

Austerity  
1948



# The ration book OLYMPICS

**Janie Hampton**, whose book on London's 1948 Olympics is just out, says the Games were very different from the multi-million pound corporate extravaganza planned for 2012

**H**OSTING THE 1948 Olympics was a tough challenge for any city, especially London. The last Games had been in Berlin 12 years earlier, and it was important to reinstate the Olympic ideals of equality and fair play, without political or racial propaganda.

The founder of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, believed that sport would lead to world peace. But despite the Second World War having ended, conflicts rumbled on. Arabs and Jews were bombing each other in Israel and there was civil war in Greece. Czechoslovakia vanished behind the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union had blockaded Berlin.

The London Olympic organising committee – all men with titles or high military rank – had less than two years to set up

the Games. Food, clothing and petrol were still rationed, unemployment was high and housing was in short supply. Among the bombsites, they planned it like a military operation, on a tiny budget. They decided competitors would get bed linen but should bring their own towels. They asked Finland to donate the timber for the basketball floor, and Switzerland the gymnastic equipment. They accepted corporate sponsorship from Coca-Cola, Craven 'A' cigarettes, Guinness and Brylcreem. They even agreed that Coopers' outfitters would provide every British male competitor with a pair of Y-front underpants.

There was no Olympic Village. The 4,000 competitors, their coaches and team managers were accommodated all round



Italian Gentile Cordiate (left) won Silver in the women's Discus

## Who was not there and why?

BY 1948, THERE were over 70 nations boasting Olympic committees, but Germany and Japan were not invited. However, just weeks before the event, the Japanese announced their intention to send a team. Ciphred telegrams flew between Japan and the Foreign Office, and the Japanese were reminded that under the rules of the Occupation, none of their subjects could leave the country. The German IOC member Dr Karl von Halt then claimed that as he lived in British-occupied Berlin, he could come as a Briton. He was firmly told that visas were not available.

Since 1936, borders, affiliations and even national identities had changed. When Finland had competed in the 1908 Games, they had been a province of Russia (whom they defeated at football) but since 1920 they had entered as an independent nation. Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia all won medals at the Olympics between 1920 and 1936, but in 1940 they had been annexed by the Soviet Union.

The Soviet magazine *Ogonyok* claimed in 1947 that the Games were an imperialist plot

concocted by the USA. An article entitled *The Role of Spam in Sport* stated: "There is no doubt that the Olympic emblem will adorn not only belt clasps and ties, but also tins containing American Spam, in the guise of American pseudo-philanthropy".

The USSR had received every encouragement to compete, but after the Berlin blockade in May 1948, British attitudes chilled considerably. Despite this, after the Opening Ceremony, the Soviet Embassy declared that a team was on its way. The Foreign Office informed them diplomatically that it was "impracticable" at such a late hour.

Italy was invited on the strength of having joined the Allies late in the war. India and Pakistan, divided in 1947, were represented separately for the first time.

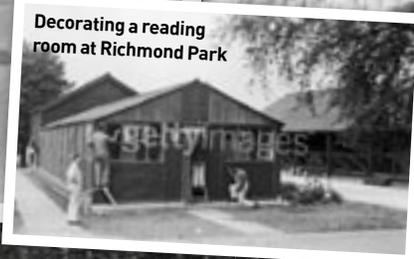
The Palestinian team was in training when it was informed that, following the creation of Israel, its registration had been withdrawn. The IOC then averted an Arab boycott by ruling that Israel could not compete because it did not yet have an Olympic Committee.



British athlete John Mark prepares to light the Olympic flame at the official opening of the Games



Drivers ready to transport competitors to events



Decorating a reading room at Richmond Park

Athletes learn their way around the Olympic camp at Richmond Park



Sweden's WOG Grut on his way to victory in the Modern Pentathlon

London in RAF camps, schools and colleges. One legacy of the war was the Ministry of Supplies, which converted classrooms into hostels with beds, rush mats and 'Utility' cupboards. In Richmond Park, army huts were spruced up with curtains and flower beds.

No new stadium was built but prewar arenas were refurbished: greyhounds gave way to athletes and footballers at Wembley Stadium; swimming and boxing replaced the ice-skating rink at the Empire Pool; the barrage balloons were removed from Herne Hill cycling velodrome in south London; and hotels in Torquay were repainted for the yachtsmen. Competitors were ferried around in old London buses and had free passes for the Underground.

**Seasick and unfit**

The New Zealand team spent five weeks at sea on a small cargo ship, and arrived thoroughly seasick and unfit, despite daily races round the deck. Most of the US team travelled together on *SS America*. "I shook hands with my first black American on board ship," remembers rifle shooter Arthur Jackson. The Games took place during Ramadan, but there was no official awareness that Muslims had to compete while fasting. Possibly never before in London had so many creeds, classes and races come together on an equal footing.

All the European teams had lost athletes in the war. Jewish Hungarian fencers and Dutch gymnasts who had taken part in the 1936 Olympics were among those who had died in Nazi concentration camps. Many North American athletes had been killed or injured fighting in the Pacific or Europe. The British team had lived through the Blitz, many had fought in North Africa, France and Italy and all were acutely conscious of friends and rivals who had perished in the conflict. Few were given paid days off – their employers viewed the Olympics as an excuse for a holiday.

Billy Butlin, the owner of six holiday camps, invited the British athletics team to train for a week at Clacton-on-Sea.

During the war it had housed prisoners of war and in 1946 it had been reopened with an amusement park, private beach and L-shaped swimming pool. The contestants were greeted by Captain Bond, the physical trainer, and Gladys Painter, the first ever Red Coat, whose motto was "Our true intent is all for your delight".

The British team trained on the basic ration of 2,600 calories per day. Once selected, their intake was increased by a half to the same ration as a coal miner. Some received food parcels from Canada and Australia, with tinned peaches and chocolate powder. The visiting teams brought their own food: from Argentina came green tea and spaghetti, Ceylon brought coconuts, and China oiled bamboo shoots. The US team flew in daily supplies of fresh fruit, Helm's bread and beef-steak from California. Government nutritionists studied visitor's "peculiar dietary habits" and discovered that while the Australians had two boiled eggs and a chop each for breakfast, the Mexicans started the day on chillies and tripe.

"Drugs?" exclaimed Joseph Birrell, a hurdler from Barrow-in-Furness. "We had drugs in 1948. We ate Horlicks tablets by the handful! With no sweets available, they were a real treat."

At first the British press considered the Olympics a waste of public money but soon over 2,000 journalists from all over the

**The New Zealand team spent five weeks at sea on a small cargo ship and arrived seasick and unfit**

GETTY IMAGES/TOPHAM PICTUREPOINT

# Great Olympians: five heroes of 1948

## EMIL ZÁTOPEK

(1922-2000)  
 Runner, Gold 10,000 metres, Silver 5,000 metres

Emil Zátopek was a Czech army captain who trained in army boots carrying his wife on his back. His lolloping gait with head nodding and tongue hanging, endeared him to the crowds and "Zá-to-pek" rang out from Wembley Stadium.

In 1968 he spoke out against the Soviet tanks in Prague and was forced to work underground as a uranium miner.

Zátopek runs to victory in London



Blankers-Koen wins gold in the 4x100-metre relay

## FANNY BLANKERS-KOEN (1918-2004)

 Gold medals for 4x100-metre relay, 100 and 200 metre-dashes and long jump

During the German occupation of the Netherlands, Fanny set six athletic world records and won 11 heats and finals in just eight days in 1948. She was greeted by huge crowds on her return to Amsterdam, and her neighbours gave her a bicycle – "So you don't have to run so much".

## HELMUT BANTZ

(1921-2004) British  
 gymnastic coach

Helmut Bantz was a Luftwaffe pilot who, after being shot down, was still a prisoner of war in 1948.

He kept fit by digging potatoes on a farm in Leicester and organising sports festivals. When British gymnasts saw him on Horizontal bars they asked him to be their coach.

"Helmut taught me new manoeuvres and gave us all the correct interpretation of the set moves," said gymnast Frank Turner.

"I received an Olympic uniform," said Bantz, "and lived and ate with the British team in the Olympic village".

Bantz went on to win a Gold medal for gymnastics at Melbourne in 1956.

## JIM HALLIDAY

(1917-2007)  
 Lightweight

weightlifter, Bronze medal

In 1940 Jim Halliday's regiment defended Dunkirk and two years later he was captured by the Japanese in Singapore. Forced to work on the notorious Burma-Siam Railway, he weighed a mere 4½ stone when released in 1945.

Determined to get fit, he shovelled coal all day at Kearsley power station, and trained at night in a room only inches wider than the bar. Just three years later he was captain of the British Olympic weightlifting team and won a bronze medal. He then became British and Commonwealth champion and went on to break four weightlifting records.



Olympic finalist Glen Haig, pictured in 1955

## MARY GLEN HAIG

(Born 1918)  
 Fencing finalist

Mary Glen Haig's father had fenced in the 1900 Olympics and taught her from the age of ten. She followed in his footsteps in 1948, beating the other seven competitors to reach the fencing final.

"Unfortunately the ladies team manager, Miss Puddlefoot, told me to rest in a deck chair," Glen Haig recalls. "All my adrenalin drained away and for the final, I was far too relaxed."

She continued fencing into her fifties and became Britain's first woman on the International Olympic Committee.

world had gathered. Female divers in the Empire Pool were a popular opportunity to photograph scantily-clad competitors. Women, still considered feeble, were only allowed to compete in swimming, fencing and short races in athletics.

At the Opening Ceremony 80,000 people gathered to hear King George VI open the games and watch 7,000 pigeons wheel above Wembley Stadium. *Picture Post* commented, "The brave old show of scarlet and brass that Britain excels in, has more childhood charm than warlike pomp". It was so hot that many of the Boy Scouts carrying flags passed out. Three days later, however, the new cinder track was flooded by rain. It was the worst weather in Olympic history.

Technical advances included starting-blocks for sprinters, the 'photo-finish' camera and television coverage. On the radio, the Games shared the Home Service with *Music While You Work*, *Children's Hour* and *Gert and Daisy's Working Party*.

This was the last Olympic Games at which artists competed for medals in sculpture, architecture, etchings, poetry and musical composition. Swiss and Danish judges had to choose between poems written in French, Finnish and Afrikaans and thousands paid to view the entries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in Kensington.

In 1948 the British definition of 'amateur' was still a matter of social class. Amateurs could only be drawn from the ranks of 'gentlemen', because they possessed private incomes and so

Wembley box office staff deal with ticket applications



## This was the last Olympics at which artists competed to win medals for sculpture, poetry and etchings

needed no financial support. This meant that the oarsman Bert Bushnell had to become a marine engineer because as a boat hand he would have been classified as a professional oarsman. Gymnast Frank Turner worked as a film extra and would have been excluded from the Games had he performed a single somersault. The Hungarians and Yugoslavs achieved ascendancy by drafting their competitors into the army where they could train all day while being paid as soldiers.

When it was all over, the sailing dinghies, flags and basketballs were sold off. Although the Argentine Olympic Committee's cheque for £280 bounced, much to everybody's surprise, the outlay of £730,000 – about £20 million in today's money – generated income which not only covered the costs but produced a profit of £29,000. "The dismal Jimmies who prophesied a failure have been put to rout," said Sir Arthur Elvin, the chairman of Wembley Stadium.

This was not only the first international celebration after the Second World War, but also the most successful, inexpensive and unpretentious Games of the 20th century. The four-year cycle has not been interrupted since, and only when they return to London in 2012 will we find out how different it will be. **11**

Janie Hampton has written 12 books, including the first biography of the writer and entertainer Joyce Grenfell

### JOURNEYS

#### BOOK

**The Austerity Olympics: When the Games Came to London in 1948** by Janie Hampton (Aurum Press, 2008) is available from **BBC HISTORY BOOK CLUB** for £18