Torch Relay

The Torch Relay in Ancient Times

Fire is a sacred symbol dating back to prehistoric times. In ancient Greece it symbolized the creation of the world, renewal and light. It was also the sacred symbol of Hephaestus, and a gift to the human race from Prometheus, who stole it from Zeus.

At the centre of every city-state in ancient Greece there was an altar with an ever-burning fire and in every home the sacred Flame burned, dedicated to Hestia, goddess of the family. Torch Relay races started in ancient Greece as religious rituals held at night. Soon they turned into a team athletic event, initially among adolescents, and further developed to become one of the most popular ancient sports.

In the Prytaneum at Ancient Olympia there was an altar dedicated to Hestia with a sacred Flame, kindled from the sun’s rays, with the help of a hollow disc or mirror. The altar was never allowed to go out. The procedure was simple but striking: the concave surface had the property of focusing or binding the rays of the sun at a single spot, the “focal” point. Therefore, the High Priestess laid the Torch on the focal point and it caught fire.

During the Olympic Games of the Antiquity, that started at 776 B.C., the Flame that burned in Olympia never went out. The Ancient Greeks held a "lampadedromia" (the Greek word for Torch Relay), where athletes competed by passing on the Flame in a relay race to the finish line. In ancient Athens the ritual was an important part of the Panathenaia fest, held every four years in honour of the goddess Athena. The strength and purity of the sacred Flame was preserved through its transportation by the quickest means; in this case a relay of Torchbearers. The Torch Relay carried the Flame from the altar of Prometheus to the altar of goddess Athena on the Acropolis. Forty youths from the ten Athenian tribes had to run a distance of 2.5 kilometres in total.

The Torch Relay and its Modern Revival

In a prophetic speech at the end of the Stockholm Games, on June 27th, 1912, Baron Pierre de Coubertin said:
"And now... great people have received the Torch... and have thereby undertaken to preserve and... quicken its precious Flame. Lest our youth temporarily... let the Olympic torch fall from their hands... other young people on the other side of the world are prepared to pick it up again. The Olympic torch will follow its course for the sake of a word with more faith, courage and purity..."

The Torch Relay, as the opening event of the Olympic celebration, was revived in the Berlin Olympiad in 1936 and since then the Torch Relay has preceded every Olympic Summer Games. Starting from Olympia and carried by the first Torchbearer, the young athlete Konstantinos Kondylis, the Flame travelled for the first time hand to hand until it reached the Berlin Olympic Stadium. Since then, the Flame’s magic has marked the beginning of the Games and has been identified with it.
In Olympiads that followed, the Torch Relay continued to play an important role, having been enriched with the characteristics and cultures of the host countries. The choice of the athlete who lights the cauldron in the Olympic stadium is always symbolic to the host country.

For the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, the Flame followed a route in homage to the Greek and Roman civilizations. It was carried from Piraeus to Rome on the ship “Americo Vespucci” and passed through some of the best-known or important historical monuments of the two countries. It was the first time that the event was covered by television.

In the Mexico Olympiad in 1968, the Flame followed the route taken by Christopher Columbus, and the athletics champion Enriqueta Basilio was the first woman to light the cauldron in the Olympic stadium. For the Montreal Games in 1976, the Flame travelled by satellite from Athens to Ottawa, and in the 1992 Games in Barcelona a Paralympic Archery medallist Antonio Rebollo lit the Flame in the stadium with a burning arrow.

In Sydney 2000, the Flame made its journey underwater in the Great Barrier Reef and covered the longest distance in the history of the Games so far.

The upcoming ATHENS 2004 Olympic Torch Relay will be the first global journey of the Flame.