

CULTURE

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LET THE GAMES BEGIN

As the Olympic Games take their marks over in east London, an exhibition of images from the very first modern Olympiad – Athens 1896 – is being shown at the Hellenic Centre

Comparing the 1896 Olympic Games in Athens to the all-consuming behemoth of London 2012 is a bit like comparing a sing-along in a pub to the Reading Festival.

There were no surface-to-air missiles, no VIP traffic lanes, no transport meltdowns and no legions of branding police protecting the all-important sponsorship rights of fizzy tooth-decay drinks, cheeseburgers and bland Euro-lager. Instead, as the Hellenic Centre's extraordinary exhibition of rare photographs of the 1896 games shows, the first modern Olympics were an altogether more innocent affair.

Athens was chosen as the first host city at a congress held in Paris in June 1894, organised by the French historian and pioneer of the Olympic movement Pierre de Coubertin and attended by representatives of sporting societies from 11 different countries. The organisation of the



event, marked by political infighting and a financial crisis, set the pattern for just about all future games, but as, with the more recent Athens Olympics, things did somehow come together in the end.

On 6th April 1896 around 80,000 spectators gathered at the Panathinaiko Stadium in Athens, a white marble arena on the site of an ancient stadium, to watch the opening ceremony, which consisted of a speech and a song and not a single piece of wildly overblown interpretive dance, and to see the athletics competition get underway.

Although competitors took part as individuals rather than as defined national teams, for the Greek public in particular there was a huge amount of national pride at stake. The vast majority of competitors were Greek (the official IOC numbers state that 169 Greeks took part, compared with 14 Americans,



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19 Germans and 10 Brits), but it wasn't until the final day of the athletics tournament, which was dominated by the American athletes, that the local crowd found itself a true national hero.

The American law student Thomas Burke won both the 100m and the 400m using a novel and somewhat controversial 'crouch' start, rather than just standing up like the other runners. His compatriot Robert Garrett then won the shot and the discus – the latter using a wildly erratic spinning action that the Greek audience found highly comical until the moment that his final throw soared past that of local favourite Panagiotis Paraskevopoulos. It was only when the entirely unheralded Spyridon 'Spyros' Louis, a water delivery man from Marousi, won the marathon on 10th April that the stadium was finally able to erupt in a vibrant

celebration of Greek pride. When Louis arrived in the stadium to run the final lap he was accompanied around the track by the country's Crown Prince. Less heroically, the third placed runner, Spyridon Belokas, was later disqualified for covering part of the distance in a carriage.

As well as athletics, the Games features cycling, fencing, gymnastics, shooting, swimming, tennis, weightlifting and wrestling. Rowing and yachting races were scheduled, but were cancelled due to bad weather. Medals were awarded at the closing ceremony, with the winners receiving a silver medal, an olive branch and a diploma. Second place merited a copper medal, while third place garnered nothing but a retrospective nod from the IOC when it decided to standardise the medals tables decades later. Marathon hero Louis then led the medalists on a lap of honour

- 01 The entrance to the Panathenaic Stadium, with the Royal Gardens, the Temple of Zeus and the Acropolis in the background
- 02 Greek athlete Panayiotis Paraskevopoulos, who came second in the discus, by Albert Meyer
- 03 The final of the 100 metres, by Albert Meyer
- 04 Scene from the fencing championship, by Albert Meyer
- 05 The start of the 12-hour cycle race, by Albert Meyer
- 06 The official stands, by Ioannis Lampakis
- 07 The final of the 100 metres, by Ioannis Lampakis
- 08 Marathon winner and Greek national hero Spyros Louis wearing his medal, by Ioannis Lampakis

LINKS

**The First Modern Olympic Games,
Athens 1896**

3 July – 12 August

Hellenic Centre
16-18 Paddington Street
helleniccentre.org

The exhibition space is available for private hire for events related to the Olympics. School visits are welcome



around the stadium, before the King of Greece formally announced the end of the first Olympiad.

Only a few photographs of the 1896 Games exist, but a remarkable number of these are being shown at the Hellenic Centre this summer. The images include those taken by Albert Meyer, who travelled to Athens at the invitation of the German Olympic committee. His images mainly depict athletes in fixed, severe poses, just before or immediately after their events.

Unlike Meyer, pioneering Greek photographer Ioannis Lampakis managed to capture some of the excitement and action of the Games. He took pictures of the events in progress, as well as snapshots of the crowd and the award ceremonies, and in doing so established many of the tropes of reportage-based sports photography – the likes of which will bombard us all summer.

OLYMPICS IN MARYLEBONE

Watch the Games at Summer of Sport

The former BBC building on Marylebone High Street has been converted into a temporary theatre and artistic space while plans are put in place for its eventual redevelopment. One of the attractions on offer is Summer of Sport – a series of events, performances and installations celebrating the Olympics. The ground floor of the building has been converted into a village green, inspired by the fact that this was once the location of the old Marylebone pleasure gardens. Visitors can bring a picnic or avail themselves of the various refreshments on offer while lounging around watching the Games on a big widescreen TV. Free entry.

Visit an exhibition or workshop

As well as the Hellenic Centre's 1896 Olympics exhibition, there are plenty of other Games-themed cultural events taking place in the area. The Wallace Collection has an exhibition celebrating the history of fencing, while the Neville Johnson furniture showroom on Wigmore Street is putting on a display of paintings by Zanny Mellor celebrating the dynamism of London 2012's sporting venues.

Create some bunting

Lots of retailers and restaurants in and around Marylebone are gearing up for special Olympics-themed events and activities. John Lewis is running bunting-making classes throughout July, meaning that you'll be able to turn your home into a temple of pure patriotism by the time the starting gun fires. The classes will centre on sewing techniques and colour matching skills as well as appliqué, stitching styles and hand embroidery, to add a personal touch to the bunting.

Avoid the Games altogether

The arrival of the Olympics in London appears to be fuelling two very different aspects of the city's character – massive participatory enthusiasm and weary cynicism. If you fall into the latter camp, Marylebone will remain a wonderful place to escape from the loud, tasteless corporate overload of the Games for calm, respite and a complete absence of lycra.

Watch the Games live

The Games themselves are coming within a hefty hammer throw of Marylebone. Hyde Park is hosting the 10km open water swimming in the Serpentine, and will also stage the swimming element of the triathlon. Lord's cricket ground, meanwhile, will provide a spectacular setting for the archery.

Watch the Games on a big TV screen

If you want to enjoy some of the communal buzz of the Games without battling with transport chaos and labyrinthine ticketing arrangements, it may be worth popping over to Hyde Park to watch the Olympics on a giant screen at the London Live site amid some sizeable crowds. Entry is free, but capacity is strictly limited. If you want to be sure of a space, you can book guaranteed entry advance tickets for £3.50 each, as long as you're going to arrive before 2pm. Visit btlondonlive.com for more details.