The Olympic Flame Torch Relay

The traditional relay to carry the Olympic Torch from Olympia, Greece, the birthplace of modern Olympism, to the host city of the Olympic Games, was inspired by an ancient ritual performed in worship of the goddess Hera. Just as the ancient Greeks captured the sun’s rays to kindle a flame in honour of the goddess, today the same ceremony is re-enacted at the shrine of Hem in Olympia to prepare the Olympic torch for its journey from Olympia to Athens, and then across the host country to the Olympic Stadium.

As a prelude to the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, ten thousand torchbearers will take part in carrying the flame across the United States from Los Angeles. The kindling ceremony, attended by the First Lady of the United States, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was held on 11 March in Olympia, whence the torch was borne, stopping in all of the European cities which have hosted the Olympic Games, to its point of departure from the Old World to arrive in the New on 27 April. Now well into its 84-day 15,000-mile trek by air, land and water, the flame is expected to create a moving and spectacular beginning to the Games in Atlanta as it makes its entrance into the Stadium on 19 July.

Tradition, innovation and progress have been the watchwords for the 1996 Olympic Torch Relay across the United States. The many different modes of transportation reflect, as ACOG puts it, “a page from America’s past and the character of the surrounding community”. The relay includes legs by bicycle, rowing shell, ferry, cable car, steamboat, tall ship and even Pony Express and torchbearers will represent America’s native and immigrant communities.

The torchbearers were selected from three groups: Community Heroes nominated by local leaders and representatives (5,500); the “Share the Spirit: Who would you Choose?” US and international selection programme run by Coca-Cola (2,500); and Olympic athletes and others who participate in the Olympic Movement (2,000).

In his State of the Union Address in January 1996, United States President Bill Clinton saluted the first two Community Heroes who would carry the Olympic flame, Police Sergeant Jennifer Rodgers of Oklahoma City, and Mr Lucius Wright of Jackson, Mississippi, two star citizens who “have demonstrated a willingness to give of themselves, to serve their neighbours and to make their communities better places in which to live”.

Coca-Cola’s “Share the Spirit: Who would you Choose?” programme was designed so that people in the United States and abroad would have an opportunity to select the person they believed most deserved to take part in the relay. The eight hundred Olympian torchbearers selected by the United States Olympic Committee are athletes who took part in previous Olympic Games. ACOG selected 1,200 additional torchbearers from among the media, sponsors and other members of the Olympic Movement.

In terms that strike a chord with the Olympic Movement’s ideal of unity, President Clinton noted in a message from the White House that, “in this great age of possibility, we can only achieve our destiny together”.

The Olympic Torch Relay in 1996 will be the largest in history, travelling through 42 states. Including the 16 days of Olympic competitions, the flame will burn on American soil for a total of 100 days, echoing the hundred-year anniversary of the modern Olympic Games.
The Mayor of Athens passes the Olympic torch to Billy Payne, president and CEO of ACOG.

Children and adults have participated in the Olympic torch relay across the United States.

Anita DeFrantz and James Easton receive the Olympic torch at the Amateur Athletic Foundation headquarters.

Music greets the Olympic flame in Linzmann, Arizona.

The Olympic flame under surveillance...and so have the media.
The 1996 Centennial Olympic Games Torch
This torch, inspired by the simplest ancient torches which were made of a cluster of reeds bound with twine, is composed of 22 aluminium "reeds", one for each Olympic Games. The handle is crafted of native Georgian wood and adorned with two gold bands, the first bearing the names of the Olympic Games host cities, the second engraved with the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games logo and the signature "Quilt of Leaves" motif. The torch stands 32 inches (approximately 50 cm.) tall.

Traditions and History
The Olympic flame burned throughout the Games of the IX Olympiad in Amsterdam in 1928. But the torch relay tradition began in 1936, when Dr Carl Deim of the German Olympic Committee designed the first relay route from Olympia to Berlin for the Games of the XI Olympiad. Over the years, the relay has come to reflect not only the Olympic ideals but the social, political and cultural context of the different Games of the Olympiad. It has been an occasion for symbolic gestures, innovation and progress, both technological and social.

The 3,075-kilometre relay to the Olympic Stadium in Berlin in 1936 took 12 days and culminated on 1 August as the winner of the 1,500-metre student world championship event ran bearing the flame into the Stadium. The torch passed through seven of the countries which took part in the Games: Greece; Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Germany, and the first torchbearer, Konstantin Koudylis of Greece, was also the first athlete of the modern Olympic Games to bear the flame.

In 1948, the 3,365-kilometre relay for the Games of the XIV Olympiad in London, passing through Greece, Italy, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg and England, included the torch's first journey over water: from Katakolon, Greece, to Italy. Also during this relay, the first torchbearer, Corporal Dimitrelis of Greece, ran in athlete's gear instead of his military uniform to symbolize the Olympic Truce of Antiquity, which was declared in ancient Greece during the period of the Olympic Games so that athletes could travel in safety to and from Olympia.

Innovative forms of transportation were introduced to the 7,870-kilometre relay in 1952 for the Games of the XV Olympiad in Helsinki, when the flame was transported by aeroplane from Athens to Denmark, with stops in Munich and Dusseldorf, and then relayed by runners, riders, cyclists, canoeists and sailors from Denmark to Sweden and on to Finland.

Prior to the Games of the XVI Olympiad in Melbourne in 1956, the Olympic flame was transported by 350 torchbearers from Olympia, where it was kindled, to Athens, where at the Acropolis two men in warrior's uniform awaited the runners who were required to speak the words: "I bring the flame from Olympia". The flame was then flown to Australia, and celebrations were held along the way in Calcutta, Bangkok, Singapore and Djakarta. It travelled a total of 21 days over 20,470 kilometres.

The 2,750-kilometre relay to the Games of the XVII Olympiad in Rome crossed from Olympia to Athens and then to the Port of Zea, where the flame was borne by ship to Syracuse and then by runner to Rome.

The flame that was kindled in Olympia for the Games of the XXVIII Olympiad in Tokyo in 1964 travelled by plane to Istanbul, Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan, India, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In Japan, several torches were borne over different routes to the Imperial Palace, from where they continued to the Olympic Stadium in Tokyo. The first torchbearer in this relay read a special speech to the runner who carried the flame into the Stadium.

Historic in more ways than one, the 13,620-kilometre relay of the Olympic flame to Mexico City for the Games of the XIX Olympiad in 1968 retraced the sea route of Columbus's voyages to the New World. After it was borne ashore at Vera Cruz by 17 swimmers, it travelled on to the capital city, where Enriqueta Basilio, the first woman torchbearer in history, carried it into the Stadium and lit the cauldron.

For the first time, wheelchair athletes were among those who carried the
torch in the 5,399-kilometre relay from Olympia to the Games of the XX Olympiad in Munich in 1972. Flowers were thrown from a helicopter to line the path of the flame as the torchbearers crossed the border into Austria. Other modes of transportation in this relay included bicycle, motorcycle and horseback.

The five-day relay to Montreal for the Games of the XXI Olympiad in 1976 included a stunning technological exploit, when the flame was fed to a sensor which transmitted it through electrical impulses via satellite from Greece, igniting the flame by laser beam in Canada. In one of the great anecdotes of Olympic history, a man and woman carried the torch together to light the cauldron in the Olympic Stadium. They later married.

For the Games of the XXII Olympiad in 1980 in Moscow, the 4,915-kilometre relay lasted 31 days and crossed through Bulgaria and Rumania en route to Moscow.

In 1984, the flame was borne in safety lamps by helicopter from Olympia to Athens and then flown to New York, where it took off on an 84-day journey to Los Angeles, passing through 33 states and the nation’s capital, Washington, DC.

Some of the better known runners in this relay were Rafer Johnson, Olympic decathlon gold-medallist in 1960, Bill Thorpe (grandson of Jim Thorpe) and Gina Hemphill (granddaughter of Jesse Owens).

The 15,250-kilometre relay to Seoul for the Games of the XXIV Olympiad in 1988 lasted 26 days and began with a leg by aeroplane from Greece to Cheju, on the southern tip of Korea. From here, the torch was borne by boat to Pusan, where runners, riders, bicyclists and motorcyclists carried it through all of the provinces and historical areas of Korea. When the flame left Athens to set out on its 5,940-kilometre journey to the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona in 1992, it was taken to the ancient Greek colony of Empuries in Spain. Most of this relay was travelled by runners, who passed through 652 towns and cities on their way to the Olympic Stadium. In a breathtaking finale to the relay, the flame was shot from a bow into the cauldron.