

# HOW TO WATCH THE OLYMPICS

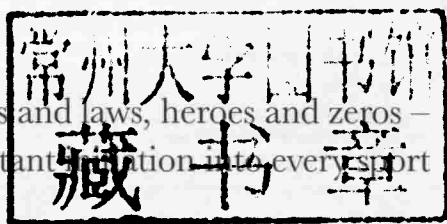
Scores and laws, heroes and zeroes:  
an instant initiation into every sport



DAVID GOLDBLATT AND JOHNNY ACTON

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an instant translation into every sport



DAVID GOLDBLATT  
and JOHNNY ACTON

Diagrams by Belinda Evans

**P**  
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## THANKS

David and Johnny would like to thank: Sally for sealing the deal; Jonathan 'Surely Not?!' Buckley for his unique style of editing, his inhuman fastidiousness and for saving us from ourselves; Henry Iles for his delightful layout; and our illustrator Belinda Evans for undergoing such a demanding crash course in the world of Olympic sport and drawing such nice stick people.

Special thanks for inspiration, amusement and diversion to, in no meaningful order: Lady Perce, Lady Sarah, Bunners, Mooers, Jefris 'More Bir' Pakpahan, Lionel Richie, Paul Moss, and John from the *Cock and Bottle* pub. Last and most definitely not least, thanks, love and praise to the white-gloved impressario of the whole show, the incomparable Jeeves to our flustering Bertie Wooster, the one and only Mark 'Frasier Crane' Ellingham. Bless them all.

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# INTRODUCTION

For two and a half weeks every fourth summer, the planet reliably goes sports crazy. The most watched event in history wasn't the 1969 moon landing, the episode of *Dallas* which revealed who shot JR, or Charles and Di's wedding. It was the opening ceremony of the Beijing Summer Olympic Games. Over a billion people tuned in to at least part of the extravaganza. And 4.7 billion of us – around 70 per cent of the world's population – watched the sporting festival at some point over the next two and a half weeks.

In July 2012, we will all be at it again. Yet if we're honest, there's a gaping hole at the heart of the Olympic experience: most of us know remarkably little about most of the sports we've suddenly gone nuts about. Of course, you could just plonk yourself down on a sofa and keep your eyes open. No harm in any of that, but to get the most out of the Olympics it really helps to know HOW TO WATCH the proceedings. Which is where this book comes in: a training programme for the Olympics, or, to be precise, a five-point-plan of crucial need-to-know information for each sport.

The first, overarching question is WHY WATCH any given sport? Why exactly do South Koreans turn out in their tens of thousands to watch the nation's leading archers? Why do Turks venerate a 4ft-11in weightlifter? Are they all mad? Sometimes, the thrill is straightforward. Other times, you need to know the STORY OF A SPORT – why it has mattered and to whom. Only then will you grasp why Denmark comes to a standstill during the women's handball or why it seems so terribly important to the Hungarians to beat the Russians in that water polo match.

Next, you need a grasp of the BASICS. To make sense of what is going on, you have to know the object of the exercise and understand the constraints the participants are operating under. How does one win, how does one lose, how does one score and how long will it all go on for? In other words, you've got to know the rules. Once you've cleared this hurdle, you are ready to take on board some of the FINER POINTS. This will enhance your enjoyment immeasurably. Understanding the different spins, for example, will improve your experience of table tennis no end. Appreciating the tactical stratagems of basketball will turn the blur of bodies into a sharply focused and thrilling encounter.

At this point, you will be in good enough shape to move on to the OLYMPIC HISTORY of the sport. This section provides historical context and introduces you to the legends, scandals and rivalries, showing how the sport's trajectory at the Games has reflected and occasionally shaped our times.

Finally, there are some Olympic topics that are so interesting, controversial or otherwise important that they merit sections of their own. You will find the main text sprinkled with features devoted to everything from the history of drugs in weightlifting to the peculiar antics of the man who popularised recreational canoeing. Oh – and there's a useful appendix at the end of the book listing the 26 PREVIOUS OLYMPIC GAMES, with details of their host cities, their key events ... and, naturally, their mascots.

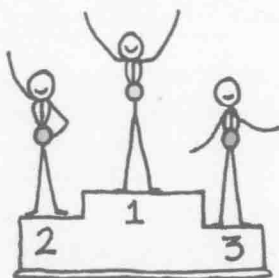
We hope you will treat this book as an amusing, knowledgeable and bizarrely passionate friend – on hand to help you get the most out of the Games. We realise you're not an expert on the finer points of dressage; we won't laugh at you if you confuse a kayak with a canoe; and we know there's something faintly ridiculous about competitive walking, or a cycling race in which the competitors can sit still on their bikes for half an hour. But we have the greatest respect for what THE GAMES are about – a cosmopolitan celebration of humanity, a demonstration of the universal power of sport and play, a showcase for the wonders of the human body and spirit – and we want to help you to enjoy them.

David Goldblatt and Johnny Acton

**PS: THE IOC**

Olympic sports are littered with JARGON and ACRONYMS. You don't need to know the half of it to enjoy the sports, though where you do, you'll find the low-down under each relevant section of this book. The one key acronym, which crops up in any discussion of the Olympics, is the IOC. This is the INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE, created by BARON PIERRE DE COUBERTIN in 1894 to oversee what we know as the 'modern Olympics'. The IOC is made up of senior figures from international sports federations (Sepp Blatter from FIFA, for example), prominent former Olympians, and the great and the good (it helps to have a royal connection). The IOC runs both the Summer and Winter Games, selects the host cities and approves the inclusion of new and existing sports (each of which are governed by their own international federations).

There are also 206 NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEES, which organise their countries' teams and officials. Their number is rather more than the 193 states represented at the UN, as it includes such 'nations' as Aruba, Guam and Cook Islands. Palestine is also recognised as an Olympic nation.





# THE OPENING CEREMONY

27 JULY 2012

OLYMPIC STADIUM

**Athletes:** 12,000 (if they all show up)

## ..... OLYMPIC PRESENCE .....

THE 1896 GAMES OPENED WITH SPEECHES AND HYMNS. PARIS failed to put on an opening ceremony in 1900 and ST LOUIS wasn't much better in 1904. But since LONDON 1908 the ceremony has been a permanent fixture.

## ..... OLYMPIC FORMAT .....

LIKE SYNCHRONISED SWIMMING AND DIVING, THE OPENING ceremony has a fixed and a free programme. The fixed programme is set by Olympic protocol and includes a parade of athletes, flames, torches, flags and oaths. The free section is open to artistic interpretation by the host city.

## ..... PAST CHAMPIONS .....

LONDON, PARIS, ATHENS, LOS ANGELES: 2 EACH.

## WHY WATCH THE OPENING CEREMONY?

WHAT EVENT GETS THE BIGGEST TV AUDIENCE AT EVERY Olympics? Which tickets are the most oversubscribed? The OPENING CEREMONY of course. It is the moment at which after four years and more of relentless hype, cynicism, argument, scandal and uncertainty the curtain finally goes up. And it's a show that has changed out of all recognition since its first appearance at the 1896 Games, becoming

along the way a strange amalgam of global ritual, military march-past, TV spectacular, Broadway musical and circus.

The ARTISTIC PROGRAMME, with which an Olympic opening ceremony now always begins, can be seen as a costumed folly or as a message of the host nation's self-image – or both. And after that, there are the old favourites of the COMPULSORY PROGRAMME to look forward to – the PARADE OF NATIONS, the ARRIVAL OF THE OLYMPIC FLAG, the LIGHTING OF THE CAULDRON. The pleasures here are many: the extraordinary national costumes of the athletes, the partisan response of crowds to a nation's foes, friends and favourites ... and, not least, the possibility that something might go a bit wrong.

## OPENING CEREMONY BASICS

THE ORGANISERS AND CHOREOGRAPHERS OF THE OPENING ceremony for LONDON 2012 have made it clear that they won't try to compete with Beijing – which featured over 15,000 performers and cost around \$100 million. The 2012 director's gig for both the opening and closing Olympic ceremonies went, somewhat surprisingly, to the Oscar-winning film director DANNY BOYLE (*Trainspotting*, *Slumdog Millionaire*). Very little has leaked as to what will be on show. But here's a taste of the main ingredients ...

### THE ARTISTIC PROGRAMME

IN THE ERA OF THE GIGANTIC STADIUM SCREEN AND GLOBAL television coverage the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games is choreographed down to the last detail. This even applies to the COUNTDOWN to the start of the show. At BEIJING 2008 LED-embedded drums not only beat out the seconds in the countdown to the Games but spelled out the numbers themselves in Chinese and Arabic numerals.

Once we reach zero it really is anyone's guess what's coming next. Since MOSCOW 1980 raised the stakes with a gigantic, apparently



BEIJING 2008 PRESENTS FIVE MILLENNIA OF CHINESE HISTORY, WITH A CAST OF THOUSANDS

endless, array of formation dancing, marching and gymnastics and a cast of many thousands, the artistic programme has run riot. LOS ANGELES 1984 opened with the entire stadium holding up coloured squares to form the flags of each participating nation; SEOUL 1988 started in the middle of a river; and SYDNEY 2000 went with a formation horse troupe. Thematically, the ambition has often been overweening – the story of humanity, five millennia of Chinese history, a treatise on balance and entropy in the universe.

## THE COMPULSORY PROGRAMME

### ..... ATHLETES ON PARADE .....

THE ARTISTIC PROGRAMME IS FINALLY DONE. THE LAST MIME artistes and creatures from the black lagoon have gone. It time for the athletes. The form now is for each team to be led out by a STANDARD BEARER provided by the hosts plus a team member who carries the national flag. The GREEKS always open proceedings and the HOSTS bring up the rear. In between, countries go in alphabetical order according to the host language. It's once around the



track and then the teams line up in the centre of the stadium. The costumes worn by the (usually female) standard bearers have often proved divertingly kitsch, as at SEOUL 1988, where they were decked out in white leather boots and peaked caps.

The response of the crowd to the teams is always interesting. ATHENS 2004 proved particularly partisan, with Turks, Israelis and Macedonians getting the silent treatment while the Palestinians and the Serbs received very positive vibes. The biggest cheers were reserved for Greece, countries with big Greek populations like Cyprus and Australia, and war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq.

### ..... THE SPEECHES .....

NOW FOR THE SPEECHES: THREE OF THEM! PRESUMABLY THEY are scheduled here to give the audience a chance to get a drink or go to the toilet after the marathon of the athlete's parade. There'll be something anodyne from the head of the local organising committee and something in a similar vein from the PRESIDENT OF THE IOC – it is their Olympics after all. Finally, the host's head of state or their representative declares the Games open. Mercifully there is strict protocol on what the head of state can say, and it isn't much.

### ..... THE OLYMPIC ANTHEM .....

SOMETIMES THEY PLAY THE OLYMPIC ANTHEM NEXT, SOMETIMES they bring the flag in and play it during or after the flag has been raised. Either way they are going to play it. The anthem was composed for the first modern Games in 1896 with music by SPIROS SAMARAS and words by the poet KOSTIS PALAMAS, but it didn't become a fixed feature of the ceremony until 1960. Some hosts, like the Chinese in 2008, go with the original Greek version; others get it translated into their own language, like the Italians at ROME 1960 or the Japanese version sung at TOKYO 1964. Language politics being a complicated thing in Spain, at BARCELONA 1992 the anthem was sung part in Catalan, part in Spanish and part in French.

MUNICH 1972 featured an instrumental version. In Anglo-phone countries an English version has been sung, with various attempts to put old school Greek poesy into some kind of plausible