

# THE OLYMPIC FLAME AND THE TORCH RELAY



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Cover: OG Sydney 2000, Opening Ceremony – Cathy FREEMAN (AUS), final torch bearer.  
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# INTRODUCTION

## FLAME

In the context of the modern Games, the Olympic flame is a manifestation of the positive values that Man has always associated with the symbolism of fire. The purity of the flame is guaranteed by the special way of lighting it - the sun's rays.

The choice of Olympia as a departure point emphasises the link between the Ancient and Modern Games and underlines the profound connection between these two events.

## RELAY

The flame is carried by relay all the way to its final destination in the stadium. Although it is usually carried by runners on foot, other modes of transport are also used. For air transportation, the flame is sheltered in a security lamp, similar to a miner's lamp. At night time, it is kept in a special cauldron. The Relay's function is twofold: to herald the Olympic Games and to transmit a message of peace and friendship to the people along its route.

## STADIUM

The highlight of the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics is the entrance of the Olympic flame into the stadium. The identity of the final torchbearer is kept secret until the last moment. It is often a personality from the sports world or a young person symbolising hope for the future.

The final torchbearer often does a lap of the stadium before lighting the monumental cauldron with the Olympic flame. A symbolic release of doves evokes the climate of peace in which the Olympic Games should take place. The flame remains lit for the duration of the Games and is only extinguished at the closing ceremony.

1. OG Vancouver 2010 –  
The Olympic flame enters  
the stadium during the Opening  
Ceremony.

© Getty / Jasper Juinen





# THE FLAME

## SYMBOLISM OF FIRE

Fire has always played a very important role in the life of Man. The knowledge, mastery and use of fire figure amongst the most important achievements of humanity. Its place in the beliefs of most ethnic groups is proof of this.

The Ancient Greeks, for example, explained the presence of fire on earth through the myth of **Prometheus**.

The divine origin of fire made it a sacred element. The Greeks maintained perpetual fires in front of their main temples. The purity of this fire was guaranteed by the ignition technique: the flame was obtained by the rays of the sun. Captured at the centre of a recipient called a *skaphia*, the ancestor of the parabolic mirror used today for lighting the Olympic flame, the rays caused an intense heat which allowed a flame to be obtained.

## FIRE IN OLYMPIA

In the sanctuary of Olympia, where the Ancient Olympic Games took place, a flame burned permanently on the altar of the goddess **Hestia**, situated in the *Prytaneum* (building used for the large banquets held in honour of the athletes at the end of the Games). Also obtained from the heat of the sun's rays, this fire was used to light the other fires of the sanctuary.

Such fires were lit on the altars of **Zeus** and **Hera**, situated in front of their temples. To honour these gods, animal sacrifices were made in the same place. Today, nothing remains of the altars, but the present ceremony for the lighting of the Olympic flame in front of the temple of Hera acts as a reminder of these events.

## LIGHTING OF THE OLYMPIC FLAME

These days, everything starts in Olympia, Greece. A few months before the opening of the Games, a ceremony is organised on the ancient site of the Olympic Games. The flame is lit in front of the ruins of the Temple of Hera by actresses playing the part of priestesses. The choreography and costumes used in the ceremony are based on those of Antiquity.

The flame is lit according to the ancient method of the sun's rays in the parabolic mirror. The Olympic flame can only be lit in this way. The flame is placed in an urn and transported into the ancient stadium where it is given to the first runner by the high priestess responsible for this operation.

This process is done months before the opening of the Games, in order to allow for the relay to arrive at the host city.

1. OG Calgary 1988 – Lighting of the Olympic flame in Olympia.  
© IOC / Jean-François Pahud

**Prometheus** stole fire from the gods to give to Man. As a punishment, he was chained to a rock by Zeus, father of the gods. Every day, an eagle came to devour his liver, which grew back every night. Prometheus defied the gods with his theft of fire but by the same act he also revealed the secrets of knowledge, wisdom and the human spirit to Man.

**Hestia** – (Roman name Vesta) goddess of the hearth. In the Roman religion, the Vestals were the guardians of the city's fire.

**Zeus** – (Roman name Jupiter) king of the gods of Olympia, he brought order and justice to the world. The Games in Olympia and Nemea were held in his honour.

**Hera** – (Roman name Juno), sister and wife of Zeus, she reigned with him. In Olympia, her cult was probably linked to that of another, older goddess of fertility. Hera herself was associated with birth.

**What if the sun isn't shining?**

As a precaution, on a sunny rehearsal day before the official ceremony, a flame is lit according to the traditional method. In this way, even if the sun is not out on the day of the ceremony, the torch can be lit from this flame, which is kept in a security lamp.

# THE RELAY AT THE MODERN OLYMPIC GAMES

## A MODERN INVENTION INSPIRED BY ANTIQUITY

The Olympic Torch Relay is now a powerful symbol of understanding and brotherhood among peoples. Contrary to what people could imagine, this tradition does not go back to the Games in Olympia. A modern invention (the first Relay was held in 1936 and the Olympic Movement recognised its great symbolic value in 1948), the Torch Relay is, however, inspired by several ancient practices:

### Athens torch races

There were never any relays held at the ancient Olympic Games nor at the Pan-Hellenic Games (held in Nemea, Delphi and the Isthmus of Corinth. (see *"The Ancient Games" sheet*). However, in Athens there were torch races (**Lampadedromia**) held in honour of certain gods, including Prometheus. The flame was passed on by relay runners and the first to arrive at the altar of the god had the honour of rekindling the fire.

### A sacred truce for the Games in Olympia

Some time before the Games, messengers wearing olive leaf crowns left **Elis** to announce the exact date of the competitions to other Greek cities. They invited the citizens to come to Olympia, and proclaimed the sacred truce (ekecheiria), which represented the obligation to cease combats one month before and during the period of the Games. This allowed the athletes and spectators to travel to Olympia and home again safely.

## THE FIRST RELAYS – SUMMER AND WINTER

- › In **1936**, Carl Diem, Secretary General of the Organising Committee of the Games of the XI Olympiad in Berlin, proposed the inclusion of a torch relay in the programme of the **Summer Games**. The flame was **lit in Olympia** and **transported to Berlin** via a torch relay.

This **first summer relay** had to overcome several practical problems:

- the site of Olympia was hard to access and roads had to be specially built;
- planning of the itinerary required a lot of travelling for that period in time;
- the absence of suitable products (torch, cauldron, etc.) meant that research into specialized technology had to be undertaken, such as tests with the sun's rays and optical instruments.

***Lampadedromia** – Greek word for the ancient torch relays. They were part of religious ceremonies rather than sporting events.*

***Elis** – The sanctuary of Olympia was situated on the territory of the city of Elis, some 50km to the north.*



- › In the context of the **Winter Games**, the first relay took place during the **1952 Games in Oslo**.  
This first relay did not start in Olympia, Greece, but in the valley of Morgedal in Norway.
  - the region, considered as the birthplace of skiing, was chosen as a reminder of the origins of this sport;
  - the flame was lit in the hearth of the chalet belonging to Sondre Norheim, a legendary figure in Norwegian skiing.
- › At the Winter Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo in **1956**, the flame was lit in front of the Capitole in Rome, as the city had just been elected host of the Games of the XVII Olympiad. The tripod used for the ceremony was sent from Olympia.
- › At the Winter Games in Squaw Valley in **1960**, the flame was once again lit in Norway, at Sondre Norheim's chalet. The inscription on the torch "Olympia to Squaw Valley" is a reference to an attempt to start the relay in Olympia, which did not succeed as the time period was too restricted.
- › Since the **Innsbruck Games in 1964**, the relay for the Winter Games has begun in Olympia.

#### ITINERARY OF THE RELAY

Choosing a route for a relay is not as easy as drawing a straight line between Olympia and the host city of the Games! Each relay has its own "flavour" and allows for the discovery of the history and culture of a new part of the world.

**From Olympia to Athens...** the organisation of the lighting of the flame in Olympia is always handled by the Greek Olympic Committee. This Committee also takes charge of the transport of the flame by runners to Athens or, more precisely, to the Panathenaic stadium which was used for the 1896 Games.

**From Athens to the host city...** the rest of the relay to the host city of the Games is handled by the Olympic Games Organising Committee (OCOG). This Committee chooses the theme of the relay, which then helps them determine the regions to be crossed, the stops planned and the different types of transport.

Until 2008, the flame usually travelled through several countries before arriving at its final destination. As from 2010, the Torch Relay has mainly taken place in Greece and the country of the host city, to where the flame is directly transported from Athens.

**1. OG Berlin 1936 –**  
*A torchbearer with the Olympic flame in front of a crowd.*  
© 1936 / International Olympic Committee (IOC)

The following are some examples of themes which have influenced the itineraries of the flame.

### **THEMATIC ROUTES – SOME EXAMPLES OF SIGNIFICANT RELAYS**

#### **The relay of peace – London 1948**

In a Europe sorely afflicted by the war, the 1948 relay carried a welcome message of peace. The first runner, Corporal Dimitrelis, took off his military uniform before carrying the flame, commemorating the sacred truce observed in Ancient Greece. The planned route highlighted border crossings, where festivities were organised to celebrate the return of peace.

The relay went through Lausanne, Switzerland. As homage to the restorer of the Olympic Games, a ceremony was organised at Pierre de Coubertin's tomb in the Bois-de-Vaux cemetery.

#### **The ancient relay – Rome 1960**

The relay shone the spotlight on the two poles of classical civilisation: Athens and Rome. Lesser-known ancient sites in Greece and Italy were thus brought to the public's attention. For the first time, the relay was televised and the event closely followed by the media.

#### **The relay to the New World – Mexico City 1968**

The relay retraced the steps of Christopher Columbus to the New World. The idea was to underline the link between Mediterranean and Latin-American civilisations and between ancient (Greco-Latin) and Pre-Hispanic civilisations. A direct descendant of the great navigator, Cristóbal Colón de Carbajal, was the last runner on Spanish soil. The Olympic flame made a stop at the Great Pyramid of the Moon in Teotihuacan. A "New Fire" ceremony was organised which, in the Aztec tradition, was celebrated to mark the end of a 52-year cycle. The reappearance of the sun at dawn symbolised the renewal of the world.

#### **The oriental relay – Seoul 1988**

The relay showcased the traditions of Korea. Its route, which was a zigzag from east to west, symbolised the harmony to be found in the balance between two opposite poles. The torchbearers did not wear the official uniform provided by the Games Organising Committee, but instead wore regional or traditional costumes.

The runner who brought the flame into the stadium was Sohn Kee-Chung, Olympic champion of the marathon in Berlin in 1936, under the name of Kitei Son. At the time, his medal was awarded to Japan, as Korea was under Japanese rule.





### The “Down Under” relay – Sydney 2000

This relay had a twofold goal: to make Oceania widely known and to promote the culture and heritage of Australia’s various regions. The start of the relay on the Australian continent was in the centre of the country at Uluru (Ayers Rock), a sacred site for the indigenous population. The Aboriginal athlete Nova Peris-Kneebone, Olympic field hockey champion, was the first runner in the relay. The enthusiasm of the crowd along the relay route grew bigger and bigger. One million spectators welcomed the arrival of the flame in Sydney. In a ceremony which recalled the elements used in the design of the torch (fire, water, earth), Cathy Freeman “walked on water” before lighting a circle of fire which revealed itself to be a monumental cauldron.

### The Northern Lights Relay – Vancouver 2010

The theme of the Relay, “A path of Northern Lights”, made reference to the flame tracing a trail among Canada’s many communities. The flame covered 45,000 kilometres throughout Canada and stopped in each province and territory of the country. More than 90 per cent of Canadians could thus see the flame as it passed less than an hour’s car drive away from every home.

### ORIGINALITY OF TRANSPORTATION

Traditionally, relays have been carried out on foot (for Berlin 1936, London 1948 and Moscow 1980 the relays were entirely run in this way). With the celebration of the Olympic Games throughout the world, the flame had to travel by plane. The **modes of transport** have slowly become more and more diversified, not only for practical reasons, but also to showcase the particularities of the regions crossed.

### The flame in the snow!

Legendary Norwegian skiers (or their descendants) carried out the entirety of the transport of the flame (Oslo 1952). Dog sleds and snow scooters were used for some stages of the Relay (Vancouver 2010).

### The flame in the water, on the water and under water!

In the sea off Veracruz, Mexico, swimmers carried the flame from the boat *Durango* to the shore (Mexico City 1968). A diver swam across the port of Marseilles holding the flame out of the water (Grenoble 1968). The flame travelled on the frigate *Cataluña* for the passage between Greece and Spain and arrived on Spanish soil in Empuries, the gateway to Greek civilisation on the Iberian peninsula (circa 600 B.C.) (Barcelona 1992). A diver carried the flame under water at the Great Barrier Reef (Sydney 2000).

1. OG Cortina d’Ampezzo 1956. Olympic Torch Relay – Zeno COLO (ITA), former downhill ski Olympic champion, starts going downhill towards Cortina d’Ampezzo. © 1956 / Foto Constantini, Cortina



### The flame in the air, through the air and in space!

The flame made its first trip in an aeroplane (Oslo 1952). The flame travelled faster than the speed of sound on its journey from Athens to Paris – on Concorde (Albertville 1992). The wonders of technology were highlighted when the Canadians organized the transmission of the flame by satellite between Athens and Ottawa (Montreal 1976). For the first time in the history of the Olympics, the torch (but not the flame) made a parachute jump. It also made an impressive entry at the Opening Ceremony of the Games, carried by a ski jumper during his actual jump (Lillehammer 1994). The torch was carried into space by astronauts (Atlanta 1996 and Sydney 2000).

### The flame on horseback and on a camel!

Although the host of the 1956 Games was Melbourne, the equestrian events were held in another city on another continent – Stockholm, Sweden. Here, the flame was transported only by horse (Melbourne/Stockholm 1956). Horses played a special role again when the history of the Pony Express was featured as a part of the Torch Relay (Atlanta 1996). Horses were replaced by camels when the flame crossed the Australian desert (Sydney 2000).

### The flame in the Wild West!

The modes of transport that are used bring to mind great moments in American history. For example, the flame traveled in an Indian canoe, on a Mississippi steamboat, and on a wagon of the Union Pacific (the first transcontinental railroad) (Atlanta 1996)

1. OG Salt Lake 2002. The Olympic flame is transported by train.  
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2. OG Montreal 1976 – Olympic Torch Relay by boat.  
© 1976 / IOC



# THE TORCH-BEARERS

The flame is carried to the host city by thousands of torch-bearers: athletes, celebrities, but mostly by everyday people.

## SELECTING THE TORCH-BEARERS

Until the 1970s, the torch-bearers were mainly athletes selected by the Organising Committees for the Games (Berlin 1936), the government (Rome 1960), sports organisations (London 1948, Helsinki 1952 and Stockholm 1956) or National Olympic Committees (Munich 1972).

These torch-bearers were young, male athletes. It was only at the Munich Games in 1972 that women and people with disabilities were included among the torch-bearers. It was also from this date onwards that the athletes and other known officials were joined by “ordinary” torch-bearers, often inhabitants of the regions through which the Relay passed. It is now the Organising Committee for the Games which is responsible for selecting all the torch-bearers.

From the 1990s onwards, the Organising Committees have involved Games sponsors in their torch-bearer selection process. The selection criteria for the “ordinary” candidates increasingly include the person’s social and community involvement. Major casting operations are organised. For the 1996 Atlanta Games, the “Community Heroes Programme” selected torch-bearers with local importance and influence. For the 2004 Games in Athens, torch-bearers were selected because they inspired and brought their communities together through sport, education and culture. For the London 2012 Games, candidates could be proposed via the internet. A total of 8,000 torch-bearers were thus selected from among the tens of thousands of candidatures received, on the basis of their social commitment.

Well-known people from the worlds of sport, show business and politics continue to be associated with the Torch Relay, thus contributing to promoting the Olympic spirit throughout the world.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIRST AND LAST TORCH-BEARERS

Among the thousands of torch-bearers, the first and, particularly, the last (who lights the cauldron in the stadium during the Games Opening Ceremony) are chosen for the special relationship they enjoy with the host country. They all carry very strong messages:

1. A female torchbearer runs with the Olympic flame.  
© Getty / Pascal Le Segretain



- › Tokyo 1964: The last torch-bearer, Yoshinori Sakai, was chosen because he was born in Hiroshima on the day that the atomic bomb was dropped on the city.
- › Sydney 2000: The last torch-bearer, Cathy Freeman, was chosen as she represented the cause of Australia's Aborigines.

1. *The Olympic flame is passed from one torch to another.*  
© Getty / Todd Warshwa

For each edition of the Games, a new model of torch is created with specific technical and aesthetical standards!

## TORCHES

For each edition of the Games, a new model of torch is created with specific technical and aesthetical standards!

### THE TECHNICAL SIDE OF THE OLYMPIC TORCH

The torch must conform to exact technical standards. During the relay, the flame must never go out. The torch must be able to stand up to difficult weather conditions (such as wind, rain, snow and extreme heat) and the most unusual modes of transport. It must also be capable of burning longer than the amount of time reserved for the relay leg, in case the runner has any problems on route.

In 1936, when the first relay was organised, experiments were necessary to determine the best shape for the torch and the most suitable combustible. Magnesium, gunpowder, resin, olive oil... all these products (and many others!) have been used to fuel the Olympic Flame. These days, a gas cartridge in the body of the torch is the most popular solution chosen. The type of gas used can influence the colour of the flame (from white to yellowy-red) and its intensity.

### THE DESIGN OF THE OLYMPIC TORCH

In the early days of the relay, the torch models were more or less the same. With the evolution of the Olympic Games, the shapes, colours and materials used have become more and more varied. The torches are very often created by world-famous firms or designers, for example Pedro Ramirez Vasquez and Lance Wyman for Mexico City 1968; Munemichi Yanagi for Sapporo 1972; Georges Huel and Michel Dallaire for Montreal 1976; Philippe Starck for Albertville 1992; Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby for London 2012; and Pininfarina for Torino 2006 and Bombardier for Vancouver 2010. This diversity shows the will to differentiate editions of the Games, as well as to express, through the object, the particularities of the host country or to highlight the most symbolic aspects of the Games.



**Rome 1960<sup>1</sup>** Highlights the Roman and Greek classical civilisations. The design of the torch was deliberately based on a classical model, inspired by torches found on ancient sites.

**Sydney 2000<sup>2</sup>** The top of the torch has the same shape as the Sydney Opera House. Its shape, as well as the logo of these Games, was inspired by the boomerang, the Aborigines' ancient hunting tool.

**Salt Lake City 2002<sup>3</sup>** The shape of the torch relates to the elements of fire and ice, symbols of the 2002 Games. The torch looks like a stalactite. Its textured pewter shaft symbolises the ruggedness of the American West.

**Beijing 2008<sup>4</sup>** The torch includes several references to Chinese culture: the lower part represents lacquer; its red colour is lucky in China. On the top part of the torch, the scrolled shapes represent auspicious clouds. Finally, the torch is shaped like a roll of paper, a Chinese invention.

**London 2012<sup>5</sup>** The 8,000 holes in the torch represent the inspiring stories of the 8,000 torch-bearers. The triangular shape is representative of series of three: three Olympic values (friendship, excellence and respect); three words in the Olympic motto (Citius, Altius, Fortius); three editions of the Olympic Games in London (1908, 1948 and 2012); and the vision of the London 2012 Games, to combine the three aspects of sport, culture and education.

Nowadays, torches are produced in great quantities and, as a result, runners sometimes have the possibility of acquiring their torch after their participation in the relay.

Images 1 to 5: © IOC



### ARRIVAL AT THE STADIUM

On the occasion of the Opening Ceremony of the Games, a torch of a different design or material from the one used in the rest of the relay is sometimes used. A smoke apparatus is sometimes added so that the public can see the arrival of the flame in the stadium and easily follow its route through the crowd right up until the moment the cauldron is lit.



1. OG Vancouver 2010 – The Torch has arrived in the stadium  
© Getty / Cameron Spencer

2. Olympic Games Seoul 1988. Opening Ceremony - Son-Man CHONG, Won-Tak KIM and Mi-Jong SON light the Olympic Cauldron.  
© 1988 / IOPP, Seoul 1988 / WIEDENER Jeff

## ACTIVITIES

**Imagine** the organisation of a torch relay in your region. What is the message conveyed by the flame? What is the route of the relay? What are the places or monuments to be showcased, and where would the flame stop in your region? How would you choose the modes of transport? What criteria would you use to select the runners?

**Study** the symbolism of the more recent Olympic torches. Look for the relationship between the shape, materials and colours used in the torch and the culture of the city or country where the Games took place.

**Compare** the role of the Olympic Flame in the Games with the role of fire in other ceremonies you know about. What do fire and light bring to these ceremonies?

**Discover** the history of fire. How do you explain the importance given to this element in all the civilisations of the world?

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