Over the last century, the Winter Olympic Games have become the most important winter sports competition of all. Devoid of any precedence, their components, originally based on sports practices from Europe, varied greatly at the mercy of the upper classes of developed countries. Up until 1992, the Winter Olympics were held in the same year as the Summer Olympics, but they have enjoyed increasing visibility ever since Lillehammer (1994) by alternating a summer and a winter Olympic Games every second year. Nonetheless, the Winter Olympics have a restricted representation of the world: contrary to the Summer Olympics, where athletics assures a universal level of participation, the practice of winter sports calls for climatic conditions and expensive infrastructures that limit the possibilities for participation. In this new century, it will no doubt be one of the missions of the IOC to open the Winter Olympics up to more countries.

**Difficult Beginnings**

The Winter Olympics occupy a very special place in the Olympic movement. Their beginnings were harder and later than the Summer Olympics, which benefited from a wide consensus around the revolutionary Pierre de Coubertin. The Winter Olympics were pure innovation, created without any historical reference, and had a long and difficult start in life.

**Coubertin and the Scandinavians against the Winter Olympics**

Neither welcomed nor well prepared, the Winter Olympics were faced with opposition on two different fronts. Firstly, Coubertin himself was against them for fear that the "white gold" would be exploited in a mercenary manner contrary to the spirit of the Olympic ideal. He wrote a few lines particularly critical of winter sports in the "Olympic Review" of March 1914: "There is no doubt that the number of people practising winter sports has greatly increased (...). However, there is also no doubt that many winter sports resorts, where a sporting spirit reigned heretofore, have rapidly declined in this regard. The sportsmen themselves are not at fault, at least not directly, but rather the high bidding hoteliers and the new market niche that they are creating (...). This is why clever hoteliers would do well to attract real sportsmen who are less demanding but safer, and replace the sentimental gymkhanas with competitions in different sports, and take on boxing teachers instead of tango instructors".

The second source of opposition were the Scandinavians, in particular the Swedish General V.G. Balck. They had been organising the Nordic Games since 1901, and were very attached to their monopoly on international winter sports competitions.

**International Winter Sports Week**

It required all the perseverance of a few men, in particular the Count of Clary, the Marquis of Polignac and a certain F. Reichel, to overcome the reluctance and convince the majority of the members of the IOC of the merits of Winter Olympic Games. In reality, it was only a partial victory - the first edition took place in Chamonix in 1924 under the name "International Winter Sports Week". Although this competition under the auspices of the IOC was not an integral part of the Olympic Games, the organisers did everything in their power to have this event considered as the first Winter Olympic Games. The success of this "International Winter Sports Week" meant that it was officially recognised at the 24th congress of the IOC in Prague in 1925.

Originally considered as the winter complement to the Summer Olympic Games, the Winter Olympics were generally granted automatically to the host country of the summer Olympics (right of priority), with the exception of Saint-Moritz in 1928, since the Netherlands would have had great difficulty organising such an event. It was not until the end of the second World War that the Winter Olympics began to gain their independence from their summer counterpart, and started to become the event we know today.

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*The opening ceremony at the first Olympic Games in Chamonix (FRA) in 1924*  
(Crédits photo: IOC, Olympic Museum Collections)
Participation in the Winter Olympic Games from 1924 to 1998: A long and unfinished conquest

The participation of the NOCs in the Winter Olympics has been very progressive over the course of the last century. The same dynamics can be found as in the Summer Olympics, but with a time lag: a competition that originally took place among a closed group of a few western nations, then a globalisation process that is still far from completed for the Winter Olympics.

Games between "Europeans" up until the second World War
Two main criteria determined the participation in the Games before the Second World War: firstly, seniority in the Olympic movement (founded in 1894 at the Sorbonne congress), and secondly the practice of the sport in the participating country.
At the first Winter Olympics in Chamonix in 1924, nearly all the participating countries were founding members in the Olympic movement. The European countries, the United States and Canada were all present, except for Germany, which was partially isolated after its defeat in 1918.

The presence of the European countries, in particular the Scandinavian and Alpine countries, and to a lesser degree Eastern Europe, was all the more justified because they had a history of winter sports and could therefore put forward competitive athletes in the competition. With a few exceptions (notable Denmark, Iceland, Ireland, Portugal and Albania), nearly all the countries of Europe took part in the Winter Olympic Games before the Second World War, including the Baltic countries, which were independent between 1918 and 1940. The other participating countries (such as Japan, Australia, Argentina, Mexico, Lebanon and Turkey) were relatively well integrated or close enough to the western world, and had a certain level of seniority in the Olympic movement.

The 1960s: the arrival of countries less disposed to the practice of winter sports
After the war, the majority of the participating countries still counted among the developed nations of the world (New Zealand, Denmark...). The arrival of the Soviet Union in 1956 brought a new dimension to the competitions. However, it was not until 1968 that there was a real widening in the range of participants. The wave of new participants brought smaller European states (such as Andorra, Monaco, San Marino) on the one hand, as well as developing countries emerging from colonisation on the other hand (e.g. Senegal, Morocco...). The fact that some of these countries were located in intertropical zones made the practice of winter sports almost anecdotal! China presents a particular case, their late arrival on the winter and summer Olympic scene resulting rather from political circumstances.

Geopolitics and wider participation
The last three Winter Olympics, namely Albertville in 1992, Lillehammer in 1994 and Nagano in 1998, have been characterised by the explosion of the former Eastern bloc countries. Many new NOCs born out of the territorial upheaval in the former USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia are now arriving on the Olympic scene (return of the Baltic republics, appearance of the majority of the ex-Soviet
republics). This explosion almost automatically led to a marked increase in the level of participation. Athletes who were unable to qualify in the USSR can now represent their Republic. On the other hand, the NOCs from Germany were united after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Finally, the globalisation of the Winter Olympics continues with the arrival of many developing countries, or small states (such as the islands of the Pacific and Caribbean).

The gradual globalisation of the participation of NOCs in the Winter Olympics (from Chamonix to Nagano, the number of delegations increased from 16 to 72), although not yet complete, nonetheless attenuates somewhat diminishes the dominant role of Europe and North America. However, this growth has only been made possible by integrating states that were little disposed to winter sports disciplines, either because of their poor economic or geographic situation (i.e., in hot climate zones), or because they were too small to produce a sporting elite. Nonetheless, the simple fact of participating means a lot to these small countries looking for international recognition; but producing competitive athletes requires the presence of the expensive infrastructures necessary for winter sports.

The evolution of the Olympic programme

Growth...
The number of events increased continuously between 1924 and 2002, mirroring the growth of the summer Games. From only 16 events in Chamonix in 1924, this number increased to 68 in Nagano in 1998, and 78 in 2002. This constant progression saw only one exception, in Saint-Moritz in 1928, where disciplines such as curling, military patrol or the 4 distances in speed skating were abandoned.

Over the whole history of the Games, one can identify three clear periods where the number of events was on the rise. Firstly, from 1932 to 1948, the number of events increased from 14 to 22; the increase remained rather small, and was mainly due to the appearance of alpine skiing events in 1936.

Secondly, between 1956 and 1964, four new events in women's skating were introduced, as well as men's biathlon, and three luge events, increasing the total number of events from 24 to 34.

Finally, the third period, between 1984 and 1998, saw a more rapid rise in the number of events, with an increasing of 39 to 68. There are several reasons behind this: new alpine and Nordic skiing events (particularly team events), the arrival of ice hockey and biathlon for women, the reintroduction of curling (men's and women's), as well as the introduction of new events such as short track, snowboarding or freestyle skiing. There has been a sort of "explosion" in the Games over the last few years, confirmed by the continuing evolution at Nagano and Salt Lake City - ten new events are on the programme for this year's Winter Olympics (women's bobsleigh, men's and women's skeleton, men's and women's 1500m short track, men's and women's cross country skiing sprint, men's and women's biathlon pursuit, and a sprint event in Nordic combined). The race towards a spectacle of enormous proportions, sometimes observed with great anxiety, is now as much an integral component of the Winter Olympics as of Summer Olympics.

... stabilisation ...

It is quite logical that the first Winter Olympic Games in Chamonix should have had only a limited number of events. However, in the
light of today’s Games, one might be surprised at the type of events that were held in those days. In particular, alpine skiing wasn’t on the programme at all. It appeared for the first time in 1936 in the form of a unique combined event, before becoming more developed and diversified after the second World War, up to the appearance in recent times of derived disciplines reflecting modern skiing practices: freestyle skiing (introduced in Albertville in 1992 for the moguls and in Lillehammer in 1994 for ski jumping) and snowboarding (Nagano 1998).

The Nordic disciplines, which reflect the important role of Scandinavia in the emergence of skiing as a sport, have been part of the Games since the very beginning (4 events, of which 2 combined). Over the years, their importance has remained constant, and has even grown slightly in the most recent Games (with a total of 18 events of 2002).

The role of the military in perpetuating the practice of skiing was acknowledged at the 1924 Games with the presence of a "military patrol" event. It disappeared again in 1928 but then resurfaced in 1960 in the form of the biathlon, a new winter sport that now has its own international federation. The appearance, disappearance and reappearance of sports was not limited to this discipline; two other sports also experience the same up-and-down destiny, namely curling (present in 1924, and reintroduced again in 1998) and skeleton (introduced in 1928, promptly abandoned, and reintroduced again in 2002).

Finally, the bobsleigh, the only sport requiring machinery at the 1924 Games, has now been joined by the skeleton and more particularly, the luge. The profitable return on the very high investment required for such equipment has justified the appearance of these sports in...
At the outset, the major part of the Winter Olympics took place on the ice rink: curling, hockey, figure skating and speed skating. These sports represented 10 of the 16 recognised events. In Salt Lake City 2002, however, ice sports count for only a third of the events.

In parallel to the increasing number of events, it can also be noticed that the Olympic Games have brought about a structural transformation in the disciplines represented: a reflection of the clear trend towards general development can be seen in the practice of winter sports throughout the last century.

... increasing female participation...

With only a very small number in the early days of the Games (in 1924, women appeared only in the figure skating competition), the level of women’s participation became significant only from 1936 on. This growing presence of women, increasing regularly until 1964, was mainly due to the appearance of the alpine skiing events in 1936, cross country skiing in 1952 and speed skating in 1960 (4 women’s events introduced, while men had been participating since the outset); luge in 1964. From 1964 to 1980, there was no change in the programme of women’s events. Since the 1984 Games, however, the number of women’s events is on the increase again, rising from 12 events in 1980 to 29 in 1998, thanks in particular to the appearance of new disciplines such as short track, freestyle skiing, snowboarding or biathlon, but also due to the increase in the number of events in cross country and alpine skiing.

The difference between the number of men’s and the number of women’s events has decreased considerably over the whole history of the Games. However, a few disciplines have always developed in a similar manner for both women and men, such as figure skating, alpine skiing, or even short track, snowboarding and freestyle skiing. The difference between the number of men’s and women’s events observed at the 1998 Games was due to the absence of a women’s bobsleigh event (introduced in 2002), ski jumping and Nordic combined, and the fact that men have an extra luge event (although in theory, the doubles event can be mixed, there are never actually any women participating). Apart from these few exceptions, men and women both have the same number of events in the sports mentioned above. So can equality really be attained? Will we see women’s Nordic combined or women’s ski jumping at the Winter Olympics some day? Although the answer to this question is not known, one can nonetheless ask whether any moves in this direction have been undertaken by the relevant federations. But do women even partake in these disciplines at all? And if so, how well developed is the women’s movement?

Strong increase of participation in the last twenty years

Growth and diversification of the events, increasing participation of women, escalating numbers of NOCs represented, increase in the size of NOC delegations... all these factors have the clear effect of rapidly increasing the number of athletes participating in the Games. From approximately 300 in 1924 (for 16 NOCs), the number of athletes increased to 2,200 in Nagano (72 NOCs), that is to say a sevenfold increase in the number of participants, and 4.5 times the number of NOCs. This huge difference is explained by the higher number of athletes in each national team, especially as regards the teams of NOCs who participated in the first Winter Olympics. Nonetheless, this increase has by no means been a linear one over the course of the 18 Winter Olympic Games.

Obstacles to participation: distance and crises

It is true that on several occasions over the years, the number of athletes has declined in...
the Olympic Games, particularly when they were held in the United States. There are several reasons behind this decrease. The first reason is the distance, particularly for the first two Games held in the United States (Lake Placid in 1932 and Squaw Valley in 1960), and this accounted for a particularly significant decline in the number of participants. The majority of the athletes at the first Olympic Games were from Europe, and given the slowness and high costs of travel and communications, especially in 1932, the delegations were somewhat smaller. The Games held in Sapporo in 1972 also suffered from this same phenomenon, but the effects seemed to have diminished by the time the Lake Placid Games were held in 1980. Another reason can be found in the political and economic aspects. The Saint-Moritz Games in 1948, which registered a decrease in the number of competitors compared to previous games, were held in the immediate post-war period. Many countries were at that time facing considerable economic problems linked to reconstruction after the war. Moreover, countries such as Germany and Japan, aggressors during the war, were not even invited to participate, whereas they had sent many athletes to participate in previous Olympics. Finally, the decrease in the number of participants at the Innsbruck Games in 1976 seems to have been linked to the petrol crisis of 1973, which plunged many countries into great financial difficulty.

Inevitable growth?

Three distinct periods of growth can be identified. The first, from 1924 to 1936 (with the exception of the too remote Lake Placid Games in 1932) follows on from the creation of the Winter Olympic Games and the first attempt in Chamonix. The second period, from 1952 to 1968, saw a greater increase in the number of participants. This was partly the result of the arrival of the USSR on the Olympic scene, as well as that of a few developing countries, and partly the result of increases in the number of athletes in each national team. This phenomenon demonstrates the increasing interest of some countries in winter sports (during the period winter sports resorts were becoming more popular,
tourist infrastructures and winter sports equipment were being developed...). Finally, from 1980 to 1998, the third period saw the highest surge in participants and in the number of NOCs (despite a small decrease in the number of competitors in 1994). This period is characterised by the appearance of many developing countries, the increasing number of NOCs (and thus, of athletes) due to the splitting of many Eastern countries, and more generally, the development of the Olympic phenomenon, with ever greater challenges, in particular economic. Indeed, this recent growth spurt does not seem to be letting up; rather, the contrary seems to be true, particularly when one considers the record number of participants for the upcoming Games in Salt Lake City 2002 (over 2,400 athletes, 77 NOCs, including 5 new NOCs represented for the first time).

"Regional Globalisation"
At the first Winter Olympics, geographical proximity played an important role on the participation, and may have given the impression that the Games were largely composed of continental Europeans. The Games in Chamonix (1924), Saint-Moritz (1928 and 1948), Garmisch-Partenkirchen (1936) and Cortina d’Ampezzo (1956) were characterised by the particularly high participation of Eastern and Western European countries (between 43.9% and 52.5% of the total participants). At the Lake Placid Games in 1932, nearly 41.9% of the participants were from North America, and in Oslo in 1952, Scandinavia provided 27.2% of all the athletes. With advancements in transport from 1960 onwards, this phenomenon was slightly diminished, but has never really totally disappeared (for the 1972 Games in Sapporo, and the 1998 Games in Nagano, the Asian NOCs sent particularly numerous delegations, respectively 11 and 15.3%). An overview of the whole history of the Winter Games shows that nearly three quarters of the participants (73.4%) have been from Europe. Going into slightly more detail, Western Europe appears to provide the greatest number of athletes (34.8%), followed by Eastern Europe (23.8%) and then Scandinavia (14.8%). Some countries from Eastern Europe participated in the 1924 Games, but the appearance of the USSR in 1956 really reinforced the Eastern European presence. These figures demonstrate the European "domination" of the Winter Olympics, a phenomenon that already became clear from the assessment of the candidate cities applying to host the Games.

Distribution of the number of athletes per sports
Only the North American continent, with 15.1% of the total number of participants, for only two countries, has a special place in this essentially European competition. Their high rate of participation underlines their constant presence as well as their great interest in winter sports. The reasons for this are of course economic (spectator sports such as ice hockey, figure skating or even curling), but also reflect their desire to develop tourism. Asia and Oceania, with 9.6% (mainly Japan), South America with 1.7%, and Africa, with only 0.2%, are very poorly represented in comparison to the size of their respective populations.

Overall, all the NOCs that have sent the most athletes to participate in the Winter Games are situated in the northern hemisphere, at high latitude (between parallels 40 and 70), with temperate climates, and developed economics (capitalist, or former socialist regimes).
The weight of the sports

A comparison of the weight of each discipline over the whole Olympics should be placed in context. Many events were introduced at different times, and not all attract the same level of interest. Furthermore, team sports such as ice hockey (20% of all participants) or bobsleigh, count for a higher proportion of athletes owing to the nature of the sport. Nonetheless, even taking these factors into account, a few salient points can be noted:

- The level of participation is not decided according to the number of medals awarded, but rather according to the type of sport and its popularity. Thus, alpine skiing, whether in terms of number athletes or number of NOCs, appears to be largely dominant with, for instance, twice as many participants as speed skating, when in fact, the number of medals awarded is lower (102 in alpine skiing for 128 in speed skating). Alpine skiing is definitely the king of the Winter Olympic sports.

- In fact, the relatively low level of participation in speed skating in not only due to its lesser popularity, but also because many athletes take part in several events, or even all events. This phenomenon is much rarer in alpine skiing, because the level of specialisation in the alpine disciplines is much greater. For example, a downhill skier practically never participates in a slalom event, with the exception of athletes from very small delegations, who sometimes partake in several events (importance of visibility for small countries).

- Finally, the participation of women is usually always lower of that of males, even when the number of medals awarded is the same. Only the newer disciplines have a more or less equal level of participation from each sex. Figure skating is the only sport where women participants are the majority. The greatest difference between the level of female and male participation can been seen in alpine skiing (where the ratio is practically 1 to 2, for the same number of events).

Apart from the simple increase in the number of events on the programme at the Winter Olympics, comes the question of the composition of this programme, a major challenge for the IOC. For the moment, the Olympic Charter stipulates that sports admitted to the Winter Olympics absolutely must be practised either on ice or on snow. However, a number of federations propose to modify this rule, in order to allow other sports to be part of the Winter Olympics, such as indoor soccer (thereby coming closer to the English notion of winter sports, in other words sports that are practised during the winter period, such as rugby, football and others).

In the longer term, it could be imagined that some sports could be transferred from the Summer Olympics to the Winter Olympics, thereby limiting the huge proportions of the Summer Olympics, and allowing certain countries, particularly developing nations, to organise the Winter Games. Allowing such new sports might also have the advantage of making the Winter Olympics more universal, however with the major disadvantage of greatly increasing the level of participation, and the infrastructures necessary, thereby increasing the costs involved in the organisation. Furthermore, what would be the reaction of the winter sports federations, such as the FIS, in the face of the loss of their monopoly, and what would be the position of the financial background, such as sponsors and media, if they were faced with this loss?

There exist many possibilities for further development for the Winter Olympics, while retaining the rationale of ice and snow sports, particularly when one considers the 120-130 NOCs that are affiliated to one or more winter sports federations. The participation of new NOCs, as for the summer Olympics, may result from increased financing from the IOC and more relaxed qualification conditions for some sports....

All of these questions will no doubt be addressed in the near future, notably under the new Presidency of the IOC.