Abstract: The modern Olympic Games were from the beginning part of world culture and modern history, reflecting political tensions, economic crises, cultural flowering, and technological development. From the very first edition athletics events had a privileged place in the Olympic program. Much have changed since 1896, not only in number of events, athletes, competition and prizes, but in philosophy, sport sciences, ethics and professional approach as well. Athletics, the sport of the most natural human movements: running, walking, jumping and throwing accompanied the Olympic Games on its 120 years journey and marked its evolution with memorable moments, exceptional records, great personalities and the triumph of talent and fair play.

Key words: History, marathon, records, major sporting events

1. Introduction.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin launched the idea of reviving the Olympic Games at a time of great cultural effervescence. At the end of the XIX century, the focus was on Paris, the capital of the elite of art reformers from across Europe and other parts of the world. There was a revolution in art, in the famous Montmartre district and Latin Quarter, begun by the impressionists, and continued by symbolist and post-impressionists, through fauvism and expressionism and by Art Nouveau in 1900, with the diffusion of art in common object aesthetics. In Paris, the art capital of the world, the global artistic community viewed art from a changed perspective (Hepp, 2010).

An emblematic generation, inspired by the present, does not write, compose, or paint about other times, but makes history. Toulouse-Lautrec and Claude Monet put can-can dancers and seraphic female figures in their paintings, each one representing his approach to life and art (Morariu, 1980). Van Gogh (1853-1890) with his vigorous and vibrant style of painting personified the rebel times and spirit. Gauguin and Cezanne painted representations of their emotions until the early years of the XX century (Marshall & Cavendish, 2008). The writers Oscar Wild, Henry James, Anton Chekov and the poets Verlaine and Rimbaud were the most prominent personalities of literature in the last decade of XIX century. These artists and their creations transformed ordinary men into heroes.

At such times, in which reforming geniuses struggled for affirmation and recognition, it was possible to revive the Olympics and to accede to the international Olympic idea. A few days after the idea went public; the IOC met for their first session and decided that the first Olympic Games would take place in Greece, in homage to the cradle of the ancient Games. In Athens, in 1896, 245 male competitors, representing 14 nations took part in the first modern Olympic competition (Pop, 2013).

2. Problem statement.

From the very first edition athletics events had a privileged place in the Olympic program. 64 athletes from ten nations competed in 12 events. This made athletics the most international of the nine sports at the first modern Olympic Games. Among the 12 athletic events were 6 running races, including the marathon, 4 jump events and 2 of throwing. Two of those events were held for the first time at an international competition: the discus throw and the marathon. The first was inspired of the Greek ancient Olympian Games; the discus thrower statue, or discobolus by Miron (circa 460–450 BC) depicting the
energy of the momentum right before the discus release, was known, and still is, as a symbol of ancient athletics contests.

The marathon race was held because of the great historical significance for the hosting country. Greece history records the sacrifice of a running currier, Philippides (530 BC–490 BC), who ran from the battlefield near Marathon to Athens announcing the victory over Persian invaders (490 BC). Previously he was sent to Sparta to request help when the Persians landed at Marathon. He ran about 246 km in two days. The legend says that after completed his mission and announced the Athenian victory, he collapsed and died in agora.

The Olympic race was run from Marathon to Athens (estimated at 40 Km), watched by more than 100,000 people (Gettings, 2012), 60,000 just in the ancient marble stadium, over its utmost capacity, i.e., with 50,000 people (Richardson, 1896). It was won by a Greek runner, Spiridon Louis, who did not know anything about sport, but on his arrival on Panathinaiko Stadium for the final leg of the race the home crowd roared with pride. He was a simple man, whose job was to carry water to Athens. Also the reward for his performance was humble; the king of Greece granted Louis one wish and he choose a horse and a cart for his business (iaaf.org, 2004).

On Monday, 6 April 1896 the American James Connolly won the triple jump to become the first Olympic champion in more than 16 centuries. He also finished second in the high jump and third in the long jump (olympic.org). At that time many athletes were competing in more events and even in different sports. Almost all of those multisport competitors were deeply rooted in athletics and the stadium was their common contest ground.

Athletes Competing in Four Sports in 1896 (Henry, 1948):
- Jensen, Viggo: Denmark – Athletics (shot put and discus throw), Gymnastics, Shooting, Weightlifting; Olympic champion in two hand lift;
- Schuhmann, Carl: Germany – Athletics (long jump, triple jump, shot put), Gymnastics, Weightlifting, Wrestling; 4 times Olympic champion in gymnastics (3 different events) and wrestling;
- Elliot, Launceston: Great Britain – Athletics (100m), Gymnastics, Weightlifting, Wrestling; Olympic champion in one hand lift.

Although he was a visionary, Pierre de Coubertin believed that the Olympics should remain traditionally “a eulogy of male sport”. This reservation, however, could not prevent women from participating, and in 1900 they competed in tennis and golf. Also in the first edition, in Athens 1896, a woman intended to join the men marathon race. Stamata Revithi, a 30 years woman, was ultimately refused to entry into the race by the organizing committee because she wasn’t officially recognized athlete. However she ran by her own the distance a day after the official race and her time was around 5 hours and 30 minutes. Completing the distance was already a success while in the Olympic race from 18 men at start just 9 reached the finish line.

Almost 100 years after that first attempt, women were finally allowed to run the Olympic marathon at the 1984 Summer Olympics, when American Joan Benoit won the inaugural race in a time of 2 hours and 24 minutes (olympic.org).

The classic marathon distance of 42.195 km was fixed once and for all in the London Marathon. The peculiar distance came about when the course from Windsor Great Park to Shepherds Bush was extended by circa 2 km so that it finished at the Royal Box. In 1921 the length for a marathon race was formally standardized at 42.195 kilometers.

In 1924, the first truly successful Olympic Games were held in Paris, involving more than 3,000 athletes, including more than 100 women, from 44 nations. Athletics events for women made their debut in Olympic arena just in 1928 with two individual races (100m, 800m) and one relay (4x100m); high jump and discus throw. 9 new world records were set in athletics events during the Amsterdam edition of Olympic Games, 4 of them in women contests (in all, except 100m).

Edition by edition since the birth of the Modern Olympics, a number of events have come and some have gone. And most of the events, listed below, led short lives prior to 1928.
Running: 60m; 200 m hurdles; Steeplechase – 2500m; 2590m; 3200m; 4000m; 3000m, 5000m, 3-miles and 4-miles team race; 5 miles; individual and team cross country;

Walking: 3000m, 3500m, 10km, 10 miles race walk;

Jumping: standing long jump; standing triple jump; standing high jump;

Throwing: 56 pound weight throw; discus throw Greek style and two hands; javelin throw free style and two hands; shot put two hands;

Combined events: triathlon and pentathlon.

Berlin organized the tenth Olympic Games in 1936, and Hitler was in the official stand when his theory of Aryan race supremacy was shattered by the performance of an exceptional black athlete, Jesse Owens. Owens won the Olympic title in four events: 100 and 200m, long jump and the 4x100m relay, once becoming the first Afro-American champion in the history of the Olympics. Owens also broke or equaled nine Olympic records and three World records. In the long jump event Owens won in a memorable duel with German Lutz Long, obtaining an exceptional result of 8.06m. Hitler and his entourage left the stadium before the prize giving ceremony, avoiding Owens victories celebration. Luz Long died in 1943 while fighting for Germany in World War II. A final letter he wrote to Jesse Owens reads, in part, "Someday find my son... tell him about how things can be between men on this Earth." (Goldman, 2009).

The Second World War begins in 1939 after the German invasion of Poland, and by 1945, the conflict has engulfed the entire world involving over 40 countries across all continents. Casualties are estimated at between 62 and 78 million soldiers and civilians (www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo, n. d.). The next Olympics were postponed until 1948 after almost six years of armed conflict and colossal destruction. After two suspended editions of the Games, representatives of 59 nations gathered in London to celebrate peace and to confirm the Olympic ideal. On this occasion, the first victory in an Olympic contest of an afro-American woman – Alice Coachman – was recorded for the high jump (www.teamusa.org. 2012). This was just the start, and once engaged in the race for titles and Olympic records, black athletes were fully instated. American Carl Lewis is one of the most successful male athletes in Olympic history and one of the only two athletes to win nine Olympic gold medals. He excelled in the sprint races and long jump (notablebiographies.com, 2010) winning in 4 consecutive editions; from 1984 to 1996. The other exceptional athlete is the Finish Paavo Nurmi, who holds nine
Olympic titles and three silver medals in long running races in three consecutive editions between 1920 and 1928.

The 1950's were marked by the arms race and the fear of a possible nuclear war between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The “Cold War” began and propaganda was rife (Pop, 2014). Champion athletes were used for propaganda purposes as models for the supremacy of one regime over the other speculating their visibility in the mass media and the general interest.

The “sporting Cold War” determined some excesses and harmful experiments over the social life and health of athletes. In USSR the athletes were required to stay in training camps almost all year, with short brakes to see their families after the season was over. In East Germany the athletes were systematically doped and the records of substances and dosage were kept in Stasi (secret service) files. From that time remained Marita Koch’s 400m world record (47.6 s) and since then no other woman athlete has come close to break it. On the other part of the iron curtain the use of banned substances had a few notorious victims also, among them Ben Johnson, men’s 100 m winner in Seoul, 1988 or Marion Johns stripped of three gold and two bronze medals she won in Sydney 2000 in sprint events and long jump.

In the IAAF hall of fame Romania is represented by Iolanda Balaș, the best female high jumper of the 20th century. She improved the world record 14 times from 1,75m in 1957 to 1,91m in 1961, which was to remain unbeaten for the next ten years. The 1960 and 1964 Olympic titles completed her list of triumphs at all major international competitions.

3. Conclusions

Nowadays, looking forward for the 28-th Olympic Games edition, we anticipate good performances for contemporary superstars athletes like Usain Bold, Allison Felix or Yelena Isimbaieva. Bolt will compete on 100m, 200m and 4x100m defending the titles he won in Beijing 2012. If he comes off victorious, the Jamaican sprinter will have a good chance to become the most successful male athlete in Olympic history, exceeding Paavo Nurmi and Carl Lewis. Isimbaieva at 33 years old, considered the greatest female pole vaulter of all time (rio2016.com), returned to training intending to compete for a third gold medal at the Rio 2016 Games. Allison Felix, also over 30, is now competing at the 4-th edition aiming to achieve the 200m and 400m double at the Olympics. On the previous three Olympic Games she won six medals among four of gold, being the most laureate woman in Olympic athletics competition. The Rio Olympic athletics competitions will be more exciting as all those important competitors mentioned above are looking for a big performance in their (probably) last Games.

The modern Olympic Games were from the beginning part of world culture and modern history, reflecting political tensions, economic crises, cultural flowering, and technological development. Much have changed since 1896, not only in number of events, athletes, competition and prizes, but in philosophy, sport sciences, ethics and professional approach as well. Athletics, the sport of the most natural human movements: running, walking, jumping and throwing accompanied the Olympic Games on its 120 years journey and marked its evolution with memorable moments, exceptional records, great personalities and the triumph of talent and fair play.

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