

## Less known aspects of the Olympic Games

### *Aspecte mai puțin cunoscute despre Jocurile Olimpice*

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#### **Abstract**

Much has been written about the Olympic Games because it is a worldwide event that makes us empathize with a whole world, but especially reminds us to be patriotic, reminding us that we have to fight for high achievements in sport. The beginning of 2018 has been marked by the Winter Olympic Games, the supreme level sporting event, held every four years. This year's host, PyeongChang City of South Korea was voted in after its third candidacy (first in 2010, second in 2014), making a collective effort to be ready in time. Athletes from 92 countries (absolute record) attended 15 sports disciplines and 102 events. Sport is and will be a messenger of twinning among nations, of respecting global values and the progress of athlete achievements. The history of these games is impressive both through its events and its continuity.

In this article, our intention is to contribute with additional information on some less known aspects of the Olympic Games and to highlight the contribution of personalities to the continuation and progress of sporting performances.

**Keywords:** Olympic Games, antiquity, modern age

#### **Rezumat**

Despre Jocurile Olimpice s-a scris și se va mai scrie foarte mult, deoarece este evenimentul care ne face să empatizăm cu o lume întreagă, dar mai ales ne aduce aminte să fim patrioți, ne aduce aminte că pentru lucruri mărețe trebuie să luptăm. Începutul anului 2018 este marcat de Jocurile Olimpice de Iarnă, manifestare sportivă de cel mai înalt nivel, organizată odată la patru ani. Gazda de anul acesta, orașul Pyeongchang din Coreea de Sud, a fost votată după a treia candidatură (prima în 2010, a doua în 2014), depunând un efort colectiv pentru a fi gata la timp. Participă sportivi din 92 de țări (record absolut) la 15 discipline sportive și 102 probe. Sportul este și va fi un mesager al înfrățirii între națiuni, al respectării valorilor globale, al progresului oamenilor de pe această planetă. Istoria acestor jocuri este impresionantă atât prin evenimente, cât și prin continuitate.

În acest articol, intenția noastră este de a contribui cu un plus de informație privind unele aspecte mai puțin cunoscute despre Jocurile Olimpice și să subliniem contribuția unor personalități, la continuarea și progresul performanțelor sportive.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Jocuri Olimpice, antichitate, epoca modernă

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#### **From antiquity**

During the Olympics (the time elapsed between two successive games), many activities, games were held to prepare the athletes for the shows, the battles, the wars to come. The name "athlete" was attributed to all participants.

The consecration of actors and athletes was made within festivities organized locally and throughout Greece.

The most popular national athletic festivities/events were: the Olympic Games from Olympia (*Olympiakoi Agones*), Delphi Pythic Games, Corinthian Isthmic Games and German Games in Nemea, each with its own features. Of these, celebrations and games were held every four years in Olympia, in the northwest of the Peloponnese,

becoming the center of interest of the entire Greece.

The games started on the first day of the summer solstice and lasted for five days.

The admitted athletes were prepared/trained for 10 months for body strengthening, resistance to hunger, thirst, high temperatures, and all kinds of fatigue (Kirîțescu, 1964).

We point out that over the course of time there have been 293 Olympiads in 1172 years, spanning 12 centuries, and the regularity with which these games were continuously played impresses even nowadays. Unbelievably, no matter what events occurred: wars, revolutions, political events or natural disasters, they could not disturb the regularity of the Games or the Olympics.

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These games also had a political dimension because during their duration, all political and military conflicts between the Greek cities ceased, and the so-called “Olympic Peace” was established (Sofronie, 2016).

The important events of this historical period were memorized by the Olympiad’s order number. (e.g.: the Battle of Thermopylae, 480 BC, the first year of the 75th Olympiad) (8).

The games started with a solemn procession, sacrifices were made to the gods, the competitors were present, and the oath was taken. Only free Greeks were allowed to participate in the Ancient Olympics. Women were excluded. It is reported that a woman disguised herself as a man and entered the arena. She was caught and convicted, but because it was found out that her son was attending the games, she was exempted from punishment.

The Olympionics (*Olimpionike*) were crowned in front of the temple of Zeus by the supreme magistrates (*Helladonike*), who placed a crown of olive on their head. The olive branches were cut with a golden sickle from a tree that was said to have been planted by Hercules, the son of Zeus (Sofronie, 2016).

Then followed the procession of winners, who walked under the acclamations of the audience. The honors were complemented by substantial material gifts consisting of copper pots and cups, horses and slaves, money, tax exemptions, life rewards, free lifetime meals, honorable places at shows, sculptures depicting the athletes as gods, poems written in their honor (the famous poet Pindar composed more than a hundred odes to ensure their immortality).

Those who retained the title of champion in several successive editions or were winners of several games held on the territory of Greece were called *periodonikes* (2).

Along with athletes, the OG hosted talented poets, philosophers, historians and scientists who even participated in the sports competitions.

After the adoption of the Olympic Games by the Romans, of all Greek athletic events, the most appreciated by them were boxing, wrestling and pankration. These were also attended by emperors such as Tiberius and Nero. Emperor Nero added music and poetry contests to traditional competitions. He participated in the music and poetry contests, winning seven times. Nero also participated in a race and was eventually declared victorious, while during the race he was about to die. Other famous winners of the games included Varastades, Armenian king, Olympic boxing champion, and Philip II of Macedonia, winner of the horse races (Şofronie, 2016).

On their return to Rome, Tiberius and Nero wore the olive crown on their heads, a sign of their victory.

The first Olympic medal was won by a cook named Koroibos of Elis, in the stade race (about 192 m), in 776 BC, a fact recorded in Olympia (Kirişescu, 1964).

The prizes included life and tax relief for all the cities that had an Olympic champion (Kirişescu, 1964).

The most titled athlete of the ancient world is considered to be Milton of Crotona, who won the Olympic Games’ pankration event six times in a row. The doping problem is as old as the OG. Athletes used various methods to become better by eating excess meat, raw animal testicles,

hallucinogenic plants as analgesic treatments. If caught, at the foot of Mount Kronion there were bronze statues representing Zeus, and on their sockets were written the reasons why the athletes and the judges who tricked the results were punished. All these statues were paid by cheaters, and they were an example for those who tried to win unmerited glory (Sofronie, 2016).

In 708 BC, the pentathlon was introduced, which consisted of: discus throw, long jump, javelin throw, the 192-meter race, and wrestling. In 720 BC, the following were added to the unique test of the first places: the event called *diaulos* (double stade), the 24-stade race called *dolichos* (about 4800 m) and a 7-day program of games which was dedicated to closing ceremonies (Kirişescu, 1964).

The Ancient Olympic Games began in 776 BC and were held until 394 AD, when they were suppressed by Roman emperor Theodosius the Great (Flavius Theodosius I), who was a Christian and wanted to remove all traces of pagan culture (Kirişescu, 1964).

### From the modern age

Only 1500 years later, people of great value thought to revive the Olympic Games following the model of antiquity. Among them was a Romanian, Evangelie Zappa (at his request, he became a Romanian citizen in 1844).

Evangelie Zappa (1800-1865) was declared a founder of the Olympics, which he organized in 1859, 1870, 1875, 1888-1889, and all the editions were financially supported by him (3).

As Horia Alexandrescu (2016) writes in his book, “this man is a true parent of the modern Olympics, a name erroneously erased from Olympic history”.

“The wonderful story of Evangelie Zappa” (Alexandrescu, 2016) is an important page in the history of the OG, which clearly demonstrates that this tycoon who loved the Bărăgan region was concerned with the revival of the Modern Olympic Games almost half a century before Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Evangelie Zappa was a Romanian businessman and entrepreneur of Greek origin, famous in the mid-19th century in both Romania and Greece (1).



Fig. 1 – Evangelie Zappa’s portrait from the Zappeion (Şontică, 2018)

“He is rightly the promoter of the Modern Olympic Games”, according to the Ialomitean history professor Ioan Man, a native of the Broșteni commune, Ialomița region, who traced the landowner’s biographical thread and presented the remarkable events of his life as they happened (Șofronie, 2015).

Zappa’s desire to revive the Olympic competition came to fruition in 1856, when in a letter to the king of Greece, Otto of Bavaria, he proposed to re-establish the OG under the name of “Olympii” (Manolache, 2013), in Athens. There was an intense correspondence between the Greek authorities of that time and Zappa, after which the nobleman promised to donate half of his fortune for the organization of sports competitions (Șofronie, 2015).

“French historian and pedagogue Pierre de Coubertin set up the first International Olympic Committee in Paris in 1894. Two years later, in 1896, the first edition of the Modern Olympic Games took place. The competition, with 241 contestants from 14 countries participating in 43 events in nine sports, took place in Evangelhelie Zappa’s Zappeion. The *Zappeion* building is still preserved in Athens, and next to it a statue is built in the memory of Evangelhelie Zappa” (Șofronie, 2015).

Zappa was honored by the Romanian Academy in a scientific session in 2000. The monumental ensemble he built in Broșteni (Ialomița) began to be restored and repaired, and his name was reconsidered and mentioned in numerous scientific papers, symposiums, etc. in both Romania and Greece (2). Honor to Evangelhelie Zappa! (Moțoc, 2014).



Fig. 2 – Athens, the Zappeion (Alexandrescu, 2016)

Romania’s rugby team won a bronze medal at the second edition of the modern Olympic Games held in Paris in 1900. Our team was defeated by France 61-3 and USA 37-0 (Chiș, 2003).

Until 1992, the Winter Olympic Games were held in the same year as the Summer Olympic Games. Since 1994, they have been placed on a separate four-year cycle, two years away from the Summer Olympic Games.

The “International Week of Winter Sports” in Chamonix, France in 1924 is considered the first edition of the Winter Olympic Games.

Romania first participated in the Winter OG in 1928,

with 10 athletes competing in bobsleigh. The first team ranked 7<sup>th</sup> and the second one finished 19<sup>th</sup>. In this edition, Romania did not obtain points in the ranking of nations.

On 9-25 February 2018, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Winter Olympic Games took place in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

The Olympic flame was lit on 24 October 2017 in the ancient site of Olympia, and the torch relay ended after a long journey on February 9, 2018 with the lighting of the Olympic cauldron during the opening ceremony of the Winter OG (Fig. 3 a & b).

Athletes from 92 countries participated in 15 sports disciplines and 102 events (Uricec, 2018).

### Olympic symbols

Fire is a symbol with divine connotations of the ancient OG. It was stolen from gods and brought to mortals by Prometheus. Fire was present in Olympia throughout the OG that were held in honor of Zeus.

The Olympic flame lighting ceremony took place for the first time at the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the Summer Olympic Games in Amsterdam, Netherlands, 17 May - 12 August 1928.



Fig. 3 – Images of the Olympic flame lighting ceremony, 2018 Winter OG, on 24 October 2017. The ancient site of Olympia, Greece (2017, TVR HD)

Another important symbol of OG is the Olympic flag, which was adopted in 1914, and was first raised at the OG in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1920. It is anchored and maintained throughout the Games, and represents all nations under the idea of global unity. On a white background, the flag has five interlocking rings colored black, blue, red, yellow and green. All the flags of the participating countries are composed of one or more of these colors (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – The flag of the Olympic Games (10)

The first Olympic mascot was born at the Grenoble Olympic Games in 1968. Subsequently, Olympic mascots acquired an increasingly greater significance; at the Moscow OG in 1980, bear Misha was highly publicized and loved by competitors and viewers (8).

The motto: “Citius, altius, fortius” in latin, which means “faster, higher, stronger”, was first pronounced by the Dominican priest Henri Didon during the opening ceremony of a school sports event in 1881. Pierre de Coubertin, who attended that speech, borrowed these words and made them famous by turning them into the motto of Olympism. It expresses the aspirations of the athletic and educational movement (Cazan, 2016).

The first OG broadcast in cinemas were the 11<sup>th</sup> edition held in Berlin, Germany, between August 1 and August 16, 1936. The games were declared open by Adolf Hitler himself, and were intended to amaze the whole world, for the exclusive benefit of Nazi propaganda. Hitler’s ambition to prove the majesty of the Third Reich materialized in the construction of an unprecedented Olympic complex. Even today, Olympiastadion and Deutschland Halle, which have undergone some changes, arouse the admiration of sports enthusiasts. It was the first edition to be broadcast on television. Interviews were broadcast in 25 cinemas in Berlin, as well as throughout Germany (Sima, 2008).

During the Olympics, participants made stunning breakthroughs, so the rules were changed according to their performance.

At the first edition of the Modern OG in Athens in 1896, the 100 m event appeared only in the men’s program and was won by the American TE Burke with the result of 12 seconds. The athlete put one knee down for the start, but the starter thought he was praying. The athlete was asked if he had finished, and he answered that he was starting from that position. The skeptical referee considered the position inconvenient. Burke’s success led to the copying of his position by the other athletes. He was the first athlete who used a crouch start (4).

Johnny Weissmüller, born Peter Johann Weissmüller in 1904, in Timisoara, who emigrated to the United States of America, was the first man to swim 100 m under one minute. He held records in 100 yards, half a mile and 100 m freestyle. At the OG in 1924 and 1928, he collected five Olympic titles (5).

Named the “Montreal goddess”, “Perfect Nadia” (Mircea, 2016), the gymnast of Romanian origin Nadia

Comăneci, born in Onesti, Bacău region, made history after she scored the first ever perfect 10 in the history of artistic gymnastics, on the uneven bars at the Montreal OG in 1976 (9).

This edition of the OG has since been known as the “Nadia Comăneci Olympics” after Nadia scored seven perfect 10s and set a new *absolute record* of 20 points on the uneven bars according to the scoring code of that time (Mircea, 2016).

Abebe Bikila, an athlete born in Jato, near Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, was the first Olympic champion from an African country. In Rome, in 1960, he won the Olympic gold medal by running the marathon barefoot and set a new world record of 2:15:16 h. In Tokyo, in 1964, he won again the gold medal in the marathon with a new world record (2:12:11 h), but this time he wore shoes (7).

In 1956, at the Tokyo Summer OG in Japan, American Harold V. Connolly won the hammer throw test with the result of 207 feet and 3½ inches (6). He had an arm shorter by 8 cm.

And the examples of athletes who contributed to the wonderful history of OG could continue.

## Conclusions

1. Ancient Greece meant the opening of new roads in politics, philosophy, arts and last but not least, in sports. The Ancient Olympic Games provided the most important rules and principles of the Modern Olympic Games.
2. The Modern Olympic Games grew in size after the emergence of cinemas and televisions, being watched around the world.
3. It is important to keep alive the memory of those who have moved us to tears, made us proud that we are Romanians and have excelled in sports, transforming competition into an amazing spectacle.

## Conflicts of interests

There were no conflicts of interests.

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