

The Olympics

People all over the world watch the Olympic Games on TV, cheer on their nations' athletes, and get into the spirit of friendly international competition. Yet how many people know how these games came about and why they were created? Why is there an Olympic torch? What does the flag with the colored rings represent? Looking back in time a few millennia can answer those questions.

The first Olympic Games in recorded history took place in 776 BC on the ancient plains of Olympia in southern Greece. Athletes competed in running, long jump, shot put, javelin, boxing, and equestrian events. These ancient games coincided with a religious festival and were dedicated to the Olympian gods. They continued for almost twelve centuries until Emperor Theodosius banned them in AD 393 due to their pagan nature. Though linked to the cult of Zeus, in reality, the aim of the games was more secular. The intent was to show off the physical strength of the youth and to encourage good relations among the city-states of Greece.

The Olympics as we know them today have a similar purpose. Their intent is to showcase the strength and talents of the world's best athletes while bringing the countries of the world together.

That unity is the reason for the five interlocking rings on the Olympic flag. They represent the continents of North and South America, Asia, Europe, Africa, and Australia coming together.

It was about 1500 years after the last Olympics that the ancient games were revived. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, a Frenchman dedicated to the promotion of physical education, was inspired to create a modern Olympic Games after he visited the ancient Olympic site. Coubertin eventually won the support of an athletic organization in Paris. They gave him their approval to form an International Olympic Committee. It remains the governing body of today's Olympic Games.

The first modern Olympic Games took place in Athens, Greece, in 1896. Since then, they have grown in size. What started in Athens with 43 events, 280 athletes, and 13 countries returned to Athens in 2004 with nearly 11,000 athletes representing 201 countries.

Each Olympics since 1896 has been numbered, even when no actual games took place. The games were cancelled three times due to global conflicts. They were not held in 1916 during World War I or in 1940 or 1944 during World War II.

Even the opening and closing ceremonies have grown in size and scope. The first opening ceremony was in 1908 at the London Olympics. Host cities have been trying to outdo each other ever since.

Interestingly, the Olympic torch was lit for the first time at the opening ceremony of the 1936 games in Germany. The ancient Greeks had a ritual fire for their games, but the idea of lighting a torch in Olympia and relaying it to the sight of the games actually belongs to Carl Diem. He was the chief organizer of the Berlin games. Hitler was skeptical of holding the games at first but became convinced that connecting the Third Reich to the grandeur of ancient Olympia was a good idea.

Because of the massive devastation of World War II, the torch was not lit again until the 1948 games in London. Although the tradition was created in Nazi Germany, a recent enemy, Britain embraced the idea of lighting a torch in Greece, relaying it to the games, and this time hailing it as a “relay of peace.” Symbolically, the first torchbearer in Greece laid down his weapons and removed his army uniform before grasping the blazing torch.

The games have continued uninterrupted since 1948. A minor change did take place in 1994 when the timing of the Summer and Winter Olympic Games was changed so that they would not be held in the same year. They are now held separately, alternating every two years.

The revival of this ancient tradition has become one of the world’s premier sporting events. It has served as a way to honor remarkable athleticism and to bring many nations together in the pursuit of something positive. The Olympic torch will most likely continue to be lit for some time to come.

Questions

1. According to the author, what are two of the main purposes of the Olympics?
2. What can you infer about the meaning of the words *pagan* and *secular* based on the context of the second paragraph of the passage?
3. The Olympics are full of symbolism. Why was the Greek torchbearer removing his uniform in 1948 symbolic?
4. Based on the passage, do you think the author has a favorable or unfavorable view of the Olympics? Cite evidence from the text to support your opinion.

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. millennia
2. ancient
3. equestrian
4. coincided
5. secular
6. intent
7. showcase
8. global
9. grandeur
10. massive

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "Looking back in time a few **millennia**"

- a. hundreds of years b. thousands of years c. moments d. thousands of miles

2) "Games in recorded history took place in 776 BC on the **ancient** plains of Olympia"

- a. dry and flat b. fertile; green c. popular d. very old

3) "Athletes competed in running, long jump, shot put, javelin, boxing, and **equestrian** events"

- a. horseback riding b. team c. swimming d. sewing

4) "These ancient games **coincided** with a religious festival"

- a. conflicted; opposed b. happened at the same time c. began d. ended

5) "Though linked to the cult of Zeus, in reality, the aim of the games was more **secular**."

- a. interesting b. unusual c. important d. nonreligious; not religious

6) "The **intent** was to show off the physical strength of the youth"

- a. purpose; aim b. order; requirement c. beginning; start d. consequence

7) Their intent is to **showcase** the strength and talents of the world's best athletes

- a. develop; improve b. create c. focus on; highlight d. applaud; congratulate

8) "The games were cancelled three times due to **global** conflicts."

- a. military b. worldwide c. governmental d. regional

9) "connecting the Third Reich to the **grandeur** of ancient Olympia was a good idea"

- a. history b. character; likeness c. greatness; magnificence d. importance

10) "Because of the **massive** devastation of World War II"

- a. huge; widespread b. recent c. regretful; tragic d. nearby; close