

**Evolution and Correlations of the Olympic Games from a Humanistic Perspective.
From Antiquity to Modernism**

Gheorghe BRANIŞTE^{1,2}, Viorel DORGAN^{1,2}, Igor ARSENE^{1,2}

¹“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati (Romania)

² Institute of Physical Education and Sport of Moldova
State University

gheorghe.braniste@ugal.ro , viorel.dorgan@ugal.ro ,
igor.arsene@ugal.ro

Abstract

This article examines, filtering through the core beliefs of the Humanistic Movement, correlations of the Olympic Games, tracing their development from their origins in Ancient Greece to their modern revival and transformation. Historically, the Olympic Games were not merely sporting competitions; they served as a profound expression of fundamental humanistic values, including excellence, fair play, mutual respect, and solidarity among participants.

In ancient times, the Olympic Games were closely linked to religion, philosophy, and culture. They played an important role in strengthening Greek identity and promoting common cultural and spiritual values. The sacred nature of the games, held in honour of Zeus, reinforced their humanistic character, promoting harmony and self-improvement through physical and moral discipline.

The modern revival of the Olympic Games, initiated by Pierre de Coubertin in the late 19th century, was inspired by humanistic ideals that viewed sport as a tool for international cooperation and peace worldwide. In the modern era, these values have been reinterpreted in light of changing political, economic and technological conditions. Since then, the Olympic Games have become a global symbol of diversity, inclusiveness and social equality.

This study highlights the continuity and adaptation of humanistic principles throughout the history of the Olympic Games, illustrating how the structure and organisation of the Games reflect both tradition and modernity. Through a socio-cultural lens, the article explores how the Olympic Games function as a catalyst for intercultural dialogue, international diplomacy and global progress. The findings underscore the enduring role of the Olympic Games in promoting universal values and establishing sport as a vital means of communication and human development.

Keywords: Olympic Games, Modernism, Humanism, Cultural Evolution, Humanistic Values.

1. Introduction

The Olympic Games are undoubtedly one of the most significant events in human history, uniting countries from around the world and demonstrating unity, diversity and competition. Their history, spanning more than two millennia, is closely linked to the development of both ancient and modern civilisations, and they have become a symbol of physical perfection and humanistic ideals. This competition, which originated in 776 BC in

Ancient Greece, is a living example of the evolution of society and the cultural and educational values that shaped it. As scholars such as Müller (2014, pp. 90–115) point out, the ancient Olympic Games were not just a sporting event, but also a celebration of identity and national unity, serving as a significant cultural phenomenon in Greece.

In Ancient Greece, the Olympic Games had a much deeper meaning than simple sporting competition. They were dedicated to the god Zeus, and participation in these games brought not only personal glory but also high social and even religious status. As Cartledge (2007, pp. 25–50) notes, Olympia, the site of the games, was a sanctuary of peace and understanding, and the competitions symbolised the core ideals of Greece: beauty, democracy and wisdom. Although athletic competition was central, the Olympic Games also served as a forum for negotiations on political and cultural relations between Greek city-states. These ancient competitions were suspended in 393 CE by the Roman emperor Theodosius I for religious and political reasons, but their influence on Western culture and values remained deeply ingrained.

The modern Olympic Games were revived in 1896 on the initiative of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, a French educator and leader who sought to rebuild ties between nations through sport. Coubertin also promoted physical education as a fundamental tool for moral and social development, emphasising the connection between sport and holistic human development. As Guttmann (2002, pp. 180–195) shows, Coubertin's vision was inspired by ancient ideals but adapted to the needs and challenges of an increasingly globalised modern world. Thus, the modern Olympic Games are more than just a sporting competition: they are a symbol of unity, progress and the overcoming of human limitations.

Over the decades, the Olympic Games have evolved from a local event into a global phenomenon, encompassing a wide range of sports and countries. As a result, the Olympic Games have become a symbol not only of physical progress but also of social and cultural development. As countries around the world have become increasingly interconnected, the Olympic Games have evolved accordingly, serving as a platform for promoting humanistic values and strengthening intercultural understanding. According to Bernstein (2006, 120–135), the modern Olympic Games have played an important role in fostering dialogue among cultures and countries, providing a unique opportunity to promote peace and international cooperation.

In the 21st century, the Olympic Games continue to be a global phenomenon with a significant impact on international politics, economics and culture. From the introduction of new sports and disciplines to the implementation of advanced technologies to improve performance and enhance athlete safety, the Olympic Games reflect the continuous progress of human society. According to research by Devis (2013, pp. 87–102), the modern Olympic Games are characterised not only by intense competition, but also by a constant commitment to the principles of sustainable development, education and diversity. Thus, they have become a global platform for promoting fundamental values such as democracy, human rights and international cooperation.

This article will analyse the evolution of the Olympic Games with a focus on their role as a cultural and social phenomenon shaped by humanistic ideals and the historical development of human society. We will examine both the influence of the Olympic Games on ancient culture and the transformations they have undergone in the modern era, highlighting the interconnection between sport and educational, social and political values.

Throughout history, the Olympic Games have gone beyond their original purpose of achieving sporting excellence to become a powerful symbol of human aspirations and international cooperation. As the world faces new challenges, from geopolitical tensions and climate change to social inequality and technological disruption, the Olympic Games offer a unique space where global issues can be addressed through the lens of sport and shared values. The Olympic Charter emphasises the importance of mutual understanding, solidarity and fair play — principles that are increasingly relevant in today's interconnected but often divided world.

In addition, the role of the Olympic Games in promoting social change has grown significantly in recent years. Initiatives such as the inclusion of refugee athletes, gender equality in sport and the Paralympic movement illustrate the Games' ability to challenge stereotypes and draw attention to underrepresented groups. The participation of athletes from diverse walks of life and identities helps change societal perceptions and contributes to the formation of a more inclusive global community. As Tuki and Weiler (2003, pp. 180–195) note, the Olympic Games have become a platform for expressing social justice and defending human dignity both on and off the field.

Technological advances have also contributed to the evolution of the Olympic experience. From improved training methods and wearable devices for tracking performance to virtual broadcasts and artificial intelligence, modern innovations have revolutionised how athletes train and how spectators interact with the Games. These developments not only improve athletic performance and safety but also democratise access to the Olympic spirit through digital media, allowing millions of people around the world to watch the event regardless of geographical or economic barriers.

In essence, the Olympic Games are not just a reflection of sporting achievements, but a mirror of humanity's collective hopes, struggles and triumphs. Looking to the future of the Olympic Games, it is important to preserve their core values while adapting to an ever-changing global environment so that the Olympics remain a symbol of peace, excellence and unity for future generations.

Thus, the Olympic Games are not just a sporting competition, but a foundation for promoting humanistic ideals — a vivid example of how sport can contribute to global development and unity.

1. Methodology

1. Historical-comparative and analytical methods using primary and secondary sources.
2. A detailed analysis of historical documents, chronicles and specialised literature will be carried out in order to identify the interrelationships between humanistic values and the development of the Olympic Games.
3. In addition, an interdisciplinary methodology combining elements of history, sociology and the humanities will be applied.

Organisation of the research. The research was conducted mainly through the study of specialised literature and academic sources using both physical and virtual libraries. The library of the Institute of Physical Education and Sport of the State University of Moldova (USM) played a key role, as it housed fundamental works on the history and philosophy of sport.

In addition, the research was supported by access to international virtual libraries, which provided a wide range of historical and contemporary sources, including academic studies, scientific articles and official documents of the International Olympic Committee.

The research was conducted between 2024 and 2025. It included an analysis of historical materials, from sources documenting the ancient Olympic Games (from 776 BC) to the latest editions of the modern Olympic Games.

This chronological evolution made it possible to clearly outline the transformation of humanistic values, from the ideals of arete in Ancient Greece to the modern principles of inclusiveness, equality and global cooperation. Thus, the organisation of the research reflected an interdisciplinary approach, grounded in a thorough study of theoretical, historical, and cultural sources, with the aim of supporting relevant and contemporary conclusions.

2. Results

To conduct our research effectively, we divided it into four main stages designed to provide a deep understanding of the evolution of the Olympic Games and the humanistic values associated with them.

Stage 1. Literature review. The literature review was an important stage in the organisation of this research, aimed at identifying and analysing relevant sources on the evolution of the Olympic Games and the humanistic values associated with them. Fundamental studies, such as Miller's work (Miller 2004, 90–115), offered a detailed look at the origins and cultural significance of the ancient Olympic Games, highlighting the deep connection between sport and religion in Ancient Greece. At the same time, these works were essential for understanding how these competitions reflected the ideals of excellence and fair play—central elements of humanistic values.

Table 1. Key Figures of Ancient vs. Modern Olympic Games

Feature	Ancient Olympics (776 BC – 393 AD)	Modern Olympics (1896–Present)	Feature
Duration (years)	~1,200	~130	Duration (years)
Sports	5	33+	Sports
Athlete Participation	200–300 Greek men only)	10,000+ athletes from 200+ countries	Athlete Participation
Gender Participation	0% (men only)	~49% female athletes (Tokyo 2020)	Gender Participation
Participating Nations	~50 Greek city- states	206 countries (Paris 2024)	Participating Nations
Event Duration (days)	5	~17 days	Event Duration (days)

Stage 2. Historical Analysis. This stage focused on examining the evolution of the Olympic Games in Antiquity, with an emphasis on the humanistic values promoted by the ancient Greeks. The Olympic Games, which originated in 776 BC in Olympia, were not only displays of physical ability but also expressions of Greek society's cultural, moral, and religious ideals. Accordingly, these competitions symbolised the aspiration toward *areté* (excellence), a central virtue in Greek culture that combined the individual's physical and moral qualities.

Table 2. Humanistic Values and Their Evolution

Value	Ancient Olympics	Modern Olympics
Excellence (<i>areté</i>)	Central virtue combining moral and physical qualities	Continues as a core ideal
Fair Play	Fundamental principle	Enforced through strict rules
Inclusivity	Restricted by gender and citizenship	Promoted globally with equality and diversity
Religious Significance	High (dedicated to Zeus)	Secular, focus on peace and unity

Stage 3. Comparing the Intervals – Ancient vs. Modern Olympic Games, Highlighting Changes and Continuities in Humanistic Values

Comparing the Ancient Olympic Games with the modern edition offers insight into how humanistic values have evolved while some key principles remain constant.

In ancient times, the Games were deeply connected to religion, dedicated to Zeus, and held a sacred ritualistic role. Finley and Pleket (1976) note that participation was an act of devotion and cultural identity, with emphasis on *areté* — combining physical and moral excellence. The Games represented unity of body and spirit, with moral virtue highly prized.

Core values such as fair play, respect for opponents, and personal excellence were central then and remain so today.

Modern Olympics have expanded to embrace inclusivity, equality, and diversity, with a global participant base. Unlike the ancient Games, where only free Greek men competed, today over 10,000 athletes from 206 nations participate, including women and athletes of all ethnicities. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) promotes gender equality with nearly 49% female athletes in recent Games (Paris 2024).

This demonstrates how the Olympics have preserved foundational humanistic values while evolving to reflect contemporary social progress.

Table 3. Comparison of Humanistic Values: Ancient vs. Modern Olympic Games

Aspect	Ancient Olympic Games	Modern Olympic Games	Data / Statistics
Religious Significance	Central; dedicated to Zeus, sacred	Secular, celebration	global Ancient: religious; Modern:

Participants	rituals Free Greek men only	Global, inclusive of all genders and ethnicities	<10% Ancient: ~300 athletes per Games; Modern: 10,654 athletes (Paris 2024)
Gender Inclusion	Male only	Nearly equal gender representation	Paris 2024: ~49% female athletes
Core Values	Areté (excellence), fair play, respect	Excellence, fair play, respect, equality, diversity	Continuity in values; equality increased
Cultural Impact	Reinforced Greek identity	Promotes global unity and cultural exchange	206 participating nations (Paris 2024)
Event Scope	Athletic competition with ritual context	Wide range of sports and global media coverage	Ancient Games: ~20 events; Modern Games: 329 events (Paris 2024)
Social Values Promoted	Physical & moral virtue, honor to gods	Human rights, anti-discrimination, inclusion	IOC Charter emphasis on inclusion since 1960s

Stage 4. Interpretation of Research Results – Correlations Between Socio-Cultural Developments and the Olympic Games. Interpreting the connections between socio-cultural developments and the Olympic Games provides deep insight into how these sporting events have both reflected and influenced society throughout history. The Olympic Games have evolved alongside dominant values, norms, and ideologies, shaping their organization, participation, and global perception.

- a. Socio-Cultural Developments in Antiquity. In ancient Greece, the Olympic Games were closely linked to religious and cultural values centered on Zeus worship. These competitions symbolized ideals of virtue, courage, and excellence, while participation was limited to free Greek men, excluding women and slaves. This exclusivity reflected strict social hierarchies and reinforced Greek cultural identity and social cohesion.
- b. Impact of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, humanistic ideals gained prominence, influencing the revival of the Olympic Games in the modern era. The Games began to embody ideals of reason, education, and international cooperation. Expanded participation and emphasis on fair play reflected new values of equality and fraternity.
- c. Modern Socio-Cultural Developments. In the contemporary era, the Olympics have become a global event symbolizing civil rights, gender equality, and multiculturalism. Inclusion of women, minorities, and global representation reflects the transformation toward universal human rights and social justice. The Games now promote diversity and respect as core values.
- d. Intersection with Global Politics. The Olympics have also been shaped by geopolitical forces. Notable examples include Cold War boycotts which turned the Games into

platforms for political statements and national identity assertion (Guttmann, 2002, pp. 180–195). The Olympics serve as both sporting events and arenas for global political expression.

Table 4. Summary of Socio-Cultural Influences on the Olympic Games
Across Historical Periods

Period	Key Socio-Cultural Developments	Impact on Olympic Games	Data / Examples
Antiquity	Religious devotion to Zeus, social exclusivity	Ritualistic competitions, limited participation	Only free Greek men competed; women & slaves excluded
Renaissance & Enlightenment	Humanism, education, international cooperation	Revival with emphasis on reason, equality	Modern Olympics founded in 1896 (Coubertin)
Modern Era	Civil rights, gender equality, globalization	Inclusion of women, minorities, 206 nations	Paris 2024: ~49% female athletes; 10,654 participants
Political Context	Cold War tensions, national identity politics	Boycotts, propaganda use, symbolic gestures	1980 & 1984 Olympic boycotts; political demonstrations

DISCUSSION

An analysis of the evolution of the Olympic Games shows how sport has long reflected and shaped humanistic values in society. In addition to sporting competitions, the Games have served as cultural and social indicators for centuries.

The literature (Miller, 2004, pp. 90–115) emphasizes the sacred origins of the Olympic Games, rooted in the Greek ideal of *arete* — a combination of physical skills and moral virtues that form the basis of enduring Olympic values.

Historically, the ancient Games were exclusive rituals that emphasized excellence and fair competition, symbolised the unity of body and spirit, and reflected the cultural identity of Greece.

A comparison of the ancient and modern Games shows the continuity of core values such as excellence and fair play, while the modern Games have embraced inclusivity, diversity and global participation, as evidenced by nearly 49% female athletes and more than 200 participating countries.

The Games reflect changes in society, from religious exclusivity to Renaissance humanism and today's emphasis on equality and civil rights. Politically, the Olympic Games have also served as a platform for global self-expression, with events such as boycotts during the Cold War highlighting their complex cultural role.

For future Games, it remains vital to promote equality, diversity, and peaceful competition, as well as to consider the political and cultural context to maintain the integrity and universal appeal of the Olympic Games.

2. Conclusions

The Olympic Games have evolved from sacred rituals in Ancient Greece to a global celebration of sport and humanistic values. Core principles such as excellence, fair play and respect have remained unchanged, while inclusivity, diversity and equality have become central to the modern era.

The Games not only reflect changes in society but also influence the cultural and political landscape around the world. Their ability to adapt while preserving traditions ensures their continued relevance.

Future Olympic Games must uphold these humanistic ideals by promoting unity, diversity, and peaceful competition, while carefully navigating political and cultural challenges to protect the Olympic spirit and legacy. The Olympic Games have undergone profound humanistic transformations from their origins in Ancient Greece to their rebirth in the modern era. In ancient times, the Games reflected the Greek ideals of *arete* (excellence), physical virtue, and spiritual harmony, serving as a unifying cultural institution rooted in mythology, religion, and civic pride. As the Olympic Games evolved into their modern form beginning in the late 19th century, they embraced new humanistic values such as international cooperation, peace, equality, and the celebration of global diversity. The connection between the ancient and modern Olympic Games lies in their shared mission to enhance human potential—physical, intellectual, and ethical—while the evolution is marked by shifts toward inclusivity, gender equality, technological advancement, and worldwide participation. Together, these eras show how the Olympic spirit continues to reflect the social, cultural, and philosophical development of humanity.

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