

London 1948: A very British Olympics

Locum Consultant Director **Tim Ambrose** looks back to the last time London hosted the Olympics, in 1948, and highlights some of the innovations and achievements that made them a Games to remember, despite challenging postwar conditions.

The last time the Olympics were held in London was in 1948, with London still bearing all the scars of the Second World War, which had ended in Europe only three years earlier. Rationing was still in force, and not everyone believed that it was an appropriate time to hold the Games in London.

It was a momentous year on the world stage. In Great Britain, King George VI was still on the throne, there was a Communist take-over in Czechoslovakia, the UN sanctioned the first State of Israel, Prime Minister Gandhi was assassinated in India, the Berlin Airlift began and the UN adopted the Declaration of Human Rights.

London had beaten off strong competition for the Games of the XIV Olympiad from the USA (Baltimore, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Minneapolis) and Switzerland (Lausanne). The London Games were significant in bringing together so many countries that had suffered so badly in previous years and for being the first to be held since the Games in Berlin in 1936. A total of 59 nations were represented through 4,099 athletes, with men significantly outnumbering women - 3,714 men and 385 women. An invitation was not sent to Germany or Japan, but Singapore, Lebanon, Jamaica and Korea participated for the first time.

The Games were held from July 29th – August 14th. The highlight of the opening ceremony in 1948 was John Mark, a former Cambridge University athlete and symbolic of British youth, lighting the cauldron in Wembley stadium. The flame had been lit 12 days before in Olympia, and carried a distance of 3,160km by some 1,531 runners, including two stretches in Royal Navy vessels.



A total of 136 events were held in 17 different sports and took place in a variety of locations in London and beyond, making use of existing facilities:

- Wembley Stadium: Athletics, equestrian events
- Wembley Grounds: Hockey
- Empire Pool, Wembley: Swimming
- London Velodrome, Herne Hill: Cycling
- Earl's Court: Gymnastics
- Finchley: Water Polo
- Harringay Arena: Boxing
- Henley: Rowing
- Bisley: Shooting
- Torbay: Sailing

Many of the venues used had to be refurbished. For example, the Velodrome at Herne Hill had been used as a wartime barrage balloon site, and at the start of 1948 it was cracked and covered with weeds. A private donor funded the construction of a new bitumen surfaced track. Wembley Stadium, the home of British football, was the main venue, and a temporary running track was laid around the pitch.

One of the highlights of the Games was Fanny Blankers-Koen of the Netherlands, who won the women's 100 metres, 200 metres and 80 metres hurdles, and ran the anchor leg on the winning relay team. A rule limiting women to three individual events in track and field athletics deprived her of more titles, at a time when she was also the world record holder in the high jump and long jump.

There was no Olympic Village in 1948. British ingenuity was to the fore with some 25 to 30 sites instead used to house the athletes. Men were accommodated at various military camps (including RAF camps at Uxbridge, West Drayton and Richmond) and in schools. Women were mainly accommodated at Southlands College in Roehampton.

The London Games saw a number of innovations, including television broadcasting in the UK (although few people yet owned television sets), the photo finish and starting blocks. Radio coverage was carried around the world via short-wave transmission.

The 1948 Olympic Games were in many ways a triumph for Great Britain. The Games symbolised the world's reaffirmation of the value of sport in forging international relationships. London and Londoners rose to the challenge of mounting the Games against the odds - and they won.

Tim Ambrose, Locum Consulting

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