The Olympic Games (12)

The 1992 Olympic Games of Barcelona, Spain

Professional athletes could compete in an Olympics for the first time in Barcelona. Professionalism in the Games was the dream of Juan Samaranch, a Spaniard and the IOC President. King Juan Carlos opened the Games in Spanish and Catalonian. With the fall of the USSR in 1989, the Russians sent a “very un-unified” unified team. Estonia and Latvia entered the Games for the first time since 1936 and Lithuania since 1928. The Germans sent its first unified team since Helsinki in 1952. Cuba and North Korea took part for the first time in twelve years. South Africa denounced its apartheid policies and entered for the first time in thirty-two years. Spain won thirteen gold medals and offered huge money stipends to their gold medal winners. Spain had won a total of four gold medals prior to the 1992 Games. Eight billion dollars had been used to rebuild Barcelona; but, posters still popped up calling for an independent Catalonia. Over 10,000 Olympians took part and athletes from sixty-four different nations won medals.

Badminton, baseball, and women’s judo were new venues. Carlos Front, the eleven-year-old, became the second youngest Olympian since 1900 when he served as the coxswain for the Spanish eight rowing team. Derartu Tulu of Ethiopia won a gold medal in the 10,000 meters becoming the first woman black African winner in Olympic history. For the US, “The Dream Team,” dominated the basketball competition, but resided in Monaco instead of the Olympic Village. Vitaly Scherbo of Belarus and representing the Unified team won six gold medals in men’s gymnastics. When Vitaly was asked where he would live and train for the next Olympics; he replied: “Wherever I can make the most money.” Scherbo resides in Las Vegas. Samaranch’s dream had come true!

The Centennial Olympic Games of Atlanta, Georgia

Most experts thought the 100 year celebration of the Olympic Games would return to Athens, Greece. Instead, the Games were on American soil for the fourth time in Olympic history. Over ten thousand athletes from 197 nations took part. The Olympians entered the stadium for the Opening Ceremony from the top for the first time in Olympic history and Muhammad Ali lit the Olympic cauldron. Organizational problems, an overcrowded transportation system and computer program problems hampered the Games. The bombing at Centennial Olympic Park, a non-Olympic facility, killed one person and injuring at least 100 others and was regrettable. New venues in beach volleyball, lightweight rowing, mountain biking, softball and women’s soccer were competed. Turkey’s Naim Suleymanoglu won a third Olympic gold medal in weightlifting, Russia’s Aleksandr Karlin won his third Olympic gold medal in heavyweight Greco-Roman wrestling and Hungary’s Krisztina Egerszegi won her third two hundred meter backstroke. Hubert Raudaschl of Austria participated in his ninth Olympics in sailing. For the US, Michael Johnson won the 200 & 400 meters, Dan O’Brien won the decathlon and Gail Devers won the 100 meters for the second time. “The Magnificent Seven,” the women’s gymnastics team, won the gold medal and Kerri Strug performed a vault on a severely twisted ankle when she thought her vault score was needed to guarantee an American victory. She found out later that the US had already won the competition before her vault! Who was keeping score?
The 2000 Olympic Games of Sydney, Australia

The XXVII Olympic Games of Sydney were the second Olympics in Australia and featured nearly eleven thousand athletes in three hundred events. New venue events included synchronized diving, taekwondo and the triathlon. Additional new women’s events were included in the modern pentathlon, water polo and weightlifting. Germany’s Brigit Fischer won her seventh gold medal in canoeing while Britain’s Steve Redgrave won his fifth gold medal in rowing. Chinese diver Fu Mingxia won her fourth and fifth gold medals. Women’s gymnastics turned into a disaster when it was found that the height of the vaulting table was set five centimeters to low for the first and second rotations competing in the all-around finals. Several gymnasts over rotated their preflight on their Yurchenko vaults during the first and second rotations of the competition. Svetlana Khorhina, the current best gymnast on the planet was one of the effected gymnasts landing on her knees each time after her vaults. The gymnasts of the first two rotations were later given the opportunity to repeat their vaults when the vaulting table height error was discovered. Khorhina, the three time world all-around Champion was beyond herself and declined the opportunity to vault again. She had missed her spectacular uneven bar routine in the third rotation and a repeat in vaulting would do her no good! To compound matters, four days after the final all-around scores were in, Andreea Raducan of Romania was stripped of her all-around gold medal because she tested positive for a banned substance! For the US, the men’s baseball team beat Cuba and the women’s softball team came back from three losses to win the gold medal. Rula Gardner defeated Aleksandr Karelin for the first time in thirteen years. It was the biggest upset in the Sydney Games!

The 2004 Olympic Games of Athens, Greece

The XXVIII Olympic Games returned to Greece. The shot put events for men and women were held in the ancient stadium in Olympia. The marathon events followed the same route as in the first Games of 1896. Argentina defeated the US in basketball winning their first gold medal in a team sport since 1936 in polo. They also won the gold medal in men’s soccer. Brigit Fischer of Germany added another gold and silver medal in canoeing. Hicham El Guerrouj of Morocco won the 1500 and 5,000 meters. At age thirty-four, Kelly Holmes of Great Britain won the 800 and 1500 meters. For the US, Natalie Coughlin, Carly Piper, Dana Vollmer, and Kaitlin Sandeno won the 200 meter relay in world record time breaking the seventeen year old record by East Germany. The softball team scored fifty-one runs and gave up one against nine opponents to win the gold medal. Michael Phelps won six gold and two bronze medals in men’s swimming. Carly Patterson and Paul Hamm won the women’s and men’s gymnastics all-around titles. Dwight Phillips won the long jump. Remarkably, Carl Lewis had won the previous four consecutive Olympic Games in that event. Even more remarkably, the modern Olympic Games had now been held for over 100 years spanning three centuries!

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