

THE OLYMPICS AND BEYOND



ILLUSTRATION: AILSA FAROUKHAR

Athens hosts the 28th modern Olympic Games in August. **Kevin Featherstone** is head of LSE's Hellenic Observatory. We asked him what these Olympics mean to Greece and about the longstanding connections between Greece and LSE.

This year's Games are about the Olympics 'coming home' to Athens. But have they lost their original character and purpose?

There are contrasts and similarities between this year's Olympics and those of the past. The modern series has a much shorter history than those of ancient times. The first Olympic Games we know of were held in 776 BC. Then they were held every four years for an incredible period of around 1,200 years, ending only when the (Christian) Roman emperor Theodosius I abolished them as too pagan. The Games were held in honour of Zeus, on Mount Olympus – hence 'Olympic'.

The ancient Olympics developed from a sense of the whole man, spirit and body – religion was a central part. Only men who were Greek could take part. Moreover, the Games were an occasion for wars to stop. If only there were a modern parallel! The modern Games were cancelled during World Wars One and Two.

But there are similarities. The modern games have prompted the revival of sports like the discus and the javelin. Many other sports are common to both: long jump, wrestling, riding on horseback, for example. And competition was fierce: the spirit denoted by agon (the root of the word 'agony') is of intense struggle, distinct from sportsmanship, and is the desire to surpass all others. Winners were celebrated as heroes. Large crowds were also a feature of the ancient Games. Perhaps 40 to 50,000 spectators came to see them – more than the combined population of many of the then city-states. So some characteristics of the Games remain.

When did the modern Olympics develop?

The first modern Olympics were also held in Athens – in 1896, after prolonged efforts by Baron Pierre de Coubertin of France. The 1896 Games were not well publicised internationally. This meant the athletes were not chosen nationally but came as individuals, at their own expense, from just 14 different countries, wearing their own athletic club uniforms rather than national ones. The records are uncertain, but there might have been only 175 athletes. They competed in 43 events in just nine sports. And they were all male. No gold medals were given. Instead, the winner received a silver medal and a crown of olive branches. The athlete coming second got a bronze medal and a crown of laurel. British participants finished fifth in the medal table, with the US and Greece the top two.

In contrast, the Sydney Olympics of 2000 saw 199 nations represented by 10,651 athletes, around 40 per cent of them women, competing in 300 events. In Athens this summer, the totals will be even higher. Today's Olympics also show how the world has changed. Some 21,500 media personnel are expected to converge on Athens, and, with the increasing terrorist threat, some 45,000 security staff will be deployed, including police, the army, firefighters and coastguards. Ordinary life in Athens will be transformed with security checks everywhere.

Sydney is said to have seen off several terrorist threats. After the September 11 attacks, Athens is undertaking much bigger precautions. They deserve to succeed.

Will Greece, and Athens, be ready in time?

It will be a close call, but the general opinion is that the essentials will be in place. We have to appreciate the magnitude of the task that is faced when hosting the Olympics. Greece is a small country, poorer than those that have recently hosted the Games. A huge effort has been made, with 60,000 volunteers recruited – even the notorious Athens taxi drivers have been trained to be better hosts! And finally, let's hope it's not too hot for everyone.

So why do it? What is there to gain from hosting the Olympics?

Recent Games have shown that the host city can derive substantial long term benefits. But perhaps the biggest immediate impact is the international profile. Billions of people worldwide will be watching on TV. The reputational benefits of a successful Olympics will be immense. The international image of Greece has changed very much for the better in recent years. The country has recently completed a very successful EU presidency, has engaged in rapprochement with Turkey, has supported Turkey's bid to join the EU, and has encouraged a settlement on Cyprus. A successful Games will further enhance Greece's reputation – and this leads to other benefits.

Gauging the economic impact of the Games is a more serious endeavour. This is relevant to discussions on the regeneration of cities in general, and more particularly the London bid to host the Olympics in 2012.

Hosting the Olympics has meant a major development effort in Greece. The transport infrastructure has been changed almost beyond recognition, with a new airport, a greatly expanded metro system, and new roads. The Olympics have prompted other developments, which will be completed only after the Games, such as a new tramway system linking central Athens to the sea. Then there is the benefit of the facilities for use afterwards, for instance,

the Olympic accommodation to be offered as cheap housing.

But the macroeconomic picture is more telling. Estimates suggest that the Sydney Olympics gave a \$6.5 billion boost to the Australian economy. Atlanta produced a \$5.1 billion gain to the state of Georgia, while Barcelona added a massive \$16.6 billion to the Spanish economy (1986-1993). Greece might not achieve these heights but there should be significant gains. By the time the Games open, the EU will have given Greece over \$40 billion to improve its roads and other infrastructure, some 65,000 new permanent jobs will be created, and a \$1.3 billion boost to public revenues is expected.

As head of the School's Hellenic Observatory, do you see the Olympics having an impact on academic connections between Greece and LSE?

The School has a long tradition of receiving students from both Greece and Cyprus. Many of our alumni have risen to public prominence in Greece, most notably the recent prime minister, Costas Karamanlis, who was a research student from 1961 to 1963, and George Papandreu (MSc Sociology 1977), now president of the opposition party, PASOK. The new Economics minister, Professor Giorgos Alagoukos, completed his PhD at the School in 1981 and obtained his first post here, following his MSc Economics in 1978. The governor of the Bank of Greece, Dr Nikos Garganas (MSc Economics 1963) is an alumnus. Our alumni in Greece have also been very generous in supporting the School.

More specifically, the Hellenic Observatory and the Venizelos chair act as a focus for contemporary Greek studies. Support has come from our original donors, as well as new ones from both the public and private sectors. One consortium, for example, comprising the Athens Medical Centre, EFG Eurobank Ergasias, Germanos, Global Finance, GrecoTel, the Hellenic Bottling Company/Coca Cola, Hellenic Petroleum, Viohalco, and an

anonymous donor, has funded a new lectureship. With this kind of support, we can do much more.

Since May 2002, when I took over from my predecessor Professor Loukas Tsoukalis, we have welcomed some 2,500 participants to our public events. These have included lectures on European security and the Iraq crisis during the Greek EU Presidency, and a screening of the film *Z* at the National Film Theatre last November, including an interview with its director, Costas Gavras. The screening commemorated the 40th anniversary of the assassination of the Greek MP Gregoris Lambrakis and the 30th anniversary of the Athens Polytechnic protest against the Colonels' dictatorship.

Last summer we also held the first LSE conference for PhD students researching contemporary Greece. The aim was to bring together some of the many disparate Greek PhD students working in different UK universities and to offer them academic support. About 70 such students came and were joined by leading academics from Greece. We hope to repeat this event in 2005.

We have also collaborated with others in the School and beyond – with successful conferences on the Greek EU presidency of 2003, on pension reform in Europe, and on Romania and the EU. With the 2004 Olympics and the legacy they will leave for the city of Athens, we hope to work with the School's Cities Programme and the Greater London Group on research into the economic and regeneration benefits. ■



Professor Kevin Featherstone

is the Eleftherios Venizelos Chair of Contemporary Greek Studies and director of the LSE Hellenic Observatory.
© Kevin Featherstone

LSE Hellenic Observatory and the Greek alumni group

The Observatory was established in October 1996 as part of the European Institute at LSE. Attached to the Observatory is the Eleftherios Venizelos Chair of Contemporary Greek Studies. Professor Loukas Tsoukalis was the first holder of the Venizelos Chair from 1997 to 2001.

The Venizelos Chair is unique. It is the only 'Greek' chair outside Greece devoted to the social sciences, to be funded by Greek firms and institutions, and to offer a permanent position. The closest parallels are the Karamanlis Chair at Tufts University in Boston, which offers a fixed term position, and a new chair in Toronto funded by the city's local Greek community.

Attached to the Chair is an advisory board, comprising representatives of the major donors and other advisers.

The Board is chaired by Professor Lucas Papademos, vice president of the European Central Bank, and the vice chair is Dr Nikos Garganas, the governor of the Bank of Greece.

www.lse.ac.uk/collections/hellenicObservatory

The LSE Greek alumni group is in contact with some 1,700 alumni (see page 41). Donations from alumni and friends of almost £900,000 have helped establish a lectureship, visiting fellowships, PhD scholarships and countless conferences and events.

To contact the LSE alumni group in Greece, email John Platidis at johnplat@yahoo.com