

The Birth of the Spirit

**CITIUS, ALTIUS,
FORTIUS**
**(The Olympic motto:
Swifter, Higher,
Stronger)**

The ancient Greeks were a very religious and idealistic people. They believed that their gods cherished physical beauty, moral character, noble conduct and intelligence so the Greeks sought to attain these characteristics.

Through the contribution of competitive sport towards physical excellence, the Greeks were able to pay homage to their gods by participating in their Games. Thus was born the Olympic spirit.

The Kindling of the Spirit

The ancient Olympics began in Olympia, Greece, where archaeologists have uncovered a stadium complete with a starting line and

From ancient
Olympia . . .

grassy banks that could seat 40 000 spectators.

Evidence indicates that the Games originated around 1379 BC and, in the earliest recorded celebration of the Games at Olympia, it is known that a cook named Coreobus, from the city of Elis, won the 200-m footrace in 776 BC. From this year through to AD 393, the Greeks began to keep their calendar by Olympiads — the four-year spans between the Games.

As a religious site, Olympia was held sacred in honour of Zeus, the leading god of Greek mythology. Indeed, the ancient Games had such powerful religious overtones that Greek states at war would observe an Olympic truce that provided safe conduct to athletes and spectators.

Initially, Olympic competitions were restricted to footraces of various lengths but, given that war seemed to be the national pastime, it's not surprising that other warrior skills were gradually added. These included competitions of

wrestling, jumping, discus and javelin throwing, and chariot races. Religious festivals remained an important part of the Olympics, and cultural and artistic displays were added. Greek intellectuals, like Plato and Socrates, attended the Olympics and treated the public to philosophical debates.

In the beginning, only Greek citizens could participate in the Games, in which glory was the main reward. Victors returned to a hero's welcome — Triumphs, they were called — in their home towns. Their laurels of wild olive and palm wreaths assured them of special privileges and recognition.

As the Olympics matured, they grew in stature and attracted participants from all the countries which then made up the Roman Empire. But in AD 393, the ruler of the day, Theodosius, cancelled the Olympics and instructed his soldiers to destroy the facilities.

The site at Olympia lay buried for 1 500 years but the Olympic spirit lived on.

In 1896, the Spirit Is Reborn

Baron Pierre de Coubertin was a determined, idealistic Frenchman who was as appalled by the poor physical condition of his compatriots as he was impressed by the athletic programs in British boys' schools.

Baron de Coubertin believed that sport was vital for a healthy life and found inspiration in the history of the Greeks. Their ancient Olympic philosophy and lifestyle gave him the idea of re-establishing the Olympic Games as an international sports festival. Bitten by that ancient Greek idealism, he carried the Olympic spirit to the rest of the world and organized the first modern Olympic Games. They were held in Athens, Greece, in April 1896. Since then, with the exception of interruptions during the two World Wars, the Olympic Games have been held every four years.

. . . to modern-day
Calgary.

