

## STUDENT READING: THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT



Cover of the official report of 1896 Athens Summer Olympics.

### THE GAMES BEGIN

In 1894 French educator and athletic enthusiast Baron Pierre de Coubertin hosted a meeting of representatives from nine countries at which he called for a modern revival of the ancient Olympic Games. Embracing the motto *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (Faster, Higher, Stronger), de Coubertin championed the idea of an Olympics celebrating amateur athletics and the love of sport.

### AN INTERNATIONAL EVENT

De Coubertin saw the potential for the Olympics to promote international goodwill through both open competition and cultural exchange. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was created to organize the first modern Olympic Games in Athens, Greece in the summer of 1896. Summer Olympics have been held every four years since 1896 – with the exception of the war years – and in 1924 the IOC added the Winter Games.

### SPORT & NATION BUILDING

Within modern nation states, there were different attitudes towards physical activity. In Germany, Friedrich Jahn (1778-1852) saw gymnastics as a way for German boys and men to develop personal strength in order to strengthen **nationalism**. In Great Britain, educators and social reformers saw competitive sports as the way to toughen their males and teach fair play. In the first decades of the 20th century, and particularly after the First World War (1914-1918), competitive sports became more popular than gymnastics in Europe, North America and parts of Asia.

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### SPORT IN CANADA

*“To strengthen the body is to improve the vehicle of almost all our activity, and to strengthen the bodies of the nation is to strengthen the nation.”*

- Henry Roxborough, Canadian author and supporter of amateur sport, 1925

Olympic supporters argued for well-ordered and regulated Games promoting competition and self-improvement. Canadians created national associations for their favorite sports. The Amateur Athletic Union of Canada was the largest of these organizations, in charge of track and field, gymnastics, handball, fencing, boxing and wrestling.

### JEWS & SPORTS

*“A healthy self-reliant and self-respecting Jewish generation will add credit to our community, to our city and to our country.”*

- One of the justifications for the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association of Toronto, 1925.

As with their non-Jewish counterparts, individual Jewish athletes have challenged themselves to excel in their chosen sport. Success in sports could mean recognition in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. By participating in athletics, Jews were also challenging stereotypes of Jews and Jewish bodies as “weak,” “nervous,” “feminine” and “ugly.”

### CHALLENGES TO THE OLYMPICS

Between the First and Second World Wars, the political left - socialists and communists - charged governments with using Olympic competition to claim a place for their nation on the international scene, or to prove the strength of their nation to both friend and foe. Critics believed that many of the national sports organizations and the IOC promoted the interests of the upper and middle classes. They responded by creating alternative sporting associations and competitions such as the Red Sport International and the Workers’ Olympics.

### FROM AMATEUR TO PROFESSIONAL

The Olympics were conceived as a competition for amateur athletes who did not earn money or receive endorsements for their participation. Amateur athletes who competed against professionals or accepted endorsements could be disqualified. With the growth of professional sports, this began to change. In 1986, the IOC allowed professional athletes to participate in the Games.

**Nationalism:** devotion and loyalty to one’s nation.