**Introduction**

The Olympic Games are unique. Athletes from the entire world take part. Their achievements are watched from both near and far by hundreds of millions of spectators. The five rings on the Olympic flag represent the international nature of the Games. What makes the Olympic Games different from other sports events? The Games are held every four years. They are the largest sporting celebration in the number of sports on the programme, the number of athletes present and the number of people from different nations gathered together at the same time in the same place. The Games are held at intervals, but are part of a broader framework which is that of the Olympic Movement. The purpose of the Olympic Movement is to promote the practice of sport all over the world and disseminate the Olympic values. It is in this spirit that the Olympic Games are held.

**Founder**

It was Pierre de Coubertin of France who dreamt up this ambitious project, although others before him had tried in vain to revive these Games. Drawing inspiration from the ancient Olympic Games, he decided to create the modern Olympic Games. With this purpose, he founded the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894 in Paris. The new committee set itself the objective of organising the first Olympic Games of modern times. The date of the first Games, 1896, marked the beginning of an extraordinary adventure that has now lasted for over a century!

**Sports**

In order to be included in the Olympic programme, a sport must be governed by an International Federation which complies with the Olympic Charter and applies the World Anti-Doping Code. If it is widely practised around the world and satisfies a number of criteria established by the IOC Session, a recognised sport may be added to the Olympic programme. Since 2000, there has been little change to the number of sports on the programme of the Summer and Winter Games, but rather changes to events in order to limit the size of the Games. Summer Games sports In Athens in 1896, nine sports were on the programme: athletics, cycling, fencing, The Modern Olympic Games 1 1. OG Beijing 2008. Athletics, pole vault – final. Elena ISINBAEVA (RUS) 1st. © 2008 / International Olympic Committee (IOC) / KISHIMOTO, Tsutomu © The Olympic Museum 10 gymnastics, weightlifting, wrestling, swimming, tennis and shooting. The Olympic programme has come a long way since then: some sports have been discontinued (e.g. polo and baseball); others were dropped and then reintroduced (e.g. archery and tennis), while several new sports have been added (e.g. triathlon and taekwondo). At the 2004 Games in Athens, the programme included the nine original sports plus a further 19: rowing, badminton, baseball, basketball, boxing, canoe/kayak, equestrian sports, football, handball, hockey, judo, modern pentathlon, softball, taekwondo, table tennis, archery, triathlon, sailing and volleyball. This represented a total of 301 events! The two major sports on the programme of the Summer Games are athletics and swimming. These are the most widely followed Olympic sports in the world. They also have the largest number of events and greatest number of participants from different countries. Athletics consists of a wide range of events: jumping, throwing, and sprint, middle-distance and long-distance races. Some of these were performed at the ancient Olympic Games: foot races (varying distances), the javelin throw, the discus throw and the long jump. The first swimming competitions at the Olympic Games took place in the sea or in a river. Today competitions take place in a 50m swimming pool, usually indoors. The current programme includes the following disciplines: swimming (freestyle, breaststroke, backstroke and butterfly), water polo, diving and synchronised swimming.

**Athletes in the Olympic Games**

The challenge of the Games The prospect of being selected for the Olympic Games is the dream of the majority of athletes. Enormous reserves of willpower and many years of dedicated training are required to achieve such a goal. The athletes that qualify for the Games can consider themselves as being among the world’s best. They will become Olympians, whether or not they win a medal. Taking part in the Games is what matters to the majority of the competitors: having the honour of representing their country and marching behind their flag at the Opening Ceremony, mixing with elite athletes, and having the opportunity to give their best. That is what the spirit of the Olympic Games is all about! Pierre de Coubertin knew this already at the start of the 20th century: “ […] In these Olympiads, the important thing is not winning but taking part. […] What counts in life is not the victory but the struggle; the essential thing is not to conquer but to fight well.” 2 Almost a century later, at the Olympic Games in Sydney, the spirit was the same. Canadian athlete Perdita Felicien explains why taking part in the Games was so important to her: “Even though I was eliminated in the preliminary round of the 100m hurdles, I would do it all over again in a heartbeat. Even though the months of religious training and the exhausting 30 hours of flight to Sydney only meant exactly 13.21 seconds of running on the hottest track in the world that day, it was beyond worth it.” 3 In order to participate in the Olympic Games, athletes have to abide by the Olympic Charter and the rules of the International Federation (IF) responsible for their sport. The IFs organise qualification events, while the National Olympic Committee (NOC) of the athlete’s country is responsible for entering athletes to the Games. Athletes with more than one nationality may compete for the country of their choice. However, if they have already represented one country either at the Games or another major sports event, they may not compete for a different country before three years have elapsed. There is no age limit for competing in the Olympic Games, except for the one What is the Olympic Charter? It is an official document containing all the rules to be followed and explaining the role and mission of each Olympic Movement stakeholder. 1. OG London 2012, Opening Ceremony, Athletes Parade of the Costa Rica delegation. © 2012 / International Olympic Committee (IOC) / EVANS, Jason 2. Olympic Review, July 1908, p. 110. (Extract from a speech given at the Olympic Games in London in 1908). 3. Comments made on her athletics team’s website, 27 November 2000. 1 © The Olympic Museum 14 The Modern Olympic Games Athletes at the Olympic Games imposed by individual IFs for health reasons. In some sports, such as equestrian, fencing and sailing, athletes can enjoy very long Olympic careers, sometimes as long as 40 years! By entering the Olympic Games, athletes are making a commitment to respect the Olympic values and agree to undergo doping tests. Throughout the Games, tests are carried out under the authority of the IOC and its Medical Commission. Tests may be conducted before or during the Games. For individual sports, tests are performed on each athlete who places among the top five in each event, plus two other athletes (in the heats or the final) chosen at random. For team sports, or other sports in which teams are rewarded, testing is performed throughout the period of the Olympic Games.

**Medals**

In the beginning, Olympic medals varied from one Olympiad to the next. At the first modern Games in Athens in 1896, winners were rewarded with an olive wreath and a silver medal, while the runners-up received a bronze medal and a laurel wreath. Gold, silver and bronze medals were not awarded until 1904. From the Amsterdam Games in 1928, when the medals were standardised, until the 2000 Games in Sydney, the medals remained almost unchanged. The obverse showed a seated, wingless figure of Victory holding a wreath in one hand and a palm frond in the other. In the background appeared an arena similar to the Coliseum in Rome. The reverse had to show a victorious athlete being borne upon the shoulders of the crowd. Since 1972, only the obverse of the medal remained the same. The reverse was modified for each Olympiad. Then, in 2004, the iconography changed dramatically. A representation of Nike from the Olympia Museum now features on the obverse of the summer Games medals. She appears to be descending from the sky to land in the Panathinaiko Stadium, recalling the place where the first modern Games were held in Athens in 1896. In the background the Acropolis can be seen.