

# HOW TO WATCH THE OLYMPICS

Scores and laws, heroes and zeros –  
an instant initiation into every sport

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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	4
THE OPENING CEREMONY .....	7
ARCHERY .....	21
ATHLETICS .....	32
BADMINTON .....	75
BASKETBALL .....	85
BOXING .....	97
CANOEOING .....	114
CYCLING .....	125
DIVING .....	137
EQUESTRIANISM .....	145
FENCING .....	156
FOOTBALL .....	168
GOLF .....	181
GYMNASTICS .....	197
HANDBALL .....	219
HOCKEY .....	228
JUDO .....	238
MODERN PENTATHLON .....	247
ROWING .....	256
RUGBY 7s .....	266
SAILING .....	279
SHOOTING .....	289
SWIMMING .....	301
SYNCHRONISED SWIMMING .....	317
TABLE TENNIS .....	327
TAEKWONDO .....	341
TENNIS .....	351
TRIATHLON .....	361
VOLLEYBALL .....	369
WATER POLO .....	379
WEIGHTLIFTING .....	389
WRESTLING .....	401
THE MEDALS CEREMONY .....	414
THE CLOSING CEREMONY .....	416
THE 27 PREVIOUS OLYMPIC GAMES .....	426

# INTRODUCTION

**F**or two and a half weeks every fourth summer, the planet reliably goes sports crazy. The most watched event in history wasn't the 1969 moon landing, the episode of *Dallas* which revealed who shot JR, or Charles and Di's wedding. It was the opening ceremony of the Beijing Summer Olympic Games. Over a billion people tuned in to at least part of the extravaganza. In 2012, with much of Asia asleep when the London Olympics kicked off, that figure slipped slightly, to 900 million. But 4.8 billion of us – some 70 per cent of the world's population – tuned in to watch the sports at some point over the next seventeen days.

In August 2016, we will all be at it again. Yet if we're honest, there's a gaping hole at the heart of the Olympic experience: most of us know remarkably little about most of the sports we've suddenly gone nuts about. Of course, you could just plonk yourself down on a sofa and keep your eyes open. No harm in any of that, but to get the most out of the Olympics it really helps to know HOW TO WATCH the proceedings. Which is where this book comes in: a training programme for the Olympics, or, to be precise, a five-point-plan of crucial need-to-know information for each sport.

The first, overarching question is WHY WATCH any given sport? Why exactly do South Koreans turn out in their tens of thousands to watch the nation's leading archers? Why do Turks venerate a 4ft 11in weightlifter? Are they all mad? Sometimes, the thrill is straightforward. Other times, you need to know the STORY OF A SPORT – why it has mattered and to whom. Only then will you grasp why Denmark comes to a standstill during the women's

handball or why it seems so terribly important to the Hungarians to beat the Russians in that water polo match.

Next, you need a grasp of the **BASICS**. To make sense of what is going on, you have to know the object of the exercise and understand the constraints the participants are operating under. How does one win, lose and score ... and how long will it all go on for? In other words, you've got to know **THE RULES**. Once you've cleared this hurdle, you are ready to take on board some of the **FINER POINTS**. This will enhance your enjoyment immeasurably. Understanding the different spins, for example, will improve your experience of table tennis no end. Appreciating the tactical stratagems of basketball will turn the blur of bodies into a sharply focused and thrilling encounter. At this point, you will be in good enough shape to move on to the **OLYMPIC HISTORY** of the sport. This section provides historical context and introduces you to the legends, scandals and rivalries, showing how the sport's trajectory at the Games has reflected and occasionally shaped our times.

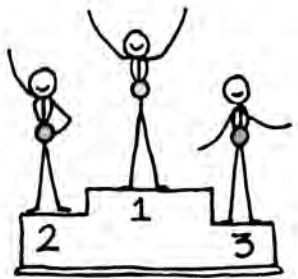
Finally, there are some Olympic topics that are so interesting, controversial or otherwise important that they merit sections of their own. You will find the main text sprinkled with features devoted to everything from the history of drugs in weightlifting to the peculiar antics of the man who popularised recreational canoeing and the Brazilian nation's perplexing inability to win the Olympic football tournament. Oh – and there's a useful appendix at the end of the book listing the 27 **PREVIOUS OLYMPIC GAMES**, with details of their host cities, their key events ... and, naturally, their mascots.

We hope you will treat this book as an amusing, knowledgeable and bizarrely passionate friend – on hand to help you get the most out of the Games. We realise you're not an expert on the finer points of dressage; we won't laugh at you if you confuse a kayak with a canoe; and we know there's something faintly ridiculous about competitive walking, or a cycling race in which the competitors can sit still on their bikes for half an hour. But we have the greatest respect for what **THE GAMES** are about – a cosmopolitan celebration of humanity, a demonstration of the universal power of sport and play, a showcase for the wonders of the human body and spirit – and we want to help you to enjoy them.

**PS: THE IOC**

Olympic sports are littered with JARGON and ACRONYMS. You don't need to know the half of it to enjoy the sports, though where you do, you'll find the low-down under the relevant section of this book. The one key acronym, which crops up in any discussion of the Olympics, is the IOC. This is the INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE, created by BARON PIERRE DE COUBERTIN in 1894 to oversee what we know as the 'modern Olympics'. The IOC is made up of senior figures from international sports federations (Sebastian Coe from the IAAF, for example), prominent former Olympians, and the great and the good (it helps to have a royal connection). The IOC runs both the Summer and Winter Games, selects the host cities and approves the inclusion of new and existing sports (each of which are governed by their own international federations).

There are also 206 NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEES, which organise their countries' teams and officials. Their number is rather more than the 193 states represented at the UN, as it includes such 'nations' as Aruba, Guam and Cook Islands. Palestine is also recognised as an Olympic nation. At Rio, for the first time, refugees will compete in the Games under the IOC's own flag.



# THE OPENING CEREMONY

5 AUGUST 2016

MARACANÃ STADIUM, RIO DE JANEIRO

**Athletes:** 12,000 (if they all show up)

## ..... **OLYMPIC PRESENCE** .....

THE 1896 GAMES OPENED WITH SPEECHES AND HYMNS. PARIS failed to put on an opening ceremony in 1900 and ST LOUIS wasn't much better in 1904. But since LONDON 1908 the ceremony has been a permanent fixture.

## ..... **OLYMPIC FORMAT** .....

LIKE SYNCHRONISED SWIMMING AND DIVING, THE OPENING ceremony has a fixed and a free programme. The fixed programme is set by Olympic protocol and includes a parade of athletes, flames, torches, flags and oaths. The free section is open to artistic interpretation by the host city.

## ..... **PAST CHAMPIONS** .....

LONDON: 3 | PARIS, ATHENS, LOS ANGELES: 2 EACH.

## WHY WATCH THE OPENING CEREMONY?

WHAT EVENT GETS THE BIGGEST TV AUDIENCE AT EVERY Olympics? Which tickets are the most oversubscribed? The OPENING CEREMONY of course. It is the moment at which after four years and more of relentless hype, cynicism, argument, scandal and uncertainty the curtain finally goes up. And it's a show that has changed out of all recognition since its first appearance at the 1896 Games,

becoming along the way a strange amalgam of global ritual, military march-past, TV spectacular, Broadway musical and circus.

The ARTISTIC PROGRAMME, with which an Olympic opening ceremony begins, can be seen as a costumed folly or as a projection of the host nation's self-image – or both. And after that, there are the old favourites of the COMPULSORY PROGRAMME to look forward to – the PARADE OF NATIONS, the ARRIVAL OF THE OLYMPIC FLAG, the LIGHTING OF THE CAULDRON. The pleasures here are many: the extraordinary national costumes of the athletes, the partisan response of crowds to a nation's foes, friends and favourites ... and, not least, the possibility that something might go a bit wrong.

## OPENING CEREMONY BASICS

IF THE OPENING CEREMONY FOR RIO 2016 IS TO BEDAZZLE the world, it will be a triumph of creativity, originality and making do on a budget of around \$4 million, roughly a tenth of what was spent at London 2012. This means that China will surely retain the dubious record of staging the most expensive Olympic opening ceremony ever: the Beijing 2008 event featured over 15,000 performers and cost around \$100 million. In Rio, the creative responsibility is shared by three of Brazil's most famous film directors: FERNANDO MEIRELLES (*City Of God*, *The Constant Gardener*), DANIELA THOMAS (who had a hand in Rio's bit of the 2012 closing ceremony) and ANDRUCHA WADDINGTON, who is best known for his 2005 drama *House of Sand*. Little has leaked as to what will be on show in Rio. There is talk of street culture and a Rio carnival vibe but the organisers insist there will be no clichés. Here's a taste of the main ingredients ...

## THE ARTISTIC PROGRAMME

IN THE ERA OF THE GIGANTIC STADIUM SCREEN AND GLOBAL television coverage the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games is choreographed down to the last detail. This even applies to the





THE BRITISH MAKE A BID FOR PILLOW FIGHTING AS AN OLYMPIC SPORT (AND WAVE A FLAG FOR THE NHS) IN DANNY BOYLE'S LONDON 2012 SPECTACULAR

COUNTDOWN to the start of the show. At BEIJING 2008 LED-embedded drums not only beat out the seconds in the countdown to the Games but spelled out the numbers themselves in Chinese and Arabic numerals.

Once we reach zero it really is anyone's guess what's coming next. Since MOSCOW 1980 raised the stakes with a gigantic, apparently endless, array of formation dancing, marching and gymnastics and a cast of many thousands, the artistic programme has run riot. LOS ANGELES 1984 opened with the entire stadium holding up coloured squares to form the flags of each participating nation; SEOUL 1988 started in the middle of a river; and LONDON 2012 appeared to feature THE QUEEN sky-diving from a helicopter with a little help from Daniel Craig as James Bond. Thematically, the ambition has often been overweening – the story of humanity, five millennia of Chinese history, a treatise on balance and entropy in the universe.

## THE COMPULSORY PROGRAMME

### ..... ATHLETES ON PARADE .....

THE ARTISTIC PROGRAMME IS FINALLY DONE. THE LAST MIME artistes and creatures from the black lagoon have gone. It's time for the athletes. The form now is for each team to be led out by a STANDARD-BEARER provided by the hosts plus a team member who carries the national flag. The GREEKS always open proceedings and the HOSTS bring up the rear. In between, countries go in alphabetical order according to the host language. It's once around the track and then the teams line up in the centre of the stadium. The costumes worn by the (usually female) standard-bearers have often proved divertingly kitsch, as at SEOUL 1988, where they were decked out in white leather boots and peaked caps.

The response of the crowd to the teams is always interesting. ATHENS 2004 proved particularly partisan, with Turks, Israelis and Macedonians all getting the silent treatment while the Palestinians and the Serbs received very positive vibes. The biggest cheers were reserved for Greece, countries with big Greek populations like Cyprus and Australia, and war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq. The marathon of athletes from more than two hundred nations can be wearying – at LONDON 2012, the Queen looked to have dozed off by the time Great Britain's team closed the parade to the tune of David Bowie's "Heroes".

### ..... THE SPEECHES .....

NOW FOR THE SPEECHES: THREE OF THEM! PRESUMABLY THEY are scheduled at this point to give the audience a chance to get a drink or go to the toilet after the parade. There'll be something anodyne from the head of the local organising committee and something in a similar vein from the PRESIDENT OF THE IOC – it is their Olympics after all. Finally, the host's head of state or their representative declares the Games open. Mercifully, there is strict protocol on what the head of state can say, and it isn't much.

..... **THE OLYMPIC ANTHEM** .....

SOMETIMES THEY PLAY THE OLYMPIC ANTHEM NEXT, SOMETIMES they play it while the flag is raised or immediately afterwards. Either way they are going to make damn sure that it gets a hearing. The anthem was composed for the first modern Games in 1896 with music by SPIROS SAMARAS and words by the poet KOSTIS PALAMAS, but it didn't become a fixed feature of the ceremony until 1960. Some hosts, like the Chinese in 2008, go with the original Greek version; others get it translated into their own language, like the Italians at ROME 1960 or the Japanese version sung at TOKYO 1964. Language politics being a complicated thing in Spain, at BARCELONA 1992 the anthem was sung in a combination of Catalan, Spanish and French. In 2012, the London Symphony Orchestra and the Grimethorpe Colliery Band collaborated on an instrumental version, following a precedent set at MUNICH 1972. In Anglophone countries an English version has been sung, with various attempts to put old-school Greek poesy into some kind of plausible modern English. It does go on rather, with a lot of choral work, but the first two stanzas should give you the drift of things:

Immortal spirit of antiquity  
 Father of the true, beautiful and good  
 Descend, appear, shed over us thy light  
 Upon this ground and under this sky  
 Which has first witnessed thy unperishable fame

Give life and animation to these noble games!  
 Throw wreaths of fadeless flowers to the victors  
 In the race and in the strife  
 Create in our breasts, hearts of steel!

..... **FLY THE FLAG** .....

THE FLAG IS UP NEXT AND IT IS INVARIABLY CARRIED BY A selection of the host nation's great Olympians (eight seems to be the preferred number for ease of manoeuvre). Outfits vary, but all-white

has been the look most organising committees have gone for. At 2012, the diverse cast of flag-bearers encompassed Muhammad Ali, UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon and Doreen Lawrence, the mother of murdered black teenager Stephen Lawrence.

..... **FLAME ON** .....

IN THE ANCIENT OLYMPICS, FIRE – STOLEN BY PROMETHEUS for humankind, or so the myth goes – burned throughout the Games at a sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Hestia. And it is from the site of her temple that the flame is ignited for the modern Games and carried by relay to each host city. In keeping with tradition, the torch continues to be lit by the final torchbearer, but there has been a turn towards novelty acts. In 1992 BARCELONA's flame was lit by the flight of a flaming arrow. At SYDNEY 2000 the cauldron was ignited by a flame that passed through water. In BEIJING a gymnast was flown by wire around the stadium before lighting a long fuse that initiated the conflagration. In LONDON, the torch first came into a view on a boat piloted down the Thames



FORTUNATELY, LIVE PIGEON SHOOTING WAS NO LONGER A SPORT AT LA 1932

by DAVID BECKHAM looking as if he was auditioning to succeed Craig as 007.

Whatever the method, the lighting of the cauldron is a peak moment of the ceremony. Over the years, the criteria used to decide who should be the final torchbearer have varied wildly. GIANCARLO PERIS lit the flame in ROME in 1960 having won a junior cross-country race to secure the honour. In TOKYO in 1964 YOSHINORI SAKAI was chosen as he was born on the day the Hiroshima bomb was exploded. MONTREAL 1976 opted for two teenage torchbearers representing French and English speaking Canada – a symbolic point that did not go unnoticed among First Nation Canadians. Leading Olympians have made obvious choices, like PAAVO NURMI at HELSINKI in 1952. The selection of the aboriginal Australian runner CATHY FREEMAN at SYDNEY 2000 and MUHAMMAD ALI in 1996 at ATLANTA were acknowledgements of the contested ethnic and national identities of the hosts.

..... **CATCH THE DOVES** .....

THE TIME-HONOURED TRADITION OF DOVES BEING RELEASED before the lighting of the Olympic flame came to a grisly end in SEOUL 1988 when many of the birds came to rest on the rim of the Olympic cauldron and were incinerated when it was lit. The dove moment now follows the lighting of the flame. At BEIJING, the Chinese dispensed with the birds altogether, and symbolically substituted them with yellow fireworks. At London 2012, DANNY BOYLE, the opening ceremony's impresario, preferred 75 'dove bikes', ascending into the air on high wires, a spectacle inspired by American naturalist Louis Helle who once declared: 'Bicycling is the nearest approximation I know to the flight of birds.'

..... **NO CHEATIN', PROMISE!** .....

NEXT UP ARE THE ATHLETE'S AND OFFICIAL'S OLYMPIC OATHS. They are taken by one person on behalf of everyone, sometimes while holding a corner of the Olympic flag. The athlete's oath was first said at the 1920 Games, while 1972 saw the introduction of the official's oath. Time has not been kind to the language of the Olympic oath. The first version, taken by the Belgian swimmer,