The Olympic Games are an international sports competition which are held every four years in a different city. Thousands of athletes from all over the world compete against each other in individual and team sports. Over 1 billion people watch the games on TV.

The first Olympic Games were held in Greece in 776 B.C. They were called the ancient games and lasted until the 4th century A.D. The modern games began in 1896, when the Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin revived the games to bring peace and friendship to the young people all over the world.

Today, there are summer and winter games. Up to 1994 both games were held in the same year, but now they are staged two years apart from each other.

**Ceremonies and symbols**

The Olympic Games begin with the opening ceremony. Athletes from all the participating nations march into the stadium. Greece comes in first, because it was the first nation to hold the Olympics and the host nation comes in last.

The Olympic flag is raised and a chosen athlete lights the Olympic flame. It is a symbol of spirit, knowledge and life. The fire comes from Olympia, a small town in Greece and many runners transport the flame in a torch relay to the site of the games. It burns from the opening ceremony until the end of the games.

The Olympic rings were created in 1913 and represent the five continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia and the Americas).

All athletes must take the Olympic oath. One of them has to promise that all athletes will give their best and compete in a fair way.

After each event, medals are given to the first three athletes. They receive gold, silver and bronze medals. Their flags are raised and the national anthem of the winner's country is played.

**The International Olympic Committee**

The IOC is the organisation that governs the games. It decides which sports and events are held at the games. The IOC also selects the host city for the summer and winter games, at least seven years before they take place. Cities that want the games must show that

**•** they have enough stadiums for all events
**•** they have enough room for all the athletes
**•** they can provide safety for the athletes
**•** they can transport athletes and spectators from one event to another

Host cities must build an Olympic village where all athletes live during the games.

**How can athletes take part?**

Normally, each country decides for itself which sportsmen and –women are allowed to take part. Athletes must qualify for the games by winning or doing well in competitions before the Olympic Games start.

Athletes, who are sent to the games by their country must be a citizen of that country. For years, only amateurs were able to participate in the games, but today, most athletes are professionals, who earn their money through sport.

Most governments give their team money so that it can take part in the games.

**The ancient Games**

The ancient Olympic Games were celebrated at Olympia, Greece every four years. They were held in honour of the god Zeus. In the early games, only Greek men were allowed to participate. The games consisted of sports like footraces, wrestling, boxing, the pentathlon and horse racing. The last event of the games was usually a chariot race.

When the Romans conquered Greece in 140 B.C. the games started to lose their religious meaning and in 393 the Roman emperor banned the event.

**The Summer Games**

The Summer Games are held during the summer season of the host country. They last for 16 days. Today, there are more than 270 events during the games. Over 15,000 athletes from 190 nations take part.

The next Summer Games will be held in London (2012).

**The Winter Games**

The first separate Winter Games were held in Chamonix, France in 1924. They usually take place in February. Today, the Winter Olympics include over 60 events. Athletes from more than 60 countries participate.

**Politics and the Olympic Games**

In the past, the Olympic Games have been disturbed by political issues. In 1936 the IOC chose Berlin as the site for the 1936 Summer Games. A few years later, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party rose to power and Hitler used the games to show Germany's power.

In 1968 two Black American runners protested against their government and raised their fists when the American national anthem was played.

In 1980 the USA—and many other countries—didn't send athletes to the games in Moscow because the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan a year before. In return, the Russians and other Communist countries refused to take part in the 1984 games in Los Angeles.

The worst day in Olympic history came on September 5th, 1972 during the Munich games. Eight Palestinian terrorists broke into the Olympic village and killed two Israeli athletes. 9 others were taken hostage. They wanted the Israeli government to set free over 400 Arab prisoners in Israel. During a battle with German policemen all hostages and the terrorists were killed.

**Olympia today**

The Olympic Games have become very successful over the past years. More and more people are able to watch them on TV and television stations are spending more money for the rights to broadcast the games. The IOC earns more money than ever before. With this money they help athletes in poorer countries.

Drugs have become a big problem. Some athletes take drugs before and during the games in order to help their muscles grow. When they are caught they are disqualified and their medals are taken away from them.