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Olympic History on the World Wide Web

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Olympic History on the World Wide Web

The excitement of the 2008 Summer Olympics held in Beijing last August led me to wonder about the history of the event. Both the ancient and the modern eras of the Olympic Games are well documented on the Internet, where I uncovered a wealth of material that gave me a good sense of the event's long history.

Ancient Olympic Games

Don't know much about the Olympic Games during ancient times? Check out the Perseus Digital Library Project at Tufts University, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/index.html>. At the project Web site, one can explore the sports and sites of these fascinating games and read ancient stories about the athletes. Especially significant are the digitized images of Greek amphorae, large vases used to carry and store various foodstuffs. Amphorae were typically decorated with images of everyday life, but many also told stories and featured images of the Olympic Games. The amphorae shown on the Perseus Digital Library Project Web site depict athletes engaged in boxing, chariot racing, running, discus, and wrestling events. What does the ancient site of the Olympics look like today? Web site visitors can tour the Sanctuary of Zeus in Olympia, Greece, through digital images, short videos, and maps. Converting a thousand years of history, the tour allows you to learn more about the site itself, its artwork, the activities that occurred there, and the structures contained within it, including the stadium and athlete training facilities.

Modern Olympic Games

For an overview of the modern Olympic Games, visit the slick Web site of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), http://www.olympic.org/uk/index_uk.asp. It contains an overwhelming amount of information about the 112-year history of the Summer and Olympic Games from the modern era, including biographies of participating athletes, statistics about the number of medals awarded to each participating country, and Olympic competition records. In addition, the Web site documents many aspects of the games with digitized images, video, and memorabilia from nearly all of the modern Olympics.

Users researching a particular Olympics can search the Web site by clicking on the “Olympic Games” link on the left side of the home page. Depending on which Olympic Games are selected, users can access primary source material such as images and film, as well as written trivia. Highlights from more than a century ago include images of female tennis players competing in long dresses during the 1900 Summer Olympics in Paris, and digitized film footage of runner Archie Hahn, the “Milwaukee Meteor,” winning the 60 meter, 100 meter, and 200 meter races at the 1904 Summer Olympics in St. Louis. In fact, sprinkled throughout the history pages for each of the Summer and Winter Olympic Games are additional videos showing athletic competitions and opening and closing ceremonies. Thanks to the trivia sections for each Olympic Games, I learned a great deal about the history of many events. For example, I found out that the 1956 Melbourne Summer Olympic Games included equestrian events held in Stockholm, Sweden, featured a combined Olympic team from East and West Germany, and was the first Olympics to be boycotted (by the People’s Republic of China).

One of my favorite features of the Web site is the inclusion of information about Olympic posters, medals, coins, emblems, torches, pins, stamps, badges, and mascots. The posters and medals, in particular, are well documented. The digitized posters allow users to learn more about how the different Olympics were announced and advertised, and many also feature a short summary explaining the contents and symbolism of the poster imagery.

Similar trivia is included with the digital photos of the medals that were awarded at the various Olympic Games. For example, did you know that winners at the 1896 Summer Olympic Games received a silver medal, an olive branch, and a diploma? The Web site also lets users view the obverse and reverse of each medal, and some include an impressive three-dimensional feature. Also noteworthy are the mascots. In 1990, I was lucky enough to visit Barcelona, Spain, as it was busily preparing for the 1992 Summer Games. Everywhere I went I saw the Olympic mascot Cobi, and I even brought home a T-shirt with him on the front. I never knew Cobi was, but on the Web site I learned he was a dog!

The quality of the IOC Web site is certainly inspiring to me as an archivist. The organizational structure, which makes all of the information about specific Olympic Games accessible together, is a time-saver, and I was particularly impressed with both the content and the easy-to-use presentation.

Want even more primary sources related to the modern Olympic Games? Check out the Web site for the LA84 Foundation, <http://la84foundation.org/index.html>, a non-profit organization endowed with the surplus funds from the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics. The Web site includes a digital archive featuring three hundred thousand pages of digital primary sources contained in forty-five thousand downloadable PDF files.

The PDF collection includes an extraordinary compilation of official reports, some even dating back to the 1896 Olympic Games in Athens, that document nearly all of the modern Olympics. For example, the official report from the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics offers a contemporary, intimate, and detailed records of the planning and venues for the events and ceremonies held in Nazi Germany. The Web site also provides access to transcripts of about 60 oral history interviews with Olympians from southern California. Conducted after the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics, the interviews are narrated by male and female Olympic athletes who competed during the first half of the twentieth century; each transcript is 25-30 pages long.

The LA84 Foundation emphasized for me the power of the primary resources that one can find on the World Wide Web. Where else can one find the official reports for the Olympics in a single place? By simply downloading a PDF (which can be rather large – the only downside of accessing these primary resources), I can study and research contemporary accounts of Olympic Games. Visiting this Web site makes me want to make primary source material from my repository on-line for the world to see.

A Midwest Connection

Jesse Owen made a major impression on the world at the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics when he won four gold medals in track. Owens, who grew up in Cleveland, was an athlete at The Ohio State University during the early 1930s, and the university is now home to the Jesse Owens Collection, <http://library.osu.edu/projects/jesse-owens/>. The collection, portions of which have been digitized and made available on-line, includes photographs

and artifacts from Owens' life, as well as personal papers and records related to his involvement with various philanthropic groups and his career as a motivational speaker. Collection highlights include a diary kept by Owens during the 1936 Olympic Games and replicas of the four medals he won that year (the originals were lost by Owens).

Owens and other athletes from the 1936 Olympic Games appear in the 1938 propaganda film, *The Olympiad*. Directed by Leni Riefenstahl and featuring footage from many different Olympic events, the film can be viewed on-line in several segments,

<http://tesla.liketelevision.com/liketelevision/tuner.php?channel=255&format=movie&theme=guide>. It's an excellent opportunity to see the 1936 Berlin Olympics through the eyes of the German propaganda machine, especially as Owens, an African-American, demonstrates first-hand the fallacy in the Nazi belief of Aryan racial superiority.