

Canada and the Commonwealth Games



Known to many around the Commonwealth as “the Friendly Games,” the Commonwealth Games have come to represent a distinct and visible unifying force within the Commonwealth family of nations. From August 18 to 28, 1994, Canada will be the host of the XV Commonwealth Games in Victoria, British Columbia. These Games will represent the most important international sporting event to be hosted by Canada in this decade. The citizens of Canada will be proud and honoured once again to welcome their Commonwealth friends in a celebration of sport and culture.

From their humble beginnings in 1930, when some 400 athletes representing 11 countries travelled to Hamilton, Canada, to compete in what were then called the British Empire Games, the Games have evolved into a spectacular international gathering featuring cross-cultural understanding — through the Commonwealth Arts and Cultural Festival — and the tradition of good sportsmanship and Commonwealth co-operation. Although credit is given to a Yorkshireman, J. Astley Cooper, who in 1891 coined the idea of athletic competition between Commonwealth nations, it was Bobby Robinson, a Canadian sportswriter, who made them a reality.

With the Canadian example as a model, the idea of the Games soon caught on, as did the spirit of friendship. Subsequent Games were held in London, Sydney and Auckland, and then in 1954 Canada again hosted the Games, this time in Vancouver. It was at these historic “Miracle Mile Games” that Roger Bannister of England and John Landy of Australia covered the mile in under four minutes. Bannister emerged the victor in an extraordinary race indelibly etched in the minds of those not only in the Commonwealth, but also in the international sports community.

Quickly gaining status and momentum in the sporting community, the quadrennial meeting of the Commonwealth began to transcend its simple amateur sport status to reflect the unity and diversity of the institution with which it was associated. As a result of its apartheid policies, South Africa was last represented at the 1958 Cardiff Games before withdrawing from the Commonwealth in 1961. In 1966, Jamaica became the first developing country to host the Games, a fact that sent a strong signal throughout the Commonwealth of the tremendous gap in sports development and infrastructure between the developed and the developing Commonwealth.

In 1978, in Edmonton, Canada played host to the Games that saw the introduction of the Arts and Cultural Festival. This colourful and dynamic tradition has since been passed on, and will be a prominent feature of the 1994 Games being staged in Victoria and may also find expression in the 1998 Games to be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

In the period that followed the Edmonton Games, not only did the Commonwealth Games embody the values and traditions of the modern Commonwealth, they managed to withstand the challenges faced by the Commonwealth in the 1980s. To provide assurances for the survival of the Games, a working party of prominent Commonwealth individuals, chaired by Justice Roy McMurtry of Canada, was established in 1989 by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the