar

© 1948 / International Olympic Committee (IOC) / RÜBELT Lothar

© 1948 / International Olympic Committee (IOC) / RÜBELT Lothar

© 1948 / International Olympic Committee (IOC) / RÜBELT Lothar
In the equestrian sports, the rules evolved to allow women to compete alongside men in the mixed events.

For its first participation, the USSR ranked second behind the USA, winning 71 medals, including 22 golds.

Czech long-distance runner Emil ZATOPEK excelled, winning the 5,000m and 10,000m and both for the second time, the marathon – a unique triple in Olympic history.
These were the first Games to be held in Oceania. As Australian veterinary rules forbade the entry of foreign horses, the equestrian events were staged in Stockholm, in June.

The IOC succeeded in its skilful diplomacy efforts to have the two Germanys (East and West) participate as a unified team (EUA). The Games saw their first boycott following various international conflicts.

In Melbourne, at the proposal of John Ian Wing, a young Australian student, the athletes entered the Olympic Stadium together at the Closing Ceremony.
These Games were a blend of sport and culture in this historic city on the banks of the River Tiber. The Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine, the Baths of Caracalla, Lake Albano and the Arch of Constantine provided an ancient setting for the Olympic competitions.

Running the marathon barefoot, Ethiopia’s Abebe BIKILA became Africa’s first black Olympic champion.

Boxer Cassius Marcellus CLAY (USA), who later changed his name to Muhammad ALI, won gold in the light-heavyweight category.
Yoshinori SAKAI, the last torchbearer, was chosen because of his date of birth – 6 August 1945 – the day of the atomic bomb explosion in Hiroshima.

The first Fair Play Trophy was awarded to Swedish sailors Lars Gunnar KÅLL and Stig Lennart KÅLL, for abandoning their race to come to the rescue of two competitors whose boat had capsized.

Judo (men’s) and volleyball (men’s and women’s) made their debut on the Games programme. This was the first team sport for women.
Mexican hurdler Enriqueta BASILIO was the first woman to light a cauldron at an Opening Ceremony.

At the 200m victory ceremony, Americans Tommie SMITH and John CARLOS, the gold and silver medallists respectively, raised a black-gloved fist and lowered their heads as the national anthem was played. They were demonstrating against racial segregation in the USA – a stance that saw them excluded from the Olympic Village.

A synthetic material, Tartan, was used for the first time for the athletics track.
While the first 11 days of the Games were perhaps the greatest Olympic celebrations ever seen, a terrible event overshadowed them on the morning of 5 September. Eight Palestinian terrorists entered the Olympic Village, taking 11 Israeli team members hostage before killing them all.

American swimmer Mark SPITZ won an incredible seven gold medals and broke seven world records!

Waldi was the first official mascot of the Olympic Summer Games. He was a dachshund, a very popular animal in Bavaria, famed for its endurance, tenacity and agility.
Women’s basketball, rowing and handball events made their debut on the Olympic programme.

Nadia COMANECI, a 14-year-old Romanian gymnast, was the undisputed queen of these Games. She rose to glory earning the first ever maximum score of 10.0 points on the uneven bars. In total, she earned this outstanding score seven times.

Hockey was staged for the first time on artificial grass.

Clarence HILL won the bronze medal in the lightweight boxing event and gave Bermuda its first Olympic medal.

Alberto JUANTORENA (CUB) took the first 400m and 800m double.

The Japanese women’s volleyball team dominated the discipline, winning all of their matches.
MOSCOW 1980

The Olympic Games were held in a socialist country for the first time.

Initiated by the USA, a boycott reduced the number of participating countries to 80, the smallest number ever recorded since 1956. This boycott was part of a series of measures aimed at protesting against the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops in December 1979.

Aleksandr DITYATIN (URS) won medals in all the men’s gymnastics events and became the first athlete to win eight medals at one edition of the Olympic Games.

After finishing second in the 800m, Sebastian COE (GBR) won the 1,500m. Four years later, he became the first athlete to retain the Olympic title in this event.

Boxer Teófilo STEVENSON (CUB) won gold for the third consecutive time. Only two other boxers have managed to achieve this.

Daley THOMPSON (GBR) won the decathlon, beating the world record. He repeated this feat four years later in Los Angeles.

The athletes’ parade at the Opening Ceremony

DATE | COUNTRY | ATHLETES | NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEES | EVENTS
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
19 July | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) | 5,179 | 80 | 203
3 August | | | | |
LOS ANGELES 1984

The Soviet Union led a boycott in revenge for the one it had been subject to four years earlier. However, 140 National Olympic Committees were present – a record!

Carl LEWIS (USA) entered the history books by equalling the success of his fellow countryman, Jess OWENS, in Berlin. He won gold medals in the same events: 100m, 200m, 4x100m relay and the long jump.

New Zealand archer Neroli FAIRHALL, a paraplegic, became the first athlete in history to compete for a medal whilst in a wheelchair.

The USA's Joan BENOIT won the first women's Olympic marathon.

Nawal EL MOUTAWAKEL (MAR) won the first women's 400m hurdles event in Olympic Games history, and became the first Arab, African and Muslim woman to win an Olympic gold medal.
Awarding the Games to South Korea provided the impetus needed to bring democracy to the country.

Canadian sprinter Ben JOHNSON beat the world record in the 100m, but then tested positive for steroids. He was the first world-famous athlete to be disqualified for doping.

In the cycling events, speed skater Christa LUDING-ROTHENBURGER (GDR) won a silver medal. With her two medals at the previous Winter Games, she became the first female athlete to win medals at consecutive editions of the Winter and Summer Games!

For the first time, the three steps of the dressage podium were all occupied by women.
For the first time since 1972, the Games were not boycotted.

In the last lap of the 10,000m final, Ethiopia’s Derartu TULU led from the front and won the race. After crossing the finish line, she waited for her South African rival, Elana MEYER, and ran a lap of honour with her, a real symbol of hope for a new Africa.

Spain’s Carlos FRONT, coxswain for the men’s coxed eights, became the youngest Olympic athlete of the 20th century: he was just 11 years old.

With basketball now open to professional players, the United States sent its “Dream Team” to Barcelona, with players including Earvin “Magic” JOHNSON, Michael JORDAN and Larry BIRD. Unsurprisingly, they dominated the competition and won the gold medal.
Athletes from 79 countries - a record - won medals, and 53 won at least one gold medal.

Beach volleyball, mountain biking, lightweight rowing and women’s football joined the Olympic programme.

American champion Michael JOHNSON became the first man in Olympic history to win both the 200m and the 400m! His 200m victory, in 19.32 seconds, was also a new world record.

Turkey’s Naim SULEYMANOGLU became the first weightlifter in history to win three consecutive Olympic titles.
Triathlon and taekwondo joined the Olympic programme. Women’s weightlifting and modern pentathlon events were held for the first time.

The honour of lighting the Olympic cauldron went to Aboriginal Australian athlete Cathy FREEMAN. This was a strong symbol of the desire for reconciliation with the Aboriginal population.

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) marched under the same flag.

For the first time, tests to detect EPO were conducted and blood samples taken.
ATHENS 2004

The media impact of these Games was unprecedented, with 3.9 billion television viewers following the event.

LIU Xiang (CHN) won the men’s 110m hurdles and became China’s first gold medallist in athletics.

The stadium in Ancient Olympia was renovated to host the shotput competitions, while the Panathenaic Stadium hosted the archery competitions and the finish of the marathon.

Women’s wrestling joined the Olympic programme, with four weight categories.

Canoeist Birgit FISCHER (GER) became the first athlete ever to win two medals at each of the five editions of the Games in which she took part.
The National Stadium, known as the Bird’s Nest to the people of Beijing, and the National Aquatics Centre, nicknamed the Water Cube, were avant-garde examples of sports architecture and symbols of the new Beijing.

Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Mauritius and Togo earned their first Olympic medals. Mongolia, Bahrain and Panama did even better, winning their first gold medals.

Michael PHELPS (USA) beat the record set by Mark SPITZ (USA) at the 1972 Games in Munich by winning eight gold medals.
Some of the competitions were held in prestigious locations, such as Wembley Stadium for football, the All England Club at Wimbledon for tennis, Lord's Cricket Ground for archery and Horse Guards Parade for beach volleyball.

After 1908 and 1948, London became the first city to host three editions of the Olympic Games.

Nicola ADAMS (GBR) became the first Olympic women’s boxing champion.

With these Games, for the first time in Olympic history, every National Olympic Committee had now included at least one woman in its team.

Epke ZONDERLAND (NED) won the high bar competition, with a routine that included a triple combo of Cassina-Kovacs-Kolman, then the most difficult release combination.
Michael PHELPS (USA) enriches his impressive record of 23 medals.

Usain BOLT (JAM) became the first athlete to win the 100m and 200m at three successive editions of the Games.

At the IOC’s initiative, 10 refugee athletes took part in the Games under the Olympic flag.

Nikki HAMBLIN (NZL) and Abbey D’AGOSTINO (USA) showed true Olympic spirit by helping each other after a fall in the 5,000m; they finished the race hand-in-hand.

In shooting, Kimberly RHODE (USA) won her sixth medal at her sixth consecutive edition of the Games.
Tokyo 2020 was the first edition in Olympic Games history to be postponed; it was delayed by one year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Several youth-centred sports and disciplines (basketball 3x3, BMX freestyle, sport climbing, skateboard and surfing) made their debut at these Games, providing a comprehensive transformation of the Olympic programme.

The high jump ended with a truly wonderful illustration of the Olympic spirit. Having tied, athletes Gianmarco TAMBERI (ITA) and Mutaz BARSHIM (QAT) agreed not to continue the competition and to share the gold medal!

Another name to remember was that of swimmer Emma MCKEON (AUS). In addition to being the athlete who won the most medals in Tokyo, she became the first female swimmer to win seven medals at the same edition of the Games.