ATHLETICS AT THE SUMMER OLYMPIC GAMES

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Abstract

Athletics is the sport of the most natural human movements: running, walking, jumping and throwing and it accompanied the Olympic Games on its 120 years journey from their first beginning. Athletics hallmark ed Olympics evolution with memorable moments, exceptional records, great personalities and the triumph of talent and fair play. The paper is a survey of relevant references and data related with athletic events in the summer Olympics program. Further I highlighted the important moments in athletics and modern Olympics history since the first edition until to the last held in Brazil. On this attempt I draw attention on the noting implications of political interference in the Olympics. A reverence has been made to those athletes either men and women representing with honor East European countries in major sporting events over the 20th century. Much have changed since 1896, not only in number of events, athletes, competition and prizes, but in philosophy, sport sciences, ethics and professional approach as well.

Keywords: modern Olympic history, athletics, records, major sporting events, cold war

JEL classification: I13, I23, I31

1. Introduction

Baron Pierre de Coubertin launched the idea of reviving the Olympic Games at a time of great cultural effervescence. At the end of the XIX century, the focus was on Paris, the capital of the elite of art reformers from across Europe and other parts of the world. There was a revolution in art made up by an emblematic generation, inspired by the present that does not write, compose, or paint about other times, but makes history. These artists and their creations transformed ordinary men into heroes.

In times like that, in which reforming geniuses struggled for affirmation and recognition, it was possible to revive the Olympics and to accede to the international attention. A few days after the idea went public; the IOC met for their first session and decided that the first Olympic Games would take place in Greece, in homage to the cradle of the ancient Games (Pop, 2013). In Athens, in 1896, 245 male competitors, representing 14 nations took part in the first modern Olympic competition.

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2. Purpose

The paper is a survey of relevant sources and data related with athletic events in the summer Olympics program. I propose a look back on the significant moments in sport history and its evolution since the first games edition until the last one which has been held in Rio de Janeiro. On this attempt I draw attention on the noting implications of political interference in the Olympics.

A reverence has been made to those athletes either men or women representing with honor East European countries in major sporting events and especially in Olympic Games over the XX century.

3. The beginnings

From the very first edition athletics events had a privileged place in the Olympic program. 64 athletes from ten nations competed in 12 events. This made athletics the most international of the nine sports at the first modern Olympic Games. Among the 12 athletic events were 6 running races, including the marathon, 4 jump events and 2 of throwing. Two of those events were held for the first time at an international competition: the discus throw and the marathon. The first was inspired of the Greek ancient Olympian Games; the discus thrower statue, or discobolus by Miron (circa 460–450 BC) depicting the energy of the momentum right before the discus release, was known, and still is, as a symbol of ancient athletics contests.

The marathon race was held because the great historical significance for the hosting country. Greece history records the sacrifice of a running currier, Philippides (530 BC–490 BC), who ran from the battlefield near Marathon to Athens announcing the victory over Persian invaders (490 BC). Previously he was sent to Sparta to request help when the Persians landed at Marathon. He ran about 246 km in two days. The legend says that after completed his mission and announced the Athenian victory, he collapsed and died in agora.

The Olympic race was run from Marathon to Athens (estimated at 40 Km), watched by more than 100,000 people (Gettings, 2012), 60,000 just in the ancient marble stadium, over its utmost capacity, i.e., with 50,000 people (Richardson, 1998). It was won by a Greek runner, Spiridon Louis, who did not know anything about sport, but on his arrival on Panathinaiko Stadium for the final leg of the race the home crowd roared with pride. He was a simple man, whose job was to carry water to Athens. Also the reward for his performance was humble; the king of Greece granted Louis one wish and he choose a horse and a cart for his business (IAAF, 2004).
On Monday, 6 April 1896 the American James Connolly won the triple jump to become the first Olympic champion in more than 16 centuries. He also finished second in the high jump and third in the long jump (Olympic.org). At that time many athletes were competing in more events and even in different sports. Almost all of those multisport competitors were deeply rooted in athletics and the stadium was their common contest ground.

Athletes Competing in Four Sports in 1896 (Bill, 1948):
- Jensen, Viggo: Denmark - Athletics (shot put and discus throw), Gymnastics, Shooting, Weightlifting; Olympic champion in two hand lift;
- Schuhmann, Carl: Germany - Athletics (long jump, triple jump, shot put), Gymnastics, Weightlifting, Wrestling; 4 times Olympic champion in gymnastics (3 different events) and wrestling;
- Elliot, Launceston: Great Britain - Athletics (100m), Gymnastics, Weightlifting, Wrestling; Olympic champion in one hand lift.

Although he was a visionary, Pierre de Coubertin believed that the Olympics should remain traditionally “a eulogy of male sport”. This reservation, however, could not prevent women from participating, and in 1900 they competed in tennis and golf. Also in the first edition, in Athens 1896, a woman intended to join the men marathon race. Stamata Revithi, a 30 years woman, was ultimately refused to entry into the race by the organizing committee because she wasn’t officially recognized athlete. However she ran by her own the distance a day after the official race and her time was around 5 hours and 30 minutes. Completing the distance was already a success while in the Olympic race from 18 men at star just 9 reached the finish line (Martin, Gynn, 2000).

Almost 100 years after that first attempt, women were finally allowed to run the Olympic marathon at the 1984 Summer Olympics, when American Joan Benoit won the inaugural race in a time of 2 hours and 24 minutes (Olympic.org).

The classic marathon distance of 42.195 km was fixed once and for all in the London Marathon. The peculiar distance came about when the course from Windsor Great Park to Shepherds Bush was extended by circa 2 km so that it finished at the Royal Box. In 1921 the length for a marathon race was formally standardized at 42.195 kilometers.

In 1924, the first truly successful Olympic Games were held in Paris, involving more than 3,000 athletes, including more than 100 women, from 44 nations. Athletics events for women made their debut in Olympic arena just in 1928 with two individual races (100m, 800m) and one relay (4x100m); high jump and discus throw. Nine new world records were set in athletics events during that Amsterdam edition of Olympic Games, 4 of them in women contests (in all the scheduled
events except 100m).

Edition by edition since the birth of the Modern Olympics, a number of events have come and some have gone. Most of the events, listed below, led short lives prior to 1928:

- **Running**: 60m; 200m hurdles; 2590m; 3200m; 4000m; 3000m, 5000m, 3-miles and 4-miles team race; 5 miles; individual and team cross country; Steeplechase – 2500m;
- **Walking**: 3000m, 3500m, 10km, 10 miles race walk;
- **Jumping**: standing long jump; standing triple jump; standing high jump;
- **Throwing**: 56 pound weight throw; discus throw Greek style and two hands; javelin throw free style and two hands; shot put two hands;
- **Combined events**: triathlon and pentathlon.

![Fig. 1 The evolution of athletics events in the Olympic Games program](image)

### 4. Political interference in the Olympics

Berlin organized the tenth Olympic Games in 1936, and Hitler was in the official stand when his theory of Aryan race supremacy was shattered by the performance of an exceptional black athlete, Jesse Owens. Owens won the Olympic title in four events: 100 and 200m, long jump and the 4x100m relay, once becoming the first Afro-American champion in the history of the Olympics. Owens also broke or equaled nine Olympic records and three World records. In the long jump event Owens won in a memorable duel with German Lutz Long, obtaining an exceptional result of 8,06m. Hitler and his entourage left the stadium before the prize giving ceremony, avoiding Owens victories celebration. Luz Long died in 1943 while
fighting for Germany in World War II. A final letter he wrote to Jesse Owens reads, in part, "Someday find my son ... tell him about how things can be between men on this Earth." (Goldman, 2009).

The Second World War begins in 1939 after the German invasion of Poland, and by 1945, the conflict has engulfed the entire world involving over 40 countries across all continents. Casualties are estimated at between 62 and 78 million soldiers and civilians (bbc.co.uk/history). The next Olympics were postponed until 1948 after almost six years of armed conflict and colossal destruction. After two suspended editions of the Games, representatives of 59 nations gathered in London to celebrate peace and to confirm the Olympic ideal. On this occasion, the first victory in an Olympic contest of an afro-American woman - Alice Coachman - was recorded for the high jump (teamusa.org. Alice Coachman, 2012).

That was just the start, and once engaged in the race for titles and Olympic records, black athletes were fully instated. American Carl Lewis is one of the most successful male athletes in Olympic history and one of the only three athletes to win nine Olympic gold medals. He excelled in the sprint races and long jump (notablebiographies.com, 2010) winning in 4 consecutive editions; from 1984 to 1996. He was also protagonist in the most exiting World Championship long jump final in Tokio 1991. Despite Lewis achieved the best series of jumps in the history and his jumps are still rated as the best 3rd and 5th performances ever (Ivan, 2016), the winner was Mike Powell with a new memorable world record of 8,95m. With that result Powell has overcame the legendary 8,89m world record set by Bob Beamon 23 years before in Mexico City (1968 OG edition).

Another exceptional athlete, member of the athletics elite is the Finish Paavo Nurmi, who holds nine Olympic titles and three silver medals in long running races in three consecutive editions between 1920 and 1928. After the 2016 OG the Jamaican Usain Bolt joined the most laureate male athletes group, being the most decorated sprinter of all time.

The 1950's were marked by the arms race and the fear of a possible nuclear war between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The “Cold War” began and propaganda was exploiting the success in sporting arena as an effective persuading tool (Pop, 2014). Champion athletes were used for propaganda purposes as models for the supremacy of one regime over the other speculating their visibility in the mass media and the general interest that sport aroused. After losing the top nation position in favor of Soviet Union in 1956 and 1960, USA considered winning in Olympic Games a matter of national prestige. The athlete for whom the flag is hoisted and the national anthem is sung, is the bearer of this prestige and his or her image was inevitably associated with the country and system effectiveness.
The “sporting Cold War” determined some excesses and harmful experiments over athletes’ social life and health. In USSR the athletes were required to stay in training camps almost all year, with short breaks to see their families after the season was over. The Soviet model in physical education and sport domain was replicated in other countries from the Eastern Bloc, as German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, or overseas, in Republic of Cuba (Yessentayev, 2016).

In East Germany the athletes were systematically doped and the records of substances and dosage were kept in Stasi (secret service) files. From that time (1985) remained Marita Koch’s 400m world record (47.6 s) and since then no other woman athlete has come close to break it. The full extent of East Germany’s doping program come to light after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, when Werner Franke, one of Germany’s and the world’s most highly regarded biochemical researchers, and his wife, Brigitte Berendonk, a former West German Olympian in discus, began having access to the official medical records and research of East Germany’s Olympic athletes (Franke, Berendonk, 1997).

On the other part of the iron curtain the use of banned substances appears that was more a private issue rather than official conducted or recommended by the medical staff. Nevertheless some athletes from the US Olympic team publicly declared that in 1968 “a third of the men on the US track and field team were using anabolic steroids at the pre-Olympic training camp” (Schofield, 2015). Four years later after an unofficial poll of all men track and field contestants at the Munich Olympic Games resulted that “68 percent have used some form of anabolic steroid in their training” (Todd, 1992). This “popular” use of performance-enhancing drugs had a few notorious victims in athletics; among them Ben Johnson, men’s 100 m winner in Seoul, 1988 or Marion Johns stripped of three gold and two bronze medals she won in Sydney 2000 in sprint events and long jump.

In the Olympics arena, the Cold War culminates in the boycott of the 1980 and 1984 Games. The US did not participate at the event held in Moscow, in protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A further 60 nations supported this position, leaving the Games less competitive and offering the host country the opportunity to dominate the classification. In retaliation, the next Games, held in Los Angeles in 1984 were boycotted by the USSR, who expressed doubts about security measures. Fifteen nations, influenced by the communist power supported the boycott. A notable exception was Romania, a communist country as well, which delegation was welcomed with sympathy in the opening ceremony in Los Angeles. Eventually the Romanian team achieved a record of 20 medals of gold from a total of 53.
Following those consecutive boycotts, in 1986 have been initiated The Goodwill Games as a way to bring Soviet and American athletes back together in a competition which was aiming to replicate the Olympic final events. Before the Goodwill Games second edition in 1990, historical events have occurred in Europe: the Berlin Wall had fallen; the Soviet Union was collapsing and the competition purpose vanished in time.

Changes in the international political landscape since 1989 were reflected in the Olympic Games in Barcelona 1992 participation. Among the 172 nations participating were, the reunified Germany, the United Team of Russia and 11 other former Soviet republics, the Baltic republics (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia - for the first time since separation from the USSR), and South Africa (suspended since 1960 until it outlawed Apartheid). The former Yugoslavian republics also participated with their first separate sports delegations. In Barcelona, for the first time since 1972, no country boycotted the Olympic competition.

6. Athletics in East European countries

The financial and organizational efforts of communist countries for a successful performance in important sporting events were substantial and politically coordinated. The sport men and women in national teams and especially in Olympic sports had special training conditions, special food supplies while strict rationing was imposed for ordinary people and the privilege to travel abroad while the wide majority of population had no passport. The athletes with promising results were semi or full professional; although officially they were considered and competed as amateurs. Those measures have proven to be effective in promoting excellence in athletics and further in exceptional results.

In the IAAF hall of fame East European countries will find tributes to 13 exceptional athletes, one quarter from the total number of sportsmen and women included in the honor list. Romania is represented by Iolanda Balăş (1936-2016), the best female high jumper of the 20th century. She improved the world record 14 times from 1,75m in 1957 to 1,91m in 1961, which was to remain unbeaten for the next ten years. The 1960 and 1964 Olympic titles completed her list of triumphs at all major international competitions.

Valeri Brumel (USSR) and Stefka Kostadinova (BG) are the other two East European athletes with outstanding records in high jump event. Brumel (1942-2003) Olympic champion in Tokyo 1964, held the world record in the high jump from 1961 to 1971. His best performance 2,28 m was 43 cm above his own height and more important he performed it in the old straddle style of jumping, years before the Fosbury Flop style was first seen in 1968. He remains the youngest male high-jump medalist in Olympic history, with his silver Olympic medal won in Rome 1960 at just 16 (Mason, 2003).
Sergey Bubka represented first USSR and then Ukraine and he may be considered the greatest pole vaulter ever. He broke the world record for men’s pole vaulting 35 times (17 outdoor and 18 indoor records) (ukraine-insight.com.) and still hold the 6,15m indoor world record since 1993. Also his outdoor world record stands at 6,14m since 1994.

Irena Szewinska is a legendary world record breaker, a multi-talented athlete, and Olympic champion of Poland. She broke 10 world records and is the only athlete, either male or female, to have held a world record in the three running events: 100m, 200m and the 400m events. Between 1964 and 1976, Irena Szewinska earned seven Olympic medals, being considered the greatest female athlete of her generation (britannica.com).

Ukrainian race walker Vladimir Golubnichiy, Latvian javelin thrower Janis Lusis, Victor Saneyev – triple jump, Nataliya Lisovskaya - shot put, Yuriy Sedykh – hammer throw, competed for former USSR, won at least one Olympic title, set world records in their events and have a place in IAAF hall of fame. Beside them Svetlana Masterkova (800m, 1500m, 1 mile), representing Russia, the legendary Czech long distance runner Emil Zatopek and Polish race walker Robert Korzeniowski (iaaf.org) complete the East European athletes list of honor.

Yelena Isimbayeva at 33 years old, considered the greatest female pole vaulter of all time (rio2016.com), was expected to compete for a third gold medal at the Rio 2016 Games. Instead she was banned by IAAF together with almost the entire Russian athletic team after an inquiry which revealed a “state-orchestrated” doping campaign (iaaf-council-meeting, 2016). Consequently she was elected by fellow athletes worldwide in the IOC athlete’s commission, receiving their support despite those accusations. In future Isimbayeva, who never failed a drug test, will be a voice to defend the athletes’ rights in IOC and hopefully not also a tool in the new sporting cold war prompted by Russian exclusion from the Olympic athletic competition.

7. Conclusions

Nowadays, looking back to the 28-th Olympic Games edition, we count good performances for contemporary superstars athletes like Usain Bolt, who completed his gold ‘triple triple’. He won three gold medals in three running events (100m, 200m and 4x100m), in three consecutive OG editions. By defending the titles he won in Beijing 2008 and London 2012, the Jamaican sprinter have a good chance to become the most successful male athlete in Olympic history, exceeding Paavo Nurmi and Carl Lewis. After he turned 30, winning the third gold medal in 4x100m relay for Jamaica, Bolt announced that the 2016 edition has been his last Olympics. A sprint era is ending and its’ hero will be assuredly one of the athletics legends.
Allison Felix, also over 30, was competing at the 4-th edition aiming to achieve the 200m and 400m double at the Olympics. On the previous three Olympic Games she won six medals among four of gold, but in 2016 the American sprinter finished second in the 400 m race, just 0.7s after the gold winner Shaunae Miller of the Bahamas. In return she won two gold medals in relay events (4x100m and 4x400m) along with her teammates, becoming the most laureate woman in Olympic athletics competition, with nine medals: 6 of gold and 3 of silver (biography.com/people/allyson-felix).

The 2016 Rio Olympic athletics competition was more exciting because all known sportsmen like Bolt, Felix, Ashton Eaton (USA) in decathlon, but also because the new rising stars like Nafissatou Thiam (BEL) in combined events or Ruth Jebet (BAH) in 3000m steeplechase.

The modern Olympic Games were from the beginning part of world culture and modern history, reflecting political tensions, economic crises, cultural flowering, and technological development. Much have changed since 1896, not only in number of events, athletes, competition and prizes, but in philosophy, sport sciences, ethics and professional approach as well. Athletics, the sport of the most natural human movements: running, walking, jumping and throwing accompanied the Olympic Games on its more than 120 years journey and marked its evolution with memorable moments, exceptional records, great personalities and the triumph of talent and fair play.

REFERENCES