

A short overview of the Winter Olympic Games

University lecture on the Olympics

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 International Chair in Olympism (IOC-UAB)

To refer to this document, you can use the following reference:

Chappelet, Jean-Loup (2002): *A short overview of the Winter Olympic Games: university lecture on the Olympics* [online article].
Barcelona : Centre d'Estudis Olímpics (UAB). International Chair in Olympism (IOC-UAB). [Date consulted: dd/mm/yy]
<<http://olympicstudies.uab.es/lectures/web/pdf/chappelet.pdf>>

[Date of publication: 2002]

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1. Origins of the Olympic Winter Games

The Congress held in 1894 with a view to reviving the Olympic Games had included ice-skating among the desirable sports to be included on the programme of the new competitions. In fact, the International Skating Union, created in 1892, was one of the few International Federations that had already been founded. In addition, the sport benefited from a certain degree of enthusiasm linked to the construction of 'ice palaces' in the major European capitals. Since it had no such installation, however, Athens was unable to organise skating competitions in 1896, and Paris and Saint-Louis also decided to abstain from their inclusion. A prize for mountaineering was nevertheless awarded in 1900 for the most remarkable ascent during the Olympiad. It was thus not until the London Games in 1908 that the first gold medal for figure skating was awarded. The recipient was the famous Ulrich Salkow, a skater who had already obtained ten world titles and after whom a figure in the discipline was named.

It could have been expected that skating would once more be a part of the 1912 Games in Stockholm, but the Swedes decided not to include it on the programme (which at the time was at the discretion of the organisers). The reason for this exclusion was doubtless the "Nordic Games." These competitions among Scandinavians were held every four years as of 1901, alternating in the capital cities of Sweden and Norway, and featured disciplines very popular in these countries, such as cross-country skiing, ski jumping, speed skating and even ice yachting. Before the First World War, annexing these Nordic Games to the Olympic cycle was envisaged but was always postponed by the IOC to the relief of the Scandinavians, who preferred this event to take place among their own nations. Coubertin, while acknowledging the resemblance between the Olympic and Nordic Games, did not favour the idea of separate Winter Games.

In 1920, the Antwerp Games re-introduced the three figure skating events (men, women and pairs) organised in London and added an ice hockey tournament. The following year, under pressure from central Europe and Canada, the IOC decided to attach a "Winter Sports Week" to the Paris Games planned for the summer of 1924. This event was held in the most well known French winter resort at the time, i.e. Chamonix, from 24th January until 4th February 1924. It comprised the following sports: cross-country skiing and ski jumping, figure and speed skating, bobsleigh, ice hockey, plus demonstrations of curling and what was at the time called the "military patrol" (today the biathlon). This corresponds to today's programme for the Winter Games with the exception of alpine and freestyle skiing, snowboarding and luge which did not exist yet.

Sixteen nations took part in the week's events – that in fact lasted twelve days – which were competently organised by a local hero and novelist, Roger Frison-Roche. The Finns, the Norwegians and the Swedes carried off virtually all the medals. In 1925, there was no opposition regarding the attribution of genuine Winter Games to St. Moritz, Switzerland, for February 1928. It was only in 1926, however, the year of the last Nordic Games, that the IOC officially recognised the week in Chamonix as being the first Olympic Winter Games. From that moment onwards, the Winter Games have been numbered according to when they take place, unlike the Summer Games that bear the number of their Olympiad whether they have taken place or not.

2. Development of the Olympic Winter Games

The history of the "White Olympiads" is less turbulent than that of their summer counterparts. First, it is closely linked to the saga of its heroes, such as Sonja Henie, who won the figure skating gold medal in 1928, 1932 and 1936 and was the flag-bearer for the Norwegian delegation in Chamonix in 1924. The Goitschel sisters exchanged their first and second places on the podium for the special and giant slalom events in 1964. Then there was Toni Sailer of Austria in 1956 and Jean-Claude Killy of France in 1968 who each won three medals in alpine skiing. Rosi Mittermaier, of Germany, nearly equalled this exploit in Innsbruck, in 1976, with two gold and one silver medals. Kasaya, Konno and Aochi of Japan swept the board ahead of their compatriots for the 70-metre ski jump in 1972. Eric Heiden of the USA collected all five gold medals for speed skating in 1980. The English couple Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean danced Ravel's Bolero on ice and enchanted spectators at the 1984 Games. Matti Nykänen of Finland completely dominated ski jumping in 1988. Hermann Maier from Austria won the men's super G in Nagano 1998 three days after a terrible fall in the downhill race. (See also table below).

Alphabetical list of 25 outstanding Winter Olympic athletes

(compiled Bud Greenspan):

ATHLETE	COUNTRY	SPORT
Myriam Bedard	Canada	biathlon;
Bonnie Blair	United States	speedskating;
Dick Button	United States	figure skating;
Lee-Kyung Chun	Republic of Korea	short-track speedskating;
Deborah Compagnoni	Italy	alpine skiing;
Bjorn Daehlie	Norway	cross country skiing;
Peggy Fleming	United States	figure skating;
Gillis Grafstrom	Sweden	figure skating;
Eric Heiden	United States	speedskating;
Sonja Henie	Norway	figure skating;
Dan Jansen	United States	speedskating;
Jean-Claude Killy	France	Alpine skiing;
Johann Olav Koss	Norway	speedskating;
Andrea Mead Lawrence	United States	Alpine skiing;
Eugenio Monti	Italy	bobsled;
Irina Rodnina	Russia	figure skating;
Birger Ruud	Norway	ski jumping;
Toni Sailer	Austria	Alpine skiing;
Vreni Schneider	Switzerland	Alpine skiing;
Lydia Skoblikova	Russia	speedskating;
Alberto Tomba	Italy	Alpine skiing;
Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean	Great Britain	figure skating;
Vladislav Tretiak	Russia	ice hockey;
Ulrich Wehling	Germany	Nordic combined;
Katarina Witt	Germany	figure skating.

Originally, it was decided to hold the Winter Games during the same year and in the same country as the Summer Games, and the committee in charge of organising the Games of the Olympiad was expected to propose a suitable winter sports resort. Hence, Chamonix was chosen when the Games were awarded to Paris, and then Lake Placid (New York State) with Los Angeles in 1932, Garmisch-Partenkirchen with Berlin in 1936 and finally Sapporo with Tokyo in 1940 (these latter were cancelled). In 1928 and 1948, St. Moritz applied to hold Winter Games because it was impossible to hold the skiing events in either the Netherlands or in Great Britain. This rule was finally abandoned by the IOC with the aim of creating a greater number of possible venues for the Winter Games. After those in Oslo in 1952 and for forty years afterwards, the Winter Games were never held on the same continent as the Summer Games during any given Olympiad. In fact, apart from Sapporo and Nagano, Japan– where the 1972 and 1998 Games took place – the Games have always been held in Europe (thirteen times until 2006, nearly always in the Alps) or in North America (five times including Salt Lake City in 2002).

The progression in participation at the Winter Games, in terms of athletes and nations, is constant as shown by the statistics below.

PARTICIPATION AT THE OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES 1924 – 1988						
	Year	Host city	Host country	NOCs	Athletes*	Events
I	1924	Chamonix	France	16	290	16
II	1928	St. Moritz	Switzerland	25	360	14
III	1932	Lake Placid	USA	17	280	14
IV	1936	Garmisch	Germany	28	760	17
V	1948	St. Moritz	Switzerland	28	810	22
VI	1952	Oslo	Norway	32	730	22
VII	1956	Cortina d'Ampezzo	Italy	32	920	24
VIII	1960	Squaw Valley	USA	30	650	27
IX	1964	Innsbruck	Austria	36	930	34
X	1968	Grenoble	France	37	1,290	35
XI	1972	Sapporo	Japan	35	1,130	35
XII	1976	Innsbruck	Austria	37	1,260	37
XIII	1980	Lake Placid	USA	39	1,280	38
XIV	1984	Sarajevo	Yugoslavia/Bosnia	49	1,490	39
XV	1988	Calgary	Canada	57	1,550	46
XVI	1992	Albertville	France	64	1,800	57
XVII	1994	Lillehammer	Norway	67	1,730	61
XVIII	1998	Nagano	Japan	72	2,180	68
XIX	2002	Salt Lake City	USA	ca 84	ca 2,350	78
XX	2006	Torino	Italy	-	-	Ca 80

* The number of athletes taking part has been rounded.

A major and sudden increase in the number of participating countries (ten more) took place in 1984, because as of this year the IOC financed travel and accommodation for a small number of athletes and officials from each NOC. In this way, the Virgin Islands, Senegal, Fiji and other nations with no winter sports traditions whatsoever were able to send representatives to the Winter Games in Sarajevo and Calgary. Although citizens of their country, most of the athletes concerned lived and trained in regions with a harsher climate.

Unlike the Summer Games, there is no drop in the participation figures for certain years but only a certain slowing down in the rise when the venue was at a considerable distance from Europe. In fact, the Winter Games have never suffered from any political boycotts, but at most various controversies concerning the exclusion of East Germany in 1968 and of Taiwan in 1980. This, however, could change given the growing size of the "White Olympiads" and the fact that "new" nations are now taking part in them. On the other hand, the Winter Games have often been shaken by problems of amateurism (see below).

In 1986, and to general surprise, the IOC decided to discontinue the tradition of organising the Winter Games and the Games of the Olympiad during the same year and to alternate them on even-numbered years. The XVII Winter Games thus took place in 1994, in Lillehammer, two years after those of Albertville; the XVIII Games followed in 1998 in Nagano, and thereafter will be organised every four years. The cycle of the Summer Games remained unchanged, and their centenary was celebrated at the 1996 Atlanta Games. The reasons for this change were economic. Because of this move, the IOC's income – closely linked to that from the Games – became more regular and the television companies that purchased broadcasting rights could distribute their expenditure better over two Olympic years than one. Indeed, the idea of making this change came from the head of an American television network. For similar reasons, and also to permit a larger number of events to be staged, the duration of the Winter Games was extended from twelve to sixteen days as of 1988 (twelve days before), with their opening on a Saturday in order for television advertisers to have three weekends available for advertisers instead of two. As from 2002 the Winter Games will begin on a Friday and last seventeen days.

3. Olympic Winter Games locations

When observing the list of host cities for the Winter Games, we note that since 1964 these have no longer been awarded to small towns in the mountains but to cities with several thousand inhabitants, sometimes at a fair distance from the ski runs: Innsbruck, Grenoble, Sapporo, Sarajevo, Calgary, Nagano, Salt Lake City and Turin. Other large towns such as Göteborg (Sweden), Anchorage (USA) and Sofia (Bulgaria) also presented candidatures, but were unsuccessful. Albertville attempted a compromise between city and mountains. The exception to this list – Lake Placid in 1980 – amply revealed the logistical difficulties of organising such an event in a village of 2,500 inhabitants in the heart of the Adirondacks (north-east of New York State). However, Lake Placid was the only candidate for 1980, and if the Canadian metropolis of Vancouver had maintained its bid, it is probable that it would have been chosen. The selection of the small snowy town of Lillehammer (fifteen thousand inhabitants) for 1994 was an exception and proved to be very successful from an image point of view but also led to logistical difficulties.

Like their summer counterparts, the Winter Games suffered from the impact of the oil crisis and the environmentalist movement during the seventies. In both Sapporo and Lake Placid, protest from ecologists hampered the organisers. A unique incident in the history of recent Olympic Games concerned the city of Denver, which in 1972 was forced to withdraw from the Games that had been awarded to it for 1976 following a hostile referendum that mixed financial concerns and those regarding the preservation of nature. The organisers of these Games had planned to hold some of the ski competitions in an area called *Evergreen*, where – as its name indicated – it would have been necessary to produce snow artificially. (Based on this experience, moreover, the IOC decided to impose a contract and a financial deposit on

future Winter as well as Summer OCOGs in the case of unexpected withdrawal.) Finally, the Mont Blanc region around Chamonix, Tampere (Finland), Lake Placid and Innsbruck all hurried forward, offering to replace Denver. The capital of the Tyrol was designated by the IOC Executive Board in the hope that the investments made for 1964 would limit this city's new Olympic budget. In fact, and as was the case for Montreal during the same Olympiad, the financial forecasts were considerably exceeded. This partly explains Vancouver's decision to withdraw its candidature for 1980 and Lake Placid being thus the only candidate for that year. Vancouver is now a candidate for 2010.

4. Olympic Winter Games and amateurism

The Winter Games overcame even greater obstacles than financial difficulties. On several occasions during the nineteen sixties, President Brundage considered cancelling them permanently. He found them too closely linked to the ski industry in terms of both the equipment that was so blatantly highlighted and of the booming real estate sector around skiing areas. The resort of Squaw Valley did not even exist when it was awarded the 1960 Winter Games – on the basis of plans alone! In Grenoble, in 1968, Brundage refused to attend the Alpine skiing events. In Sapporo, four years later, he insisted that the Austrian skier Karl Schrantz be disqualified for carelessly – or perhaps unwisely – admitting during an interview at the Olympic village that he had received subsidies from ski manufacturers. If Brundage had still been the IOC President at the end of 1972, he would probably have taken advantage of Denver's withdrawal and attempted to cancel the winter cycle.

The unfortunate Schrantz incident was only the last twist to discussions that had been taking part within the IOC since the foundation of the International Ski Federation in Chamonix in 1924. Were ski instructors amateurs, and could they take part in the Games? Was it possible to allow commercial brands on material? Did national federations have the right to be associated with suppliers' pools? Figure skating and its lucrative post-Olympic contracts, plus ice hockey and its professional leagues, were similarly debated. Curling, focused on professional athletes in North America, only regained its Olympic status in 1988 (as a demonstration) and ten years later as a full Olympic sport. Similarly, President Samaranch was to return a Sapporo participant's medal to Karl Schrantz sixteen years later in Vienna, the city where the disqualified champion had been acclaimed as a hero – and where the IOC had been harshly criticised – by an entire nation.

Because of these problems of amateurism, the Winter Games were long considered unworthy of the Olympic flame. One burned in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1936 and in St. Moritz in 1948, but this had been lit at the site. In 1952, the Norwegians chose to kindle it in the fireplace of the birth house of their skiing pioneer Sondre Nordheim. The flame for Cortina d'Ampezzo arrived from the Capitol in Rome, and that of Squaw Valley again came from Norway, via the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. It was only as of Innsbruck, in 1964, that the Hellenic Olympic Committee agreed to organise a ceremony in Olympia similar to the one that has been held for the Summer Games since 1936.

5. Today's Olympic Winter Games

In Innsbruck 1964, the Winter Games came of age. Luge was the sixth sport added to the programme. The biathlon had been introduced four years previously, in Squaw Valley, under the responsibility of the International Federation for the modern pentathlon. Alpine skiing, in the form of the combined event (slalom and downhill) dates from Garmisch in 1936 and has since diversified into three disciplines: downhill, giant slalom and special slalom, to which the super-G was added in 1988. From sixteen in Chamonix, the number of events rose to 34. This became 46 in Calgary, twenty-four years later, and 57 in Albertville in 1992. In 2002 it stands at 78, thanks to the introduction of a new sport (curling) and several new disciplines (freestyle skiing, snowboarding) and events for women athletes in all disciplines (in 2002) except ski jumping and Nordic combined.

Television made its appearance in Cortina d'Ampezzo and Squaw Valley, but the first live broadcasts took place from Innsbruck and crossed the Atlantic thanks to the Early Bird satellite. It was in 1964, then, that the number of journalists and commentators exceeded that of the athletes for the first time. For the Summer Games, this phenomenon only took place in 1972.

Although the organisation of the Games of the Olympiad is strongly linked to the prestige of the host country and often of its capital, the Winter Games above all concern a region. The aim is above all to develop and promote winter sports resorts at a reasonable cost. This objective strongly influenced the candidatures by Innsbruck, Grenoble, Lake Placid, Sarajevo and Albertville. Thanks to the double Games in Innsbruck, ski resorts in the Tyrol became famous. For 1968, the city of Grenoble was equipped with installations that turned it into a major congress venue and university town. Its region today benefits from infrastructures, notably regarding transport, that gave the resorts in the area an advantage over those in the Savoie until the Albertville Games of 1992. Thanks to the Games in Sarajevo, an entire zone of the Balkans was opened up to skiing with the hope – partially in vain – of attracting numerous foreign tourists. As far as Lake Placid was concerned, this was a brand new resort in 1932, and it was necessary to renovate the infrastructures in order to restore it, to some extent, to its former glory.

In 1988, Calgary without doubt represented the beginning of a new era for the Winter Games. Economic development overtook tourism. The petrochemicals industry in Alberta subsidised the Olympic effort, hoping to attract new companies, and the city grew to almost 700,000 inhabitants. The distances between the competition venues were considerable. These, however, were the first Winter Games to make a profit for several Olympiads. A record number of countries, athletes and spectators took part. As was the case for Los Angeles, in the same North American context, a private OCOG led by businessmen accumulated revenues from sponsors while keeping a firm control over expenditure. The difference between these Games and those held in California, however, was that most installations were new constructions, built thanks to subsidies from the city, the province and the Canadian government. They were to be reimbursed with the help of an astonishing contract for television rights (US\$ 305 million for the US rights alone!). As had often been the case for other Winter Games, however, bad weather adversely affected the events that all took place on artificial snow (and ice) for the first time. Nagano and Salt Lake City continued, the trend started with Calgary to organise the Winter Games in large cities, and so will Torino in 2006.

To date, the Winter Games have rarely been affected by international politics, but they have frequently been an opportunity for economic and tourist promotion. Their 'white' aspect, in both practical and figurative terms, represents an ideal framework for sponsorship. This has also given rise to their new importance and the fact that medium-sized nations are becoming increasingly interested in staging them – they are seeking a certain prestige at a much lower cost than that incurred by hosting the Summer Games. Alternating the Games every two years – winter and summer – can only increase the importance of these former Games that will perhaps one day no longer be restricted to sports practised on snow and ice as requested by the *Olympic Charter* (rule 9) (IOC, 2003).

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Related web sites

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www.isu.org

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www.lakeplacid.com

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