

Winter Olympics

Swishing down the slope, twisting through the air and twirling across the ice. Every four years the best cold weather athletes in the world compete for the gold in the Winter Olympics.

The first Winter Olympics were held in 1924 in France. These first Games included events such as downhill and cross-country skiing, ski jumping, speed skating, hockey and figure skating. 258 athletes from 16 countries competed in those Olympic Games, with those from Norway earning the most medals, 17 total. Athletes from the United States brought home four, including one gold medal.

The 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, in contrast, have more than 2800 athletes from 88 countries competing in 98 events. The United States, Canada, and Russia each have over 200 athletes competing, but there are also 18 countries each with only one athlete representing them in these Games, including Zimbabwe, Tonga, and Paraguay, which have never before had athletes compete in a Winter Olympics.



Photo Credit: Brian R. Spears

The United States is one of twelve countries which has sent athletes to every Winter Olympics. The U.S. is the only country that has won a gold medal at every Games, though Norway holds the current record for the highest total of winter gold medals.

Originally the Winter Olympics were held during the same year as the Summer Olympics, until 1992. The decision had been made by the Olympic Committee to change the schedule to alternate the Summer and Winter Olympics. That way an Olympics would be held every two years, a Summer Olympics and then, two years later, a Winter Olympics. The Winter Olympics was held in 1992 and then again in 1994 and every four years since.

Over the years, a number of athletes have competed in both summer and winter events, but only four have won medals in both. American Eddie Eagan won gold medals in Boxing in 1920 and Four-Man Bobsled in 1932. From Norway, Jacob Tullin Thams won gold in ski jumping in 1924 and silver in sailing in 1936. Clara Hughes of Canada won two bronze medals in cycling in 1996 and bronze, silver and gold medals in speed skating in 2002, 2006 and 2010. She is the only person who has earned multiple medals in both the Winter and Summer Olympics.

The only person to win medals in both winter and summer Games in the same year is German Christa Luding-Rothensburger, who won gold and silver medals in speed skating and a silver medal in sprint cycling in 1988. She won additional medals in speed skating in 1984 and 1992.

Events are added and taken away with each Games. Events are added based on factors such as appeal, cost for the infrastructure, and gender equality. Some years demonstration events are held, often that reflect traditional sports of the host country. For example, sled dog racing was held at the 1932 Winter Olympics in New York, and

in 1952 in Oslo, Norway, a sport called "bandy," which is popular in Europe, was held at the Games.

Some events are taken out of the games because they lack popularity. Ski ballet was included as a demonstration sport in the 1988 and 1992 Olympics. This event required a great deal of strength as well as artistic ability. Skiers would complete choreographed routines that included flips and spins. However the event didn't draw enough attention and was cut, particularly as attention shifted to new "extreme" winter sports.

The popularity of events such as the X Games led to the addition of sports such as the snowboard halfpipe, first held at the 1998 Games in Nagano, Japan. Snowboard Cross joined the lineup in the 2006 Games in Turin, Italy. In 2014 in Sochi, Russia, Men's and Women's Slopestyle Snowboard and Ski Slopestyle and the Ski Halfpipe made their debut.

Slopestyle has been a popular X Games event. Athletes complete tricks while skiing or snowboarding through a course that includes jumps, rails, boxes and other obstacles. They earn points based on the difficulty of the tricks they complete and how high they get in the air off of the jumps.

Also new in 2014 is a team event in figure skating. Figure skating has long been a popular winter sport. This is the first new event added to Olympic figure skating since 1976. Since the other skating events are done by individuals and pairs, the team event is the first time the competing countries have the opportunity for the athletes to compete together as an actual team for their home country. Each team includes a male and a female individual skater, a pair, and an ice dancing pair. Each performance earns points that count toward the team's overall total, with the highest total score earning the gold.

Skating to the cheers of their home country fans in Sochi, the team from Russia won the first Team Figure Skating gold medal. The Canadian team didn't win any of the events but earned a total number of points high enough to get the silver medal. The United States came in third, taking the bronze.

Plans are already underway for the 2018 Winter Olympics, which will be held in Pyeongchang, South Korea. These Games will be held from February 9-25, 2018. 98 events are expected to be included.