**HISTORY OF THE MODERN SUMMER GAMES**

**[Athens](https://www.britannica.com/event/Athens-1896-Olympic-Games), Greece, 1896**

The inaugural Games of the modern Olympics were attended by as many as 280 athletes, all male, coming from 12 countries. The athletes competed in 43 events covering [athletics](https://www.britannica.com/sports/athletics) (track and field), [cycling](https://www.britannica.com/sports/cycling), [swimming](https://www.britannica.com/sports/swimming-sport), [gymnastics](https://www.britannica.com/sports/gymnastics), [weightlifting](https://www.britannica.com/sports/weightlifting), [wrestling](https://www.britannica.com/sports/wrestling), [fencing](https://www.britannica.com/sports/fencing), [shooting](https://www.britannica.com/sports/shooting), and [tennis](https://www.britannica.com/sports/tennis). A festive atmosphere [prevailed](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/prevailed) as foreign athletes were greeted with parades and banquets. A crowd estimated at more than 60,000 attended the opening day of competition. Members of the royal family of [Greece](https://www.britannica.com/place/Greece) played an important role in the organization and management of the Games and were regular spectators over the 10 days of the Olympics. [Hungary](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hungary) sent the only national team; most of the foreign athletes were well-to-do college students or members of athletic clubs attracted by the novelty of the Olympics.

The track-and-field events were held at the [Panathenaic Stadium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Panathenaic-Stadium). The stadium, originally built in 330 BCE, had been excavated but not rebuilt for the 1870 Greek Olympics and lay in disrepair before the 1896 Olympics, but through the direction and financial aid of Georgios Averoff, a wealthy Egyptian Greek, it was restored with white marble. The ancient track had an unusually [elongated](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/elongated) shape with such sharp turns that runners were forced to slow down considerably in order to stay in their lanes. The track-and-field competition was dominated by athletes from the United States, who won 9 of the 12 events. The swimming events were held in the cold currents of the Bay of Zea. Two of the four swimming races were won by [Alfréd Hajós](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-Hajos) of Hungary. Paul Masson of [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) won three of the six cycling events.

The 1896 Olympics featured the first [marathon](https://www.britannica.com/sports/marathon-race). The race, conceived by Frenchman Michel Bréal, followed the legendary route of [Pheidippides](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pheidippides), a trained runner who was believed to have been sent from the plain of Marathon to Athens to announce the defeat of an invading Persian army in 490 BCE. The race became the highlight of the Games and was won by [Spyridon Louis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Spyridon-Louis), a Greek whose victory earned him the lasting admiration of his nation.

**[Paris](https://www.britannica.com/event/Paris-1900-Olympic-Games), France, 1900**

The second modern Olympic competition was [relegated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relegated) to a sideshow of the World Exhibition, which was being held in Paris in the summer of 1900. [Pierre, baron de Coubertin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pierre-baron-de-Coubertin), founder of the modern Olympics and president of the [International Olympic Committee](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Olympic-Committee) (IOC), lost control of his hometown Games to the French government. The Games suffered from poor organization and marketing, with events conducted over a period of five months in [venues](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/venues) that often were inadequate. The track-and-field events were held on a grass field that was uneven and often wet. Broken [telephone](https://www.britannica.com/technology/telephone) poles were used to make hurdles, and [hammer throwers](https://www.britannica.com/sports/hammer-throw) occasionally found their efforts stuck in a tree. The swimming events were contested in the [Seine River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Seine-River), whose strong current carried athletes to unrealistically fast times. There was such confusion about schedules that few spectators or journalists were present at the events. Officials and athletes often were unaware that they were participating in the Olympics. *See* [Sidebar: Margaret Abbott: A Study Break](https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Study-Break-1367944).

Nevertheless, the Games were [attended](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/attended) by nearly 1,000 athletes representing 24 countries. There was an infusion of new events, some of which were not officially part of the Olympic program or were later discontinued (e.g., [golf](https://www.britannica.com/sports/golf), [rugby](https://www.britannica.com/sports/rugby), [cricket](https://www.britannica.com/sports/cricket-sport), and [croquet](https://www.britannica.com/sports/croquet)). Archery, [football](https://www.britannica.com/sports/football-soccer) (soccer), [rowing](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rowing-boat-propulsion-and-sport), and equestrian events were among those introduced at the 1900 Games. [Women](https://www.britannica.com/topic/women), competing in sailing, lawn tennis, and golf, participated in the Olympics for the first time even though women’s events were not officially approved by the IOC. The confusion surrounding the events led to similar confusion over who was the first woman to win an Olympic gold medal; Swiss yachtswoman Hélène de Pourtalés, tennis player Charlotte Cooper of Great Britain, and golfer [Margaret Abbott](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Peggy-Abbott) of the United States could all lay claim to that honour.

Despite the problems of the Paris Games, the quality of athletic performance improved. Athletes from the United States, led by jumper [Ray Ewry](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ray-C-Ewry) and sprinter [Alvin Kraenzlein](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alvin-Kraenzlein), again dominated the track-and-field competition. American athletes won 17 of the 23 track-and-field events, while French athletes earned more than 100 medals, by far the most for any nation at the 1900 Games.

**[St. Louis](https://www.britannica.com/event/St-Louis-1904-Olympic-Games), Missouri, U.S., 1904**

Like the 1900 Olympics in Paris, the 1904 Games took a secondary role. The Games originally were scheduled for Chicago, but the location was changed to St. Louis when Olympic organizing committee officials decided to [combine](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/combine) the Olympics with the [Louisiana Purchase](https://www.britannica.com/event/Louisiana-Purchase) Exhibition, a large fair celebrating the 100th anniversary of [the U.S. acquisition of the Louisiana Territory](https://www.britannica.com/event/Louisiana-Purchase). As a result, the Games suffered. Several events became part of an “anthropological” exhibition in which [American Indians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Indian), [Pygmies](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pygmy), and other “tribal” peoples competed in events such as mud fighting and pole climbing. The Games were poorly attended by both spectators and athletes. The remoteness of St. Louis and growing tension in [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/place/Europe) over the [Russo-Japanese War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Russo-Japanese-War) kept away many of the world’s best athletes. Of the approximately 650 competitors representing 12 countries, fewer than 100 were from outside the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States), and about half of those were from [Canada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada). Even the Olympic founder, the baron de Coubertin, stayed away in 1904.

The overall results were predictably lopsided, with Americans earning more than three-fourths of the 95 gold medals and more than 230 medals in all. The track-and-field events, held on the campus of [Washington University](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Washington-University-in-St-Louis), featured [Ray Ewry](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ray-C-Ewry), who repeated his [Paris](https://www.britannica.com/place/Paris) performance by winning gold medals in all three standing-jump events. American athletes [Archie Hahn](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Archie-Hahn), [Jim Lightbody](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jim-Lightbody), and [Harry Hillman](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harry-Hillman) each won three gold medals as well. [Thomas Kiely](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Kiely) of Ireland, who paid his own fare to the Games rather than compete under the British flag, won the gold medal in an early version of the [decathlon](https://www.britannica.com/sports/decathlon). Kiely and his competitors performed the 100-yard sprint, [shot put](https://www.britannica.com/sports/shot-put), [high jump](https://www.britannica.com/sports/high-jump), 880-yard walk, [hammer throw](https://www.britannica.com/sports/hammer-throw), [pole vault](https://www.britannica.com/sports/pole-vault), 120-yard hurdles, 56-pound [weight throw](https://www.britannica.com/sports/weight-throw), [long jump](https://www.britannica.com/sports/long-jump), and mile run, all in a single day. The swimming events took place in an artificial lake on the fairgrounds. [Zoltán Halmay](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zoltan-Halmay) of Hungary and [Charles Daniels](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Daniels) of the United States each won two gold medals in individual swimming, while Emil Rausch of [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) won three. [Boxing](https://www.britannica.com/sports/boxing) made its Olympic [debut](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/debut) in 1904.

**Athens, Greece, 1906**

When Athens served as host of its second International Olympic Games, in 1906, more events were held and more countries participated than in the first three modern Games. With better athletes and more of them, the competition was fierce and entertaining, resulting in the most satisfying Olympics to date. As in the previous Games, Americans dominated the athletic competition, led once again by standing jumper Ray Ewry and thrower [Martin Sheridan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Martin-Sheridan). Both had won in St. Louis and would repeat their victories in [London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London). William Sherring of Canada won an emotionally charged marathon.

The 1906 Games, often referred to as the Intercalated Olympic Games, introduced some important permanent Olympic customs, including the parade of the nations’ teams in ranks around the track, now the first major event at all opening ceremonies. Olympic scholars agree that, after the fiascoes of 1900 and 1904, the well-organized and highly successful 1906 Athens Olympics probably saved the entire Olympic movement from an early [demise](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demise).

These Games, however, are not included in the official IOC lists. The rest of the IOC, over Coubertin’s objection, had agreed that Athens would hold Olympics every two years in between the other Olympiads. Coubertin feared more Olympics in Greece would [bolster](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bolster) the popular proposal that Athens become the permanent Olympic site. He later “vetoed” the results of the 1906 Games and retroactively withdrew IOC status from them, even though he himself had listed them as official IOC Games in his 1906 *Olympic Review*. In 1948 the IOC executive board, at [Avery Brundage](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Avery-Brundage)’s urging and without discussion, rejected a scholarly petition from another IOC member who sought to reinstate the 1906 Games. In 2003 the IOC executive board once more rejected a carefully argued and well-documented petition from the International Society of Olympic Historians asking that the 1906 Games again be recognized as official. As in 1948, the matter was not even submitted to a vote.

[**London**](https://www.britannica.com/event/London-1908-Olympic-Games)**, England, 1908**

The 1908 Olympic Games originally were scheduled for [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome), but, with [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) beset by organizational and financial obstacles, it was decided that the Games should be moved to London. The London Games were the first to be organized by the various sporting bodies concerned and the first to have an opening ceremony. The parade of athletes, like the Games, was [marred](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/marred) by politics and controversy. The Finnish team protested Russian rule in Finland. Many Irish athletes refused to compete as subjects of the British crown and were absent from the Games, and a running feud between the Americans and the British began when the American shot-putter [Ralph Rose](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ralph-Waldo-Rose) would not dip the U.S. flag in salute to King [Edward VII](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-VII). This refusal later became standard practice for U.S. athletes in the opening parade. (*See* [Sidebar: Ralph Rose and Martin Sheridan: The Battle of Shepherd’s Bush](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ralph-Rose-and-Martin-Sheridan-The-Battle-of-Shepherds-Bush-1688488).)

Twenty-two countries and about 2,000 athletes participated. The opening ceremony and the majority of events were held at Shepherd’s Bush Stadium. New events included [diving](https://www.britannica.com/sports/diving), motorboating, indoor tennis, and [field hockey](https://www.britannica.com/sports/field-hockey). The track-and-field events were marked by bickering between American athletes and British officials. The 400-metre final was [nullified](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/nullified) by officials who disqualified the apparent winner, American [John Carpenter](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Carpenter), for deliberately impeding the path of [Wyndham Halswelle](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wyndham-Halswelle) of Great Britain. A new race was ordered, but the other qualifiers, both American, refused to run. Halswelle then won the gold in the only walkover in Olympic history. *See also* [Sidebar: Dorando Pietri: Falling at the Finish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/1908-Olympic-Games-Falling-at-the-Finish-1367949). [Henry Taylor](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Taylor-British-swimmer) of Great Britain starred in the [swimming](https://www.britannica.com/sports/swimming-sport) events, winning three gold medals.

[**Stockholm**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Stockholm-1912-Olympic-Games)**, Sweden, 1912**

Known as the “Swedish Masterpiece,” the 1912 Olympics were the best organized and most efficiently run Games to that date. Electronic timing devices and a public address system were used for the first time. The Games were attended by approximately 2,400 athletes representing 28 countries. New competition included the modern [pentathlon](https://www.britannica.com/sports/pentathlon) and swimming and diving events for women. The [boxing](https://www.britannica.com/sports/boxing) competition was canceled by the Swedish organizers, who found the sport disagreeable; this cancellation, along with controversial officiating at earlier Olympics, prompted the [IOC](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Olympic-Committee) to greatly [curtail](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/curtail) the role of local organizing groups after 1912.

The star of the 1912 Olympics was American [Jim Thorpe](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jim-Thorpe-American-athlete). Entered in four events, he began slowly with a fourth-place finish in the [high jump](https://www.britannica.com/sports/high-jump) and a seventh-place finish in the [long jump](https://www.britannica.com/sports/long-jump). In the pentathlon and [decathlon](https://www.britannica.com/sports/decathlon), however, Thorpe dominated the events to win two gold medals. The track-and-field competition also featured the [long-distance running](https://www.britannica.com/sports/long-distance-running) of [Hannes Kolehmainen](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hannes-Kolehmainen) of Finland, who won gold medals in the 5,000- and 10,000-metre runs and the 12,000-metre cross-country race. The 1912 Games marked the Olympic debuts of legendary fencer [Nedo Nadi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nadi-brothers) of Italy and American swimmer [Duke Paoa Kahanamoku](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Duke-Kahanamoku) of Hawaii.

The 1916 Games, scheduled for [Berlin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Berlin), were canceled because of the outbreak of [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I).

[**Antwerp**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Antwerp-1920-Olympic-Games)**, Belgium, 1920**

The 1920 Olympics were awarded to [Antwerp](https://www.britannica.com/place/Antwerp-Belgium) in hopes of bringing a spirit of renewal to [Belgium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Belgium), which had been devastated during the war. The defeated countries of [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I)—[Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany), [Austria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Austria), [Hungary](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hungary), [Bulgaria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria), and [Turkey](https://www.britannica.com/place/Turkey)—were not invited. The new [Soviet Union](https://www.britannica.com/place/Soviet-Union) chose not to [attend](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/attend).

The city, plagued by bad weather and economic woes, had a very short time to clean up the rubble left by the war and construct new facilities for the Games. The athletics stadium was unfinished when the Games began, and athletes were housed in crowded rooms furnished with folding cots. The events were lightly attended, as few could afford tickets. In the final days, the stands were filled with schoolchildren who were given free admittance.

The [Olympic flag](https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-of-the-Olympic-Games) was introduced at the Antwerp Games. More than 2,600 athletes (including more than 60 women) participated in the Games, representing 29 countries. The highlight of the track-and-field competition was the running of [Paavo Nurmi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paavo-Nurmi) of [Finland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Finland), who battled [Joseph Guillemot](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Guillemot) of [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) and won three of his nine career gold medals in the 10,000-metre run, the 10,000-metre cross-country individual race, and the cross-country team race. In the 5,000-metre run he finished second to Guillemot (*see* [Sidebar: Joseph Guillemot: Life After War](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Life-After-War-1367956)). The Finnish team gave a historic performance, gaining nine gold medals in athletics, one fewer than the U.S. team, which had traditionally dominated the sport.

[**Paavo Nurmi and Augusto Maccario**](https://cdn.britannica.com/52/5752-004-ACF5B72E/Paavo-Nurmi-Finland-race-Augusto-Maccario-Italy-1920.jpg)

Paavo Nurmi (right) of Finland and Augusto Maccario of Italy after the 10,000-metre race at the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium.

Italian fencer [Nedo Nadi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nadi-brothers) won five gold medals, including individual titles in foil and sabre. The swimming and diving events starred Americans [Duke Paoa Kahanamoku](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Duke-Kahanamoku) (two golds), [Ethelda Bleibtrey](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ethelda-Bleibtrey) (three golds), and [Aileen Riggin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aileen-Riggin), who at age 14 won the gold medal in springboard diving.

[**Paris**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Paris-1924-Olympic-Games)**, France, 1924**

The 1924 Games represented a coming of age for the Olympics. Held in [Paris](https://www.britannica.com/place/Paris) in tribute to the baron de Coubertin, the retiring president of the IOC and founder of the Olympic movement, the Games featured a high [calibre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/calibre) of competition. International federations had gained more influence over their respective [sports](https://www.britannica.com/sports/sports), standardizing the rules of competition, and national Olympic organizations in most countries conducted trials to ensure that the best athletes were sent to compete. More than 3,000 athletes, including more than 100 women, represented a record 44 countries. [Fencing](https://www.britannica.com/sports/fencing) was added to the women’s events, although the total number of events decreased because of a reduction in the number of [shooting](https://www.britannica.com/sports/shooting) and yachting competitions.

The Finnish team, led by [Paavo Nurmi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paavo-Nurmi) and [Ville Ritola](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ville-Ritola), ruled the distance running races. For the first time, the swimming competition attracted as much attention as track-and-field. The men’s events featured a rare collection of talent, including the [Kahanamoku](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Duke-Kahanamoku) brothers and [Clarence (“Buster”) Crabbe](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Buster-Crabbe) of the [United States](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-States), [Andrew (“Boy”) Charlton](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boy-Charlton) of [Australia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Australia), Yoshiyuki Tsuruta of [Japan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Japan), and [Arne Borg](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arne-Borg) of [Sweden](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sweden). The star of the competition, however, was American [Johnny Weissmuller](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johnny-Weissmuller), who won three gold medals as well as a bronze medal as a member of the [water polo](https://www.britannica.com/sports/water-polo) team. *See also* [Sidebar: Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams: Chariots of Fire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/1924-Olympic-Games-1117726).

[Helen Wills](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Helen-Wills) of the United States won gold medals in the singles and doubles [tennis](https://www.britannica.com/sports/tennis) events. After the 1924 Games, tennis was dropped from Olympic competition because of questions over the amateur standing of many participants. The sport did not return to the Olympics until 1988.

[**Amsterdam**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Amsterdam-1928-Olympic-Games)**, Netherlands, 1928**

Track-and-field and [gymnastics](https://www.britannica.com/sports/gymnastics) events were added to the women’s slate at the 1928 Olympics. There was much [criticism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criticism) of the decision, led by the baron de Coubertin and the Vatican. [Women](https://www.britannica.com/topic/women) athletes, however, had formed their own track organizations and had held an Olympic-style women’s competition in 1922 and 1926. Their performances at these events convinced the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF; later [International Association of Athletics Federations](https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Association-of-Athletics-Federations)) that women were capable of a high level of athletic competition and deserved a place at the Olympics.

Germany returned to Olympic competition at the 1928 Games, which featured the debut of the Olympic flame. Approximately 3,000 athletes (including nearly 300 women), representing 46 countries, participated in the Olympics. The men’s athletics competition was noteworthy for two reasons. It was last Olympic Games for the great [Paavo Nurmi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Paavo-Nurmi) and [Ville Ritola](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ville-Ritola) of Finland. It was also the poorest performance to date for the U.S. team, which won only three of a possible 12 gold medals in running events. [Percy Williams](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Percy-Williams) of [Canada](https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada) won both the 100- and 200-metre runs. Controversy arose in the women’s [800-metre](https://www.britannica.com/sports/800-metre-race-running) run when several women collapsed from exhaustion at the end of the race; Olympic officials concluded that the distance was too long for women, and it was not until the 1960 Games in Rome that women were allowed to compete in a race of more than 200 metres.

The Japanese team won the most medals in the swimming competition. [Johnny Weissmuller](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johnny-Weissmuller) of the United States concluded his Olympic career with gold medals in the 100-metre freestyle swim and the 800-metre freestyle [relay](https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/relay). The Hungarian sabre team won the first of seven consecutive gold medals.

[**Los Angeles**](https://www.britannica.com/event/Los-Angeles-1932-Olympic-Games)**, California, U.S., 1932**

Only about 1,300 athletes, representing 37 countries, competed in the 1932 Games. The poor participation was the result of the worldwide economic [depression](https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression) and the expense of traveling to [California](https://www.britannica.com/place/California-state). The [Los Angeles](https://www.britannica.com/place/Los-Angeles-California) Games featured the first [Olympic Village](https://www.britannica.com/sports/Olympic-Village), which was located in Baldwin Hills, a suburb of Los Angeles, and covered 321 acres (130 hectares). The male athletes were housed in more than 500 bungalows and had access to a hospital, a library, a post office, and 40 kitchens serving a variety of cuisines. The female athletes stayed at a downtown hotel. The Los Angeles Coliseum was expanded to seat more than 100,000 people, and a new track was installed. Made of crushed peat, the new surface was exceptionally fast, resulting in 10 world records in the running events. Uniform automatic timing and the photo-finish camera were used for the first time at the 1932 Games.

The star of the Games was American [Babe Didrikson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Babe-Didrikson-Zaharias) (later Zaharias). She had won five events at the U.S. Olympic trials, but Olympic rules allowed women to compete in no more than three. Didrikson competed in the 80-metre hurdles, javelin, and high jump, winning two gold medals and a silver. The U.S. team returned to its dominance of the track-and-field events, winning 11 gold medals. American [Eddie Tolan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eddie-Tolan) won the 100- and 200-metre runs. The first race-walking event was held at the Los Angeles Games.