

Winter Olympic traditions begin in 1924; Vancouver games anticipated

Written by Darci Tomky

Citius—Altius—Fortius.

Faster. Higher. Stronger.

The idea that one's focus should be on bettering one's achievements rather than on coming in first was at the heart of the inaugural modern Olympic Games in 1896.

Now, over a century later, those values still ring true as athletes around the world prepare for the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada Feb. 12-28.

With the 21st Winter Olympic Games just around the corner, take some time to reflect on how the ski jumping, triple axles, torch relays and gold medals got their start.

Chamonix remembered

Before skiers and figure skaters obtained their own games, they began to emerge on the Olympic scene in the early 1900s. Figure skating made an appearance at the 1908 Summer Olympics in London, England.

Eight years later, Olympic organizers planned to introduce a "Skiing Olympia" at the 1916 Summer Games in Berlin, Germany, but the Games were canceled due to WWI.

Ice hockey then made its debut and figure skating returned at the 1920 Summer Olympics in Antwerp, Belgium.

Originally called "Winter Sports Week," 258 athletes competed in 16 different events in

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Chamonix, France in 1924. Founder of the modern Olympics Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the Scandinavian countries all objected, as they already had their own Nordic championships every four years. Despite their protests, the event was a huge success, attracting 10,004 paying spectators.

Featuring speed skating, hockey, bobsleigh, figure skating and nordic skiing, athletes finally had a winter event to call their own. Retrospectively, Winter Sports Week was named the first Winter Olympic Games and would go down in history.

American Charles Jewtraw became the first Winter Games champion, winning the 500 meter speed skating. Finland's Clas Thunberg won five medals in speed skating, and the Canadian hockey team won the tournament by scoring a total of 122 goals, with only three scored against them, at those first Winter Olympic Games.

Perhaps the most memorable medalist from Chamonix was American Anders Haugen. Errors in the ski jump markings deprived him of the bronze medal he rightfully won. He eventually proved his case and was awarded the medal 50 years later in 1974, making him the oldest man to receive an Olympic medal at 83 years old.

Traditions established

Those in attendance at the first Winter Olympics in Chamonix saw a parade of the delegates during the Opening Ceremonies, much like the display fans will watch in Vancouver this Friday. However, in 1924, athletes marched in the parade with their equipment on their shoulders.

Olympic rules at the time said they had to walk in their sportswear which includes equipment. Therefore, hockey players marched with their sticks, and skiers proudly displayed their skis.

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Today, athletes have replaced sportswear at the Opening Ceremonies with elaborate costumes, each country aiming to outdo the other competitors.

With the Chamonix Winter Olympics followed by the Paris Summer Olympics in 1924, the traditional four-year cycle of staging both the Winter and Summer Games in the same year continued through 1992. In 1994, just two years after the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville, France, they had another winter event in Lillehammer, Norway—the beginning of a new schedule with the Winter and Summer Games alternating every two years.

One tradition sure to be recognized around the world is the Olympic rings. The five colored rings—blue, yellow, black, green and red—symbolize the five continents from which athletes travel to take part in the Olympic Games (the Americas are considered one continent). Every nation's flag contains at least one of the five colors or white from the Olympic symbol's background.

The games were intended to be a place where all nations could go and compete in unity, as shown by the interlocking rings. Coubertin, who created the rings and the flag upon which they were flown, wanted to ensure the Olympic flag would be universally accepted.

The Olympic flag was first flown at the 1920 games in Antwerp, Belgium and has been flown at every Olympic event since.

Brandt experiences Olympic custom

Ancient Greeks believed fire to have sacred qualities, and still today, the flame holds a unique symbolism—notably for the Olympic Games.

Honoring the ancient Greek tradition, a flame is lit in front of the ruins of the Temple of Hera in

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Olympia using a parabolic mirror and the rays of the sun. A relay of runners carries torches from Greece to the site of the Olympic Games, lighting a cauldron there that remains lit until extinguished in the Closing Ceremonies.

“Humbling” and “awesome” are two words Jerry Brandt used to describe his role in transporting the Olympic torch in its long journey from Greece to Salt Lake City, Utah in 2002.

Brandt was nominated to be a support runner as the torch passed through Fort Collins. It was his responsibility to run alongside the torch bearers and assist them in any way needed.

One memorable moment for Brandt was hearing the stories from the torch bearers—traditionally local heroes with big life experiences. “It’s a way to honor their desire to live or their significant contribution to life,” said Brandt.

He supported three runners in the relay, but the once-in-a-lifetime experience was over in a short amount of time since Brandt’s total distance was only about half a mile. He noted the “outpouring of support” coming from the large crowds cheering along the route.

It was a “proud moment” for both the country and Brandt—running alongside the torch and even getting a chance to carry the flame for a time.

Torch bearers wore white uniforms while the support runners were decked out in blue. Brandt said it was fun after the event, being recognized in his official jacket.

The Winter Olympics were much more personal for Brandt that year, and he definitely watched them with more enthusiasm.

This was Brandt’s second encounter with the torch. He helped organize the relay in 1996 when the relay passed through the area on its way to the Summer Games in Atlanta, Ga.

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Shari Johnson, a 1996 graduate of Holyoke High School, had the honor of being a torch bearer, running a half mile with the flame through Brush.

The Olympic torch made its way through northeast Colorado as the U.S. Cycling Team proudly handed the torch off to runners in Julesburg. Finally, Pony Express riders carried the tradition on horseback in Nebraska.

Summer Olympic Games have been lighting symbolic Olympic flames since 1928, and the first Winter Games to participate in the tradition were held in 1936.

The first torch relay took place for the 1936 Summer Games in Berlin. Since 1964, the Winter Games have also had a torch relay starting in Olympia. Of the three Winter Olympics preceding 1964, two had torch relays beginning at the fireplace of skiing pioneer Sondre Norheim, and one had a relay starting in Rome, Italy.

Memorable moments relived

Winter Olympic fans all have a favorite event to watch, and whether that's bobsledding or figure skating, these memorable American moments from Winter Games are sure to spark an Olympic spirit.

—Team USA celebrated a 4-3 victory over the Soviet Union in the 1980 semifinal hockey game, later known as “The Miracle on Ice.” The underdogs went on to win the gold medal by defeating Finland 4-2 in the final game in Lake Placid, N.Y.

—Figure skater Michelle Kwan cried on the podium after finishing third at her final Olympic

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Games in 2002. The five-time world champion and nine-time U.S. champion led the competition going into the free skate, but was unable to pull out a victory as the result of a flawless performance from American Sarah Hughes who won the gold at 16.

—Speed skater Bonnie Blair took home five gold medals in three Olympic appearances making her one of the best speed skating sprinters of all time.

—Just weeks before the 1994 Olympics, figure skater Nancy Kerrigan was attacked by fellow skater Tonya Harding’s ex-husband. It was seen as an effort to sabotage the gold-medal favorite and prevent her from competing in Lillehammer.

—Australia’s short track speed skater Steven Bradbury crossed the finish line while American Apolo Anton Ohno scrambled across the line to claim second place in the men’s 1000 meter final in 2002.

—Dorothy Hamill won figure skating gold at the 1976 Games, capturing the hearts of many American fans along the way.

Undoubtedly many more memorable moments will be added to Olympic history as the Games kick off in Vancouver this weekend. Watch your favorite athletes as they follow their dreams—aiming to be “faster, higher and stronger.”

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