

# BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT WORLD WINTER GAMES

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## Abstract

This paper asks three basic questions concerning world winter games (Winter Olympic Games and related events). I shall point at the features of these games that we usually take for granted. The three basic questions asked in this text will concern the three main words from the title: ‘world’, ‘winter’, and ‘games’. Firstly, I shall ask questions about what *winter* sport means, which is related to the origin of the Winter Olympic Games at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, I shall highlight the topic of *internationality* concerning winter games, which has always been problematic. Thirdly, I shall explain why Olympic Games are ‘*Games*’ and not ‘*Sports*’. Here, I shall present the distinction between ‘Olympic Games’ and ‘world championships’, which was an important distinction for Pierre de Coubertin and his followers, but which has now almost disappeared.

## Introduction

This paper examines the topic of world winter games. World winter games are international events that comprise winter sport competitions, but are considered to be more than the sum of sport competitions, and as such are called ‘games’. These include mainly the Winter Olympic Games, but not exclusively – they also relate to Winter Paralympic Games, Winter Youth Olympic Games as well as the European Youth Olympic Festivals, since these events are based on the concepts of Olympism. Presently, the Winter Olympic Games, being one of the world’s most important sport events, influences our thinking about sport in general, as well as about winter sports. In this paper, I shall ask three basic questions about concepts raised by world winter games:

*What does ‘winter’ mean? – What are winter sports?* As we have now experienced many editions of the Winter Olympics and related winter games, most of us think we have a pretty clear idea of what counts as winter sports. However, this was not so at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> brings new possibilities. The first part of this paper will be devoted to discussions about the origin and development of what we presently call ‘winter sports’.

*What does the word ‘world’ refer to?* This question raises the issue of the internationality of world winter games, especially the Winter Olympic Games. Internationality is an important value propounded by Olympism and required of Olympic and related games, and this is especially problematic because the necessary conditions for participation in winter sports do not exist everywhere.

*Why ‘games’ and why not ‘sports’?* Or in other words: What does the word ‘games’ refer to in the context of Olympic Games and related events? Here, I shall discuss the distinction between Olympic Games and world championships, made by Pierre de Coubertin in his effort to establish the Olympic Games as ‘something else’ than world championships ([1] p. 542 ff.). Since this distinction is presently under threat, it is necessary to keep it in our mind.

## 1 What are winter sports?

Nowadays, the answer to the question what are winter sports is quite easy, since most of us would probably say that winter sports are those sports that get on the program of the Winter Olympic Games. Thus the existence of the Winter Olympic Games directs our way of thinking about summer and winter sports. However, the distinction between summer and winter sports took some time to develop, and has been differently understood in different countries and periods.

So, what sports should be classified as winter sports? The obvious answer would be that they are those sports that are practised in the season of winter. This way of thinking will work well in those countries in which the seasons of summer and winter are distinct, such that there is a clear difference between them (the latter being accompanied by ice and snow), as for example in the north European countries. But let us look more widely and internationally, because Olympism and the Olympic Games should relate to all countries, so we need to take all of them into account. From this point of view, the concept of winter is problematic. Not all countries have distinctive summers and winters, many of them (e.g. Great Britain) do not have severe winters, sufficient to support snow and ice sports. Some countries do not even have what we central Europeans would call a winter at all. This makes the question about winter sports quite complicated.

In the northern European countries, where there is a clear distinction and a large difference between the seasons, different sports are practised in different seasons for the simple reason that certain seasons do not allow the practice of some kinds of sports. In this case, we can easily see the rationale for a clear distinction between the summer and winter sports. For example, skiing is clearly a winter sport, while football may not be (a mid-winter break being prescribed out of necessity).

However, there are countries that do not have such distinctive seasons, and the conditions in their winter are not so different from the conditions in the summer. Of course, without sufficient snow and ice, this excludes the practice of certain (what we would nowadays call 'winter') sports, such as skating or skiing, and yet permits the practice of summer sports also in winter time.

However, these countries may have a season called 'winter' and then summer sports and winter sports are distinguished on the basis of more or less favourable conditions for the given sport, or on tradition, etc., while the conditions for practicing these sports are not utterly exclusive. For example, in Great Britain, unlike in the Czech Republic, football can be played outdoors all year round. Before the Winter Olympics were fully established, for Britain winter sports used to entail football, rugby, netball and field hockey, since these were the sports that could be practiced in the winter season (though the British people obviously knew and participated in sports on ice and snow in other countries as well), while summer sports were track and field, tennis and cricket.

However, let us now see how our present distinction between winter and summer sports originated at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the beginning of the modern Olympic Games, no distinction was made between summer and winter sports. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were also what we would now call winter sports included within the programme of Olympic Games, which are presently counted among the Summer Olympic Games. Firstly, and above all, there was skating, which was already planned for the 1896 Games in Athens and after that also for 1900 Olympics in Paris, but it was only at the 1908 Olympic Games in London that the discipline of figure-skating was for the first time fully included in the Olympic Programme. [8] Through its great success in London, skating gained its place in the Olympics and also through Coubertin's support – Coubertin himself practised skating and

considered it to be “a universal exercise, so he would not necessarily be against it as a part of the Olympic program” ([10] p. 267).

The unclear distinction of summer and winter sports is clearly visible with the example of the London Games. The 1908 Olympics lasted from 27<sup>th</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> October and with the approval of the IOC they were divided in two parts – summer and winter games, which is the first appearance of this kind of seasonal division within the Olympic Games. However, when we take a look at what were called ‘the winter sports’ on the Programme of London Olympics, we might be surprised to find association football (soccer), rugby football, field hockey, lacrosse, figure skating, and boxing ([4] p. 7).

However, in the beginning, Coubertin did not like the idea of that kind of distinction very much, as he writes in his *Olympic Memoirs* ([2] p. 105). The idea was rather to have all the sports together – nevertheless, this idea was not possible to realize, because not all sports could be organized at the same time at the same place. This approach is also seen from his earlier texts (e.g. [1] p. 263). Coubertin suggested that winter sports should not be practised as part of the Olympic Games, and he offered instead the title of ‘Northern Games’ for special games that should take place in winter. This is what he said on the matter: “Modern industry has managed to create artificial ice, but it is hardly reasonable to expect that the time will come when a perfected form of chemistry will be able to place durable, long-lasting snow on hillsides. Thus skating is the only one of the three great winter sports that might be included within the Olympic enclosure, if necessary. It would be better to adopt a solution in which these special sports are grouped together in winter, under the title ‘Northern Games’.” ([1] p. 263)

After the success of figure-skating in London, the IOC wanted skating to be included in the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, but the negotiations were unsuccessful. Skating was rejected, mainly by Swedes and Norwegians, who saw their inclusion as a rival to their Nordic Games and Holmenkollen competitions. (They were right to be concerned. These competitions were indeed terminated in the late twenties because of the rise of the Winter Olympics.) The Nordic Games were created in 1900 as a counterpart to the Olympic Games and they took place and were arranged by the northern European countries (Finland, Sweden and Norway). However, the Nordic Games did not have an international character, since they consisted mainly of typical Nordic sports. [7,8]

The Antwerp Olympics in 1920 included even more of what we would now call winter sports – figure skating, and for the first time ice-hockey was introduced. In 1921 a decision was made by the IOC to organize an international winter sports week at Chamonix in 1924. The winter sports week included competitions in ice-, figure-, and speed-skating, ice-hockey, Nordic ski-ing and bobsleigh [3]. This event was successful and, two years later, at the IOC session in Lisbon, it was pronounced as the 1<sup>st</sup> Winter Olympic Games. And whilst it was mainly the Nordic countries which were successful within the first few Games, the 1<sup>st</sup> Winter Games contributed to an increased popularity of winter sports in other countries. [7,8] The impossibility of organizing competitions of all sports at the same time in one place thus finally led to two kinds of Olympic Games – Summer and Winter Olympic Games.

To sum up, it is clear that the distinction between summer and winter sports is somewhat problematic. Winter sports cannot really be considered as sports practised in winter. The notion of ‘winter’ comes from the northern European concept of snowy and icy winter, which is not applicable to the seasonal practice of sports, nor the kind of winters in other regions, and thus the word ‘winter’ in this context is based just on a tradition. It is more sensible to distinguish ‘winter sports’ as those sports that are practiced on snow and ice. In this way, the word ‘winter’ refers to certain conditions – those of ice and snow that occur during severe winters in some countries only, rather than to a season. And this is, after all, the route taken

by the IOC, whose Olympic Charter now says: “Only those sports which are practised on snow or ice are considered as winter sports” ([5] 6:2).

With the formation of the Winter Olympic Games the distinction between summer and winter sports settled down. While the Summer and Winter Olympic Games direct our thinking about what summer and winter sports are, the distinction is once more being complicated by another, contemporary, factor.

The distinction between summer and winter sports may be blurred by artificial conditions, such as gymnasia, sports halls and indoor swimming pools, which for many years have enabled athletes to practice summer sports in winter. Similarly, we can provide artificial conditions for winter sports, such as ice-rinks and artificial snow that make up for the lack of ‘real winter conditions’, enabling the practice of winter sports – this happens mostly in the countries where there are winters that are not cold enough. Whilst those are not such new inventions, there are nowadays many more, and they affect many more kinds of sport than they used to. For example, recently ski-slopes have been built even in some (rich) countries where there is generally no natural ice and snow (e.g. in Saudi Arabia). Artificial conditions do not influence only the practice of winter sports though. Just a few weeks ago, a FIFA World Cup in Qatar was unthinkable, even with air-conditioned stadia. What about a winter sports event there next?! In this context, the distinction between summer and winter sports is blurred, and this influenced the Olympics too – attempts have even been made (1965-1977, 1970, 1972, 1975, 1980) to transfer indoor summer sports like boxing, fencing or basketball to the Winter Games ([8] p. 15), but these were not successful.

Nowadays, we even find the view that the distinction between summer and winter in relation to sports becomes useless. For example, Otto Schantz [8] says that in the era of globalization the distinction between winter and summer sports is becoming anachronistic, since sports depend less on weather or seasons, and seasons have less temporal but more and more geographical meaning. With regard to this topic Schantz says: “Of course, a lot of sports need certain special conditions, geographical conditions like mountains for skiing (snow can be made artificially) or big water surfaces for sailing, but many sports are completely independent of seasons, especially the indoor sports or ball-games like basketball, handball, badminton or table-tennis. To differentiate between winter and summer sport is becoming anachronistic” ([8] p. 14). He also supports this view by the recent trend to formalize and standardize sports and by the problem of the ecological compatibility of many outdoor sports ([8] p. 14).

While it is true that many sports may be completely independent of seasons, however, there are still many that are not, and an indoor environment would change them considerably. If we wish to keep these kinds of sports popular, we cannot simply put them indoors, even if this brought more standardized conditions for the sport. In addition, the practice of sports in the open air is quite important for people in 21<sup>st</sup> century, who have become too much domesticated, and such a trend in Olympics would probably make the problem worse. So it rather seems that the two kinds of Olympics have a good chance to survive, under our present definitions.

## **2 The issue of the internationality of the Winter Olympic Games**

As we can see above, the journey of the Winter Olympic Games was not an easy one at their beginning. The revival of the Olympic Games brought a programme with only what we would call now ‘summer’ sports – based on the ancient Greek Olympic Games tradition and on the popular sports practised at the time of the revival at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. But other modern sports were also considered, including some sports that we now call winter sports, and some were included on the Games programmes from 1908. The inclusion of

winter sports eventually led to the division of the Olympic Games in two editions – Summer and Winter Olympic Games. However, the nature and even the existence of the Winter Olympic Games has been repeatedly questioned, and even now, when they have an established tradition in the sporting world, the Winter Olympics are not equal to the Summer Olympics – in the eyes of public as well as researchers [8].

The general problem of world winter games is the limited possibility of practising winter sports all over the world. Thus the main problem for the Winter Olympic Games has ever since been connected to insufficient internationality. This is a particular problem for Olympism, because internationality is one of the main values of Olympism and, based on this value, there are rules for the acceptability of sports into the Olympic Programme, according to their popularity in a certain number of countries in a certain number of continents. For example, the insufficient internationality of Winter Olympic Games was one of the reasons with which Avery Brundage fought against them ([8] p. 8).

The Winter Olympic Games do not fulfil the requirement of internationality in the same sense as the Summer Olympic Games do (cp. [8]). Winter sports have weaker criteria for acceptance among Olympic sports – while summer sports need to be widely practised by men in at least 75 countries and on four continents and by women in at least 40 countries and on three continents, winter sports need to be widely practised only in at least 25 countries on three continents [9].

Insufficient internationality is also clearly seen with the example of the number of participating National Olympic Committees in individual Winter Olympics. To take just two examples – the oldest and the most recent: in 1924 (Summer) Olympic Games in Paris there was a participation of 44 NOCs, while in Chamonix in 1924 only 19. This difference might be thought to be understandable, since the (Summer) Olympic Games in Paris were the eighth games of their kind and thus had some tradition, while the winter sport week in Chamonix was pronounced as Olympic Games only later. However, there has been a difference in participation ever since. The most recent Summer Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 hosted 204 NOCs, while the Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver in 2010 hosted only 82 – even smaller in percentage terms than 1924.

### **3 Why ‘games’ and why not ‘sports’?**

The last question that I shall try to answer refers to the word ‘Games’ within the name of the Olympic Games. Here, we may ask more generally: why do we speak of Olympic Games and not Olympic Sports? Or in the context of this text we may ask why do we speak of Winter Olympic Games and not of Winter Olympic Sports? At first glance it seems that Olympic Games mean simply the peak of the performances of the best athletes in Olympic sports. The only distinction between Olympic Games and specific world championships would be the number of sports included in the given event. However, the Olympic Games do not mean the highest competition in the sports that were selected into the Olympic Programme. The Olympic Games are not a set of sport disciplines, decided upon prior to each Olympic Games, which are to be a part of the Olympic Programme and thus are called ‘Olympic Sports’. Conceiving the Olympic Games as a mere sum of Olympic Sports is reducing the Olympic Games to something like a top-level world championships.

This is indeed a stance that some people take, but it would be counter to Coubertin’s idea of what Olympism (and the Olympic Games) are supposed to be. Coubertin wanted the Olympic Games to be understood as the highlight and celebration of sport practice as expressing the ideas and ideals of Olympism. Within this setting, the Olympic Games are supposed to be more than a high level competition in the chosen sports. Rather, the word ‘Games’ refers to a festival that is the highlight of the sport journey of various kinds of athletes. Coubertin refers

to the Olympic Games as to a ‘festival of the human springtime’ ([1] p. 600). The Games also provide a demonstration of the athletes’ excellence to others, motivating them to engage in sport practice ([1] p. 575), offering them the possibility of new friendships and mutual respect, of understanding different nations and their cultural heritage, and thereby uniting all nations of the world. Apart from sport competition, Olympism and Olympic Games also comprise cultural, social and educational aspects. Sometimes, Coubertin even talked of Olympism as of a religion [6]. Also, the Olympic Games are different from world championships in the respect that they do not necessarily unite the best athletes in a given discipline, but rather the best representatives of the multitude of participating countries.

This distinction between pure sport competitions and the Olympic Games is clearly seen in the works of Pierre de Coubertin himself, who distinguished between ‘Olympic Games’ and ‘world championships’ ([1] p. 542-543). According to Coubertin, Olympism was not just about improving one’s sport performance, so that the athlete stood a chance of victory within a competition. Rather, Olympism must be understood from a wider perspective – as a way of life, through which the athlete improves on all levels of his or her existence – which in the context of sport means the way of competing. This is apparent, among others, from the Olympic creed: “The most important in life is not the triumph, but the fight; the essential thing is not to have won, but to have fought well.” The Olympic Games are a demonstration of the overall excellence of these athletes.

To keep the Olympic Games special and worthwhile, it is important to keep this distinction, or we may lose a possibility to engage in sports in a more human way. This does not go without saying, however. The Olympic idea needs to be repeatedly researched, discussed and explained, so that it can be understood and so that it can make our sport practice fully meaningful.

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## ZÁKLADNÍ OTÁZKY OHLEDNĚ SVĚTOVÝCH ZIMNÍCH HER

V tomto textu jsou položeny tři základní otázky ohledně světových zimních her (Zimních olympijských her a podobných akcí). Toto tázání se vztahuje k těm rysům zimních her, které jsou obvykle považovány za samozřejmé. Tři základní otázky v tomto textu se týkají tří slov z názvu: „světové“, „zimní“, „hry“. Nejprve bude položena otázka po tom, co to znamená *zimní* sport – tato otázka se vztahuje ke vzniku Zimních olympijských her na začátku 20. století. Dále bude rozpracováno téma *mezinárodního* charakteru zimních her, který byl vždy problematický. Nakonec bude vysvětleno, proč se Olympijské hry nazývají „hry“, nikoli „sporty“ – zde bude představen rozdíl mezi „Olympijskými hrami“ a „světovými mistrovstvími“. Tento rozdíl byl zásadní pro Coubertina a jeho následovníky, avšak v současnosti téměř zmizel.

## GRUNDFRAGEN BEZÜGLICH DER WELTWINTERSPIELE

In diesem Text werden drei Grundfragen bezüglich der Weltwinterspiele (Olympische Winterspiele und ähnliche Veranstaltungen) gestellt. Sie beziehen sich auf die Merkmale der Winterspiele, die gewöhnlich für selbstverständlich gehalten werden. Die drei grundlegenden Fragen in diesem Text betreffen die drei Wörter aus dem Titel: „Welt“, „Winter“, „Spiele“. Zuerst wird die Frage danach gestellt, was *Wintersport* heißt - die sich auf den Ursprung der Olympischen Winterspiele zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts bezieht. Ferner wird das Thema des *internationalen* Charakters der Winterspiele hervorgehoben, der immer ein Problem darstellte. Schließlich wird erklärt, warum die Olympischen Spiele „*Spiele*“ und nicht „*Wettkämpfe*“ heißen – hier wird der Unterschied zwischen den „Olympischen Spielen“ und den „Weltmeisterschaften“ dargestellt. Dieser Unterschied war für Coubertin und seine Nachfolger grundsätzlich, jedoch ist er in der Gegenwart fast verschwunden.

## PODSTAWOWE ZAGADNIENIA ŚWIATOWYCH IGRZYSK ZIMOWYCH

W niniejszym artykule zadano trzy podstawowe pytania dotyczące zimowych światowych imprez sportowych (Zimowych Igrzysk Olimpijskich i podobnych wydarzeń). Pytania odnoszą się do tych cech zimowych igrzysk, które zazwyczaj traktowane są jako oczywiste. Trzy podstawowe pytania w opracowaniu dotyczą wyrazów w tytule: "światowe", "zimowe", "igrzyska". Najpierw zadane jest pytanie, co oznacza sport zimowy – pytanie to dotyczy powstania zimowych igrzysk olimpijskich na początku XX wieku. Następnie omówiona jest kwestia międzynarodowego charakteru zimowych olimpiad, która zawsze była problematyczna. W zakończeniu przedstawione jest wyjaśnienie, dlaczego igrzyska olimpijskie nazywane są "igrzyskami" a nie "sportami" – tu będzie pokazana różnica pomiędzy "igrzyskami olimpijskimi" a "mistrzostwami świata". Różnica ta była zasadnicza dla Coubertina i jego następców, jednak w obecnych czasach praktycznie zaniknęła.