Olympic Games Essay, Research Paper

The Olympic Games, an international sports competition, are held once every four

years at a different site, where athletes from different nations compete against

each other in a wide variety of sports. There are two classifications of

Olympics, the Summer Olympics and the Winter Olympics. Through 1992 they were

held in the same year, but beginning in 1994 they were rescheduled so that they

are held in alternate even-numbered years. For example, the Winter Olympics were

held in 1994 and the Summer Olympics in 1996. The Winter Olympics were next held

in 1998 in Nagano, Japan, while the Summer Olympics will next occur in 2000 in

Sydney, Australia. The Olympic Games are administered by the International

Olympic Committee (IOC), which is headquartered in Lausanne, Switzerland. The

IOC was created in Paris in 1894 as an independent committee selecting its own

members but "to begin the process, however, Coubertin himself chose the

first 15 members"(White 60). IOC members are officially considered to be

"representatives from the IOC to their own nations, not delegates from

their own countries to the IOC"(White 65). Most members are elected to the

IOC after serving on the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) of their own

countries. The first IOC members were all from either Europe or the Americas,

with the exception of one representative from New Zealand. Currently, members

from European and North American countries still account for a majority of the

IOC membership. IOC members must retire at the end of the year in which they

reach the age of 80, unless they were elected before 1966, in which case they

can serve for life. The IOC oversees such functions as determining the site of

the Olympic Games, the establishment of worldwide Olympic policies, and the

negotiation of Olympic television broadcast rights. The IOC works closely with

the NOCs and with the International Amateur Athletic Federation (the

international governing body for track and field), and other international

sports federations (ISFs) to organize the Olympics. The ISFs are responsible for

the "international rules and regulations of the sports they

govern"(Gary 22). The IOC president, who is chosen by IOC members, is

assisted by an executive board, several vice presidents, and a number of IOC

commissions. The IOC’s first president, Demetrius Vik?las of Greece (served

1894-1896), was succeeded by Coubertin himself (1896-1925). The other IOC

presidents have been Count Henri de Baillet-Latour of Belgium (1925-1942), J.

Sigfrid Edstr?m of Sweden (1946-1952), Avery Brundage of the United States

(1952-1972), Michael Morris, Lord Killanin, of Ireland (1972-1980), and Juan

Antonio Samaranch of Spain (1980-) . In order to host the Olympics, a city must

submit a proposal to the IOC, and after all proposals have been submitted, the

IOC will vote. If no city is successful in gaining a majority in the first vote,

the city with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voting continues with

successive rounds, until a majority winner is determined. Typically the Games

are awarded several years in advance in the hopes of allowing the winning city

adequate time to prepare for the Games. In selecting the site of the Olympic

Games, the IOC considers a number of factors, mainly among them is which city

has, or promises to build, the best facilities, and which organizing committee

seems most likely to stage the Games effectively as well as efficiently. The IOC

also considers which parts of the world have not yet hosted the Games. For

instance, Tokyo, the host of the 1964 Summer Games, and Mexico City, the host of

the 1968 Summer Games, "were chosen in part to popularize the Olympic

movement in Asia and in Latin America"(Gorman 69). Because of the growing

importance of television worldwide, the IOC in recent years has also taken into

account the host city’s time zone. Whenever the Games take place in the United

States or Canada, American television networks are willing to pay significantly

higher amounts for television rights because they can broadcast popular events

live, in prime viewing hours. Once the Games have been awarded, it is the

responsibility of the local organizing committee-not the IOC or the NOC of the

host city’s country-to finance them. This is often done with a portion of the

Olympic television revenues and with corporate sponsorships, ticket sales, and

other smaller revenue sources, such as commemorative postage stamps or proceeds

from a national lottery. In many cases there is also some direct government

support. Although many cities have achieved a financial profit by hosting the

Games, the Olympics can be financially risky. Montreal, Canada, for example,

spent a great deal of money preparing for the 1976 Summer Games which were due

to "extensive design and construction costs for new facilities. When the

proceeds from the Games were less than expected, the city was left with large

debts"(White 28). Although the Olympic Charter, the official constitution

of the Olympic movement, proclaims that the Olympics are contests among

individuals and not among nations, the IOC assigns to the various NOCs the task

of selecting national Olympic teams. In most cases the NOCs do this by holding

Olympic trials or by choosing athletes on the basis of their previous

performances. From the start of the modern Olympic Games, "male amateur

athletes of every race, religion, and nationality have been eligible to

participate"(White 36). Although Coubertin "opposed the participation

of women in the Olympics and no women competed in 1896", a few female

golfers and tennis players were allowed to participate in the 1900 Games (Gary

39). Female swimmers and divers were admitted to the 1912 Games, and female

gymnasts and track-and-field athletes first competed at the 1928 Games. Women’s

Olympic sports have grown significantly since then, and currently women account

for approximately half of the members of teams, except in teams from Islamic

nations, where the level of female participation is generally lower. Coubertin

and the IOC intended from the start for the Olympics to be open only to

amateurs. Amateurism was determined by adherence to the amateur rule, which was

originally devised in the 19th century to "prevent working-class athletes

from participating in sports such as rowing and tennis"(Gary 21). The

amateur rule prevented athletes from earning any pay from activities in any way

related to sports, and working-class athletes could not afford both to make a

living and train for competition. Olympic rules about amateurism, however, have

caused many controversies over the years. Such questions as whether an amateur

could be "reimbursed for travel expenses, be compensated for time lost at

work, be paid for product endorsements, or be employed to teach sports"

have been raised, but they have not always been satisfactorily resolved by the

IOC, leading to confusion about the definition of professionalism in different

sports (White 79). By 1983 a majority of IOC members acknowledged that most

Olympic athletes compete professionally in the sense that sports are their main

activity. The IOC then asked each ISF to determine eligibility in its own sport,

and over the next decade nearly all the ISFs abolished the distinction between

amateurs and professionals, accepting so-called open Games. One of the most

visible examples of the policy change came in 1992, when professional players

from the National Basketball Association of the United States were permitted to

play in the Summer Games in Barcelona, Spain. The Olympic Games have always

included a number of ceremonies, many of which emphasize the themes of

international friendship and peaceful co-operation. The opening ceremony has

always included the parade of nations, in which the teams from each nation enter

the main stadium as part of a procession. The Greek team always enters first, to

"commemorate the ancient origins of the modern Games", and the team of

the host nation always enters last(Gary 25). The opening ceremony has evolved

over the years into a complex extravaganza, with music, speeches, and pageantry.

The torch relay, in which the Olympic Flame symbolizes the "transmission of

Olympic ideals from ancient Greece to the modern world and was introduced as

part of the opening ceremony at the 1936 Summer Games in Berlin"(Gary 26).

In the relay the torch is lit in Olympia, Greece, and is carried over several

weeks or months to the Host City by a series of runners. After the last runner

has lit the Olympic Cauldron in the main Olympic stadium, the host country’s

head of state declares the Games officially open, and doves are released to

symbolize the hope of world peace. Two other important ceremonial innovations

had appeared earlier at the 1920 Games in Antwerp, Belgium. The Olympic Flag,

with its five interlocking rings of different colors against a white background,

was flown for the first time. The five rings represent "unity among the

nations of Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, and Europe"(Gary 27).

Another innovation occurring in 1920 was the first reciting of the Olympic Oath,

taken in the name of all the athletes by a member of the host’s team. The oath

asserts "the athletes’ commitment to the ideals of sportsmanship in

competition"(Gorman 22). Medal ceremonies are also an important part of the

Modern Games. After each individual event during the Games, medals are awarded

in a ceremony to the first-, second-, and third-place finishers. The ceremony

occurs after each event, when these competitors mount a podium to receive gold

(actually gold-plated), silver (silver-plated), and bronze medals. While the

national flags of all three competitors are hoisted, the national anthem of the

winner’s country is played. Some critics have suggested that because the medal

ceremony seems to contradict the IOC’s vow to internationalism, these national

symbols should be replaced by the hoisting of the Olympic Flag and the playing

of the official Olympic Hymn. Originally there was another parade of nations

during the closing ceremonies of the Games. At the end of the 1956 Summer Games

in Melbourne, Australia, the athletes "broke ranks and mingled together to

celebrate the occasion, and this custom is continued throughout subsequent

games"(Gorman 24). After the athletes join in the main Olympic stadium in

celebration, the president of the IOC invites the athletes and spectators to

meet again at the site of the next Games. The IOC president then declares the

Games officially over, and the Olympic Flame is extinguished. While the exact

origin is unknown, there have been many popular myths surrounding the beginning

of the Ancient Olympic Games. Two of the more popular myths surround the

legendary Hercules and a young hero named Pelops . The most common myth of the

beginning of the Ancient Olympics is the story of the hero Pelops and was

displayed prominently on the east pedimental sculptures of the Temple of Zeus.

Pelops was a prince from Lydia in Asia Minor who sought the hand of Hippodamia,

the daughter of King Oinomaos of Pisa. Oinomaos challenged his daughter’s

suitors to a chariot race under the guarantee that any young man who won the

chariot race could have Hippodamia as a wife. Any young man who lost the race

would be beheaded, and the heads would be used as decoration for the palace of

Oinomaos. With the help of his charioteer Myrtilos, Pelops devised a plan to

beat Oinomaos in the chariot race. Pelops and Myrtilos secretly replaced the

bronze linchpins of the King’s chariot with linchpins made of wax. When Oinomaos

was about to pass Pelops in the chariot race, the wax melted and Oinomaos was

thrown to his death. Pelops married Hippodamia and instituted the Olympic games

to celebrate his victory. A different version of the myth refers to the Olympic

games as funeral games in the memory of Oinomaos. Another myth about the origin

of the Olympic Games comes from the Tenth Olympian Ode of the poet Pindar. He

tells the story of how Hercules, on his fifth labor, had to clean the stables of

King Augeas of Elis. Hercules approached Augeas and promised to clean the

stables for the price of one-tenth of the king’s cattle. Augeas agreed, and

Hercules re-routed the Kladeos and Alpheos rivers to flow through the stables.

Augeas did not fulfill his promise, however, and after Hercules had finished his

labors he returned to Elis and waged war on Augeas. Hercules sacked the city of

Elis and instituted the Olympic Games in honor of his father, Zeus. It is said

that Hercules taught men how to wrestle and measured out the stade, or the

length of the footrace. Although the exact origin is unknown the Ancient Olympic

Games were held in a sacred valley at Olympia in Elis near the western coast of

Greece and the earliest recorded Olympic competition was in 776 B.C. So

important were these contests that time was measured by the four-year interval

between the Games with the term "Olympiad" describing this period. It

is a well established fact that religious festivals in honor of Olympian Zeus

had been observed in the sacred valley for several centuries previous to that

remote date. The Greek Games were celebrated in the belief that "the

spirits of the dead were gratified by such spectacles as delighted them during

their earthly life"(Gorman 79). During the Homeric age, these festivals

were "simply sacrifices followed by games at the tomb or before the funeral

pyre"(White 49). Gradually they grew into religious festivals observed by

an entire community and celebrated near the shrine of the god in whose honor

they were instituted. The idea then developed that the gods themselves were

present but invisible and delighted in the services and the contests. Later

these festivals lost their local character and became Pan-Hellenic. Four of

these festivals, Olympian, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian, had attracted world

wide attention but the one held at Olympia was by far the most important

consecrated to the Olympian Zeus. The Olympic Games became the greatest festival

of a mighty nation. Once every four years "trading was suspended, the

continuously warring states and the fighting tribes laid down their arms, and

all of the people went forth in peace to pay tribute to the manhood of its

nation"(Gorman 82). The immediate site of the Games, the Stadium of

Olympia, lay towards the northeast of the Altis beyond Mount Kromion. It was an

oblong area that was "about 643 feet in length and about 97 feet wide. It

consisted of four sloping heights, two at the sides and two at the ends. The one

at the north had been cut into a hill, while the other had been artificially

formed by earth that had been taken from the arena. The spectators sat on the

grassy slopes which accommodated more than 40,000"(White 50). For the first

13 Olympiads, the competition consisted of "a single race of 200 yards,

approximately the length of the stadium"(Gorman 84) The race was called the

"Stade" from which our word "stadium" was derived. The first

recorded victor in 776 B.C. was "Coroebus of Elis, a cook"(Gorman 84).

The athletes of Elis maintained an unbroken string of victories until the 14th

Olympiad at which time a second race of two lengths of the stadium was added. In

the 15th Olympiad, an endurance event was added in which the athletes "went

12 times around the stadium, about 4 1/2 kilometers"(Gorman 85). The

athletes competed in groups of four, which were determined by "drawing lots

with the winners meeting the other winners until a final race was

run"(Gorman 86). In 708 B.C., the Pentathlon and Wrestling events were

introduced. In 688 B.C., Boxing; in 680 the Four Horse Chariot Race; in 648 the

Pancration (a fierce combination of boxing and wrestling), and in 580 the Armed

Race where the men traversed the stadium twice while heavily armed. In the

pentathlon, those who jumped a certain distance qualified for the spear

throwing; the four best then sprinted the length of the stadium, the three best

then threw the discus, and the two best then engaged in a wrestling match to the

finish. The early rewards were "simple crowns of wild olive, but, by the

61st Olympiad, it was permitted in Olympia to erect statues in honor of the

victors"(Gary 72). However, the athletes had to win three times before the

statues could be made in their likeness. Later, it was often the practice to

make "a breach in the walls of the city through which the victorious

athletes returned"(Gary 73). In the fifth century before the Common Era,

the Games reached their climax; and they were already showing their first sign

of decay. Trying for records and specialization claimed the interest of the

crowd. The invasion of the Macedonians put an end to the Greek city-states and,

relieved of the political controversies, they devoted themselves entirely to the

Olympic Games. Instead of training their growing youth like the Greeks, they

merely hired athletes and nationalized them. During the middle of the second

century before the Common Era, Greece came under the domination of the Romans,

who permitted the Games to continue but they had little interest in them.

Centuries passed and the Games still continued but the high Olympic ideals were

entirely discarded and profit alone provided the incentive. In "393 A.D.,

the Emperor Theodosius forbade the Games altogether"(Gorman 102) but they

had survived a period of "nearly 300 Olympiads or approximately 1200

years"(Gary 78). Full credit for the revival of the Olympic Games in the

modern era must go to Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who was "born in Paris,

Jan. 1, 1863 and who died at Geneva, Sept. 2, 1937"(Gary 89). Very early in

life he showed a taste for the study of "literature, history, and the

problems of education and sociology"(Gary 90). At the age of 17 he began to

scrutinise the weaknesses of his people who were trying to recover hope and

self-respect following the Franco-Prussian War. He concluded that "three

monarchies, two empires, and three republics during a single century are not

indicative of stability in the French character"(Gary 92). The solution, he

believed rested in the development of the individual. Coubertin had sufficient

means to travel, he therefore visited England and America where he studied

organised athletics conducted by students. He observed that "competing for

a place on an athletic team developed qualities of character whereas the

attitude in French schools was that games destroyed study"(Gorman 118). He

was convinced that he should devote his entire time and energy to securing a

reform in his own country. He decided to start at the bottom because, as he

expressed it, "the foundation of real human morality lies in mutual

respect-and to respect one another it is necessary to know one

another"(Gary 92) Coubertin was not an athlete but he chose athletics as

his field. The first major sport with which he associated himself was rowing,

but when he attempted to bring the British oarsmen to France or send the French

oarsmen to compete at Henley, he found that the "British and French

conceptions of amateurism were not the same"(Gorman 120). This gave him the

idea of bringing together educators, diplomats, and sports leader for the

purpose of developing a universal understanding of amateurism so that the

athletes of all nations might meet on an equal basis. Coubertin realized that to

capture the attention of disinterested persons he would have to originate

something spectacular. He began to dream of a revival of the Olympic Games. At a

meeting of the Athletic Sports Union at Sorbonne in Paris, Nov. 25, 1892, be

first publicly announced the Olympic Games idea. Speaking at the conference,

Coubertin said, "Let us export oarsmen, runners, fencers; there is the free

trade of the future-and on the day when it shall take place among the customs of

Europe the cause of peace will have received a new and powerful

support"(Gorman 125). However, his proposal to revive the Olympic Games

went for naught as his auditors failed to grasp the significance of the idea.

His next opportunity came in the spring of 1894 at an international congress

which he had assembled for the purpose of studying the questions of amateurism.

At this meeting, official delegates from France, England, the United States,

Greece, Russia, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, and Spain, were in attendance. Hungary,

Germany, Bohemia, Holland and Australia sent proxies or letters. Seven questions

concerning the problem of amateurism were on the agenda and Coubertin took the

liberty of adding an eighth, "Regarding the possibility of the revival of

the Olympic Games"(Gorman 125). Coubertin imparted his enthusiasm so well

that it was "unanimously agreed on June 23, 1894 to revive the Games and an

International Committee was formed to look after their development and well-being"(Gorman

130). Two years later in 1896 Greece celebrated in the rebuilt stadium of Athens

the first Olympic Games of the present cycle and from this beginning, the

world’s greatest athletic spectacle was established. Only the ceaseless labor,

the tenacity and the perseverance of Baron de Coubertin accomplished and

perfected this great work. Its main organization benefited from his methodical

and precise mind and from his wide understanding of the aspirations and needs of

youth. In fact, Coubertin was "the sole director of the Games in regards to

their form and character; the Olympic Charter and Protocol and the athlete’s

oath were his creation, as well as the opening and closing ceremonies of the

Games"(Gary 95). In addition, until 1925, he personally presided over the

IOC, assuming single-handed all the administrative and financial duties. The

work of Coubertin was, above all, a work of peace but there is one basic fact,

almost universally misunderstood which is that peace is not the major aim of the

Olympic Games. "Peace," Coubertin hoped and believed, "would be

furthered by the Olympic Games . . . but peace could be the product only of a

better world; a better world could be brought about only by better individuals;

and better individuals could be developed only by the give and take, the

buffeting and battering, the stress and strain of fierce competition."

Although they were founded as part of a vision of world peace, once the modern

Olympic Games became a truly important international event they also became a

stage for political disputes. The most controversial Olympics were the Berlin

Games of 1936. The IOC had voted in 1931 to hold these Games in Berlin, before

IOC members could have known that the Nazi movement would soon control the

country. When it became known in the early 1930s that under the rule of the

Nazis, German Jewish athletes were being barred from the 1936 German team which

was in violation of the Olympic Charter, many Americans demanded a boycott of

the 1936 Games. The boycott movement failed because Avery Brundage, head of the

United States Olympic Committee (USOC) at the time, was convinced by German

officials that "Jewish athletes would be permitted to try out for the

German team"(Gary122). In fact, only two Jewish athletes were named to the

1936 German Olympic team, and both were of mixed religious backgrounds. There

have been several boycotts of the Olympics by various countries. In 1956 the

Egyptian, Lebanese, and Iraqi teams boycotted the Melbourne Games to protest the

invasion of Egypt by the United Kingdom, France, and Israel that had occurred

earlier that year. Major boycotts of the Olympics occurred in 1976, 1980, and

1984. In 1976 many African nations demanded that New Zealand be excluded from

the Montreal Games because its rugby team had played against South Africa, then

under the rule of supporters of apartheid, the official policy of racial

segregation followed in that country from 1948 to the early 1990s. When the IOC

resisted the demands of the African countries with the argument that rugby was

not an Olympic sport, athletes from 28 African nations were called home by their

governments. The issue in the 1980 boycott of the Moscow Games was the invasion

of Afghanistan in 1979 by the USSR. Although American President Jimmy Carter

forced the USOC to "refuse the invitation to attend the Moscow Games, many

other NOCs defied their governments’ requests that they boycott the

Games"(Gary 124). Once Carter acted to spoil the Moscow Games and after

"62 nations did boycott the Games" it became clear that the USSR and

its allies would retaliate with another boycott at the 1984 Games in Los

Angeles. Although Romania did send a team to Los Angeles, 16 of the USSR’s other

allies boycotted the Los Angeles Games. From the 1940s to the 1980s, the IOC

also had to deal with the political problems caused by divided nations. One

example was the dilemma concerning the Chinese Olympic team, which developed in

1949 after the political division of China into the People’s Republic of China

on the mainland and the Republic of China on the island of Taiwan. The issue was

whether the Chinese people would be represented by a team from the mainland or

by a team from Taiwan. In 1952 the IOC decided to invite both Chinas, but this

decision led to decades of boycott by the government of mainland China, which

did not send a team to the Olympics until the Lake Placid Games in 1980. Another

political issue arose in 1949, because of the formal political division of

Germany that year into East Germany and West Germany. This division created the

question of whether there was to be one German team or two. The IOC tried to

solve this problem by insisting on a combined German team. Negotiations lasted

several years, and this solution was first tested at the Melbourne Games in

1956; it lasted until the Munich Games in 1972, for which two teams were formed.

There continued to be two German teams until 1992, by which time the countries

had reunited. The IOC also had to cope with racial segregation in South Africa.

The IOC voted in 1968 to exclude the South African team from Olympic competition

in order to bring pressure on the government to give up its policy of apartheid.

The South Africans were not readmitted until the Barcelona Games in 1992-by

which time apartheid had been discontinued. Violence has also occurred at the

Olympic Games. In the midst of the 1972 Munich Games, the Olympic movement

experienced its most tragic hour. A band of Palestinian terrorists made their

way into the Olympic village, murdered two members of the Israeli team, and took

nine hostages. When the IOC, meeting in emergency session, learned that a

gunfight had broken out and that all nine hostages were dead, along with five of

the terrorists, the Games were suspended for a day. The IOC’s controversial

decision to resume the Games that year was endorsed by the Israeli government.

Having survived a century of warfare and political turmoil, the Olympic Games

have become very successful in recent years, gaining more popularity and

generating more money than ever before. A great deal of this popularity and

wealth is due to the development of satellite communications and global

telecasts. Not only can more and more people see the Games, but the opportunity

developed to sell television rights to the Games for hundreds of millions of

dollars. With their share of this income, organizing committees can now stage

spectacular Games without fear of the huge indebtedness incurred by Montreal’s

organizing committee in 1976. With more money, the IOC can also subsidize the

development of sports in less affluent nations. In return for their money,

however, television networks have gained a strong influence on when, where, and

how the Olympics will take place. The Olympic movement has also become dependent

on multinational corporations, who pay millions of dollars to become official

sponsors of the game and to use Olympic symbols in their advertisements which

has led to the mass commercialization of the Olympic movement. However Pierre de

Coubertin’s dream has lasted over 25 Olympiads and will no doubt continue remain

in the hearts of the world with the Olympic ideals carrying on well into the

future. The Games of the Olympiads and The Cities of the Olympic Games Summer

Winter I 1896 Athens, Greece II 1900 Paris, France III 1904 St. Louis, USA IV

1908 London, England V 1912 Stockholm, Sweden VI 1916 Cancelled due to W.W.I VII

1920 Antwerp, Belgium VIII 1924 Paris, France 1924 I Chamonix, France IX 1928

Amsterdam, The Netherlands 1928 II St. Moritz, Switzerland X 1932 Los Angeles,

USA 1932 III Lake Placid, USA XI 1936 Berlin, Germany 1936 IV

Garmish-Partenkirchen, Germany XII 1940 Cancelled due to W.W.II 1940 Cancelled

due to W.W.II XIII 1944 Cancelled due to W.W.II 1944 Cancelled due to W.W.II XIV

1948 London, England 1948 V St. Moritz, Switerland XV 1952 Helsinki, Finland

1952 VI Oslo, Norway XVI 1956 Melbourne, Australia 1956 VII Cortina D’Ampezzo,

Italy XVII 1960 Rome, Italy 1960 VIII Squaw Valley, U.S.A. XVIII 1964 Tokyo,

Japan 1964 IX Innsbruck, Austria XIX 1968 Mexico City, Mexico 1968 X Grenoble,

France XX 1972 Munich, Germany 1972 XI Sapporo, Japan XXI 1976 Montreal, Canada

1976 XII Innsbruck, Austria XXII 1980 Moscow U.S.S.R 1980 XIII Lake Placid,

U.S.A. XXIII 1984 Los Angeles, USA 1984 XIV Sarajevo, Yugoslavia XXIV 1988

Seoul, South Korea 1988 XV Calgary, Canada XXV 1992 Barcelona, Spain 1992 XVI

Albertville, France XXVI 1996 Atlanta U.S.A 1994 XVII Lillehammer, Norway XXVII

2000 Sydney, Australia 1998 XVIII Nagano, Japan

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