The Olympic Flame Returns to Tokyo after 56 Years

By Philip Barker

For the second time, an Olympic flame has set out for Tokyo but in very different circumstances to the relay that carried it there in 1964. Daily bulletins about the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) have overshadowed much sport throughout the world, forcing widespread cancellation of many events.

The crisis forced organisers to stage the Tokyo 2020 lighting ceremony with only a small group of invited guests. Normally the ceremony in Ancient Olympia attracts thousands of spectators. "In this ceremony regretfully, we had to downsize turnout to protect public health." said Hellenic Olympic Committee President Spyros Capralos. As a further precautionary measure, school groups did not take part in the ceremonies as they had done in the past.

On a cloudless day, the flame was kindled in the ruins of the Temple of Hera by high priestess Xanthi Georgiou. She was performing the role for the first time in Olympia. She had previously lit the flame for the Lausanne 2020 Youth Olympic Games but that ceremony took place in Athens.

On the hillside, the priestesses and heralds performed a dance sequence choreographed by Artemis Ignatiou and accompanied by music specially composed by Yannis Psimadas. The sequence, entitled "Ancient Echoes" was designed to evoke the spirit of antiquity. It was the prelude to the arrival of the flame in the ancient stadium. This was carried in an archaic bowl.

Rio 2016 shooting gold medallist Anna Korakaki then stepped forward as the first runner to receive the torch. It was the first time a woman had been chosen to carry the flame in the ancient stadium, although women did take part in the shot put at the same arena in Athens 2004.

"I ask her to make a step to light a path of hope." said Tokyo 2020 Chief Executive Toshiro Muto.[1] Korakaki carried the flame to the nearby monument to Baron Pierre de Coubertin. There she made the traditional salute before handing the flame to Athens 2004 women's marathon champion Mizuki Noguchi, the first Japanese participant in the relay.

The date of the event had been carefully selected as the ninth anniversary of the tsunami that devastated many areas in Japan in 2011.

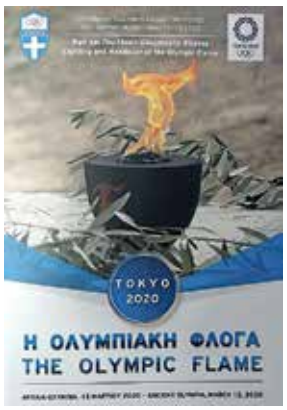
Amongst those watching was 1984 judo gold medallist Yasuhiro Yamashita, now President of the Japanese Olympic Committee and a recent recruit to the IOC membership. He said: "The Japan Olympic Committee has been working with various organisations in order to support and assist those affected by the disaster, encouraging them, and we have been conducting various activities to do this. This is the first time for me to visit Olympia. I went to the ancient stadium and I saw where the athletes competed with each other and was very moved. By being here, I recognised the importance of continuing such work beyond 2020 in order to support these affected people through the power of sport."[2]

IOC President Thomas Bach drew parallels between the importance of the 2020 Games and the impact of those staged in 1964."The Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 will be a symbol of hope and confidence for all Japanese people, especially so in the regions affected by the devastating disaster nine years ago. We are grateful to the Japanese people who are embracing these Games with such enthusiasm. The Olympic flame returns to Tokyo for the first time in 56 years. The Olympic flame represents our hope for a better future. Back in 1964, the first Olympic Games in Asia marked a new beginning for a peaceful and dynamic Japan among the family of nations."[3]

The Greek portion of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic torch relay through Greece was cancelled after less than a day after "unexpectedly large crowds" when the flame visited Sparta. Many were attracted by the chance to see Hollywood actor Gerard Butler carry the flame.

"Apollo, god of sun and light, send your rays and light the torch for the hospitable city of Tokyo!" The prestige was increased when, for the first time, the Greek actress Xanthi Georgiou played the role of high priestess, standing-before the ruins of the Temple of Hera.

Photo: picture-alliance



The official programme of the lighting ceremony was produced with a limited edition of only 1,000 pieces. Middle: In the ancient stadium of Olympia, Xanthi Georgiou gave the flame to the first torchbearer, Anna Korakaki. Far right: Olympic Torch Relay Tokyo 1964: the fourth and final advertising poster produced by Yusaku Kamekura.

Photos: Philip Barker, Official Report Tokyo 1964

According to astatement by the Hellenic Olympic Committee (HOC),"Despite strong recommendations to the public not to focus on the ceremony in the flame crossing cities, the HOC took the difficult but necessary decision to cancel the rest of the programme on Greek soil. The decision was made in consultation with the Ministry of Health and the International Olympic Committee with a deep sense of responsibility, as public health is the ultimate good and in these difficult times a reasonable attitude is imposed by all sides."

This is the only the third time that a relay to Athens for the Summer Games has not been completed.In 1948, civil disturbances in Greece forced organisers to take the London flame to the port of Katakolo near Olympia, where it was carried by ship. In 1984, the flame was flown by helicopter to Athens and then to New York after a dispute between Los Angeles Organising Committee representatives and HOC officials over sponsorship of the relay.

A look back at 61 years ago

The Games had been awarded to Tokyo in 1959 and it was clear from the start that the organisers were determined to harness the symbolism of the Olympic Movement. Yoshinori Sakai, the young athlete who lit the final cauldron was even chosen because he had been born on the day the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima.

The journey of the Olympic flame to Tokyo 1964 had been a long time in the planning. German scholar and administrator Carl Diem had visited in 1961. His vision had contributed to the successful inauguration of a torch relay in 1936 for Berlin, and the Japanese were eager to receive his advice. Sadly, Diem died before the Games so he never did see the relay come to fruition.

Veteran choreographer Michio Ito proposed a very ambitious relay that would transport the flame along the historical Silk Road route. This called for runners, horses, and camels in a journey across land that was expected to last a year.[4] Immediately there came a setback to such an ambitious plan.

Mainland China was still in sporting limbo and was not part of the "Olympic Family". The Chinese government made it clear that cooperation would not be forthcoming. In the *Japan Times*, writer Katsundo Mizuno suggested that "Even with the cooperation of communist China, the Silk Road route would involve much difficulty in carrying the torch over mountains of over 5,000 m."

A second plan, which featured the Spice Route, was also suggested. This had "political and geographical advantages." Eventually, a plan to fly the torch to Japan was devised. There would be stopovers in many Asian capitals en route. Even then there were still political problems to be overcome.

North Korean Radio announced that their government had lodged a protest with Tokyo organisers because they had "deliberately left Pyongyang out from the course of the sacred torch relay. Rectify such arbitrary wrongful view" (sic).

In any case, North Korea's participation in the Games themselves was in jeopardy, partly because their athletes had participated in the 1963 Games of New Emerging Forces (GANEFO). These had been organised in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, but were not officially sanctioned by International Federations or the International Olympic Committee.

Organiser Fumio Takashima set off from Tokyo on an inspection tour of the proposed stopovers for the flame. In Hong Kong, a ceremonial torch to be used in the relay was presented to Olympic Association official Arnaldo de Sales.

Back in Japan, organisers revealed the profile they sought for the final runner in the torch relay. "The runner should be a youth of good character. He should be more than 170 cm in height and weight around 65 kg."

Yoshinori Sakai, a first-year student in the education department of Waseda University, "was found to meet all qualifications." His name was made public long before the day of the opening ceremony. Sakai had been born 55 kilometres north of Hiroshima on the fateful day the atomic bomb fell. "Happily, I know nothing of war. I have grown up free from care in the atmosphere of freedom in peace-loving Japan, " he said. Mitsuyasu Ochiai, a third-year student at Meguro High School was picked as Sakai's reserve.

In the meantime, the flame was kindled in a ceremony at Ancient Olympia. The ceremony was choreographed by the legendary Greek theatrical performer Maria Horss. As part of the ritual, the poem *Light of Olympia*, by Greek poet Takis Dokis, was read for the first time. It has been recited at the torch lighting at every ceremony until this year when it was missing from the schedule.[5] High priestess Aleka Katseli kindled the flame from the rays of the sun and was escorted to the stadium by 14 priestesses from the Lyceum Club of Greek Women.

In the stadium King Constantine, a member of the International Olympic Committee, received the first torch. He handed it to the first runner, George Marcellos, a 110 m hurdler who had competed at the Rome Olympics and would do so again in Tokyo.

When the flame reached Athens, it was taken to the Panathinaiko Stadium for the traditional handover. The stadium was almost in darkness as the final bearer approached and passed the flame to King Constantine, who lit a cauldron in the centre of the stadium. The flame was taken to the airport to board the aircraft. Admiral Pyrros Lappas, General Secretary of the Hellenic Olympic Committee, was there to bid farewell to Tokyo organising chief Daigoro Yasukawa and his precious cargo.

The aircraft, named *Spirit of Tokyo*, headed first to Istanbul and from there to Lebanon. When it touched down in Beirut, it was greeted by a gendarme band and a fencing team with foils drawn. Nineteen runners took the flame into the city, where army corporal Elie Naasau lit a cauldron at the top of a diving tower.

In Tehran, the delegation was received by the Shah's brother, Prince Gholam Reza, who was Iran's National Olympic Committee President. The party was also greeted at a banquet by Tehran mayor Dr. Ziaeddin Shademan, who had played for his country's basketball team at the 1948 Olympics.

The Olympic flight continued to Pakistan and India before reaching Rangoon in Burma (Myanmar). U Zaw Weik carried the flame from the airport. A weightlifter, he had taken part in the 1936 Berlin Games and was the first Burmese to do so, although he represented British India. He was the first of 32 runners who took the flame to the Aung San Stadium, where marathoner Myi Tung Naw, an Olympian in 1956 and 1960, lit the cauldron. There was even a football match to mark the occasion.

The flame visited Manila, but as it returned towards continental Asia, Typhoon Ruby struck Hong Kong. The official plane was damaged, delaying progress whilst a replacement was sent. In the meantime, the cauldron used in Hong Kong was auctioned to raise funds for typhoon victims.

Finally, it headed towards Okinawa. At the time, this was still under United States administration, and technically, the flying of the Japanese flag was not permitted without special permission.

Yoshinori Sakai was an international class 400 m runner. He later worked as a sports journalist for the Japanese television station Fuji TV. He died in 2014, aged 69.

Photo: Wolfram Adolphi

Yet the *Japan Times* reported, "Tens of thousands of Japanese flags blossomed everywhere and the band of the United States Air Force struck up a rousing tune."[6]

When the relay officially reached Japanese soil at Kagoshima, 30,000 people were waiting to welcome it. Ritsuko Takahashi, an 18-year-old student, was the first bearer on its journey from the airport to the Kagoshima prefectural office. Over the next few weeks, many teenagers would be asked to carry the flame as part of the symbolic message celebrating the youth of Japan.

With a much shorter time frame than that available in 2020, the relay was split to allow it to reach every prefecture across the country and the constituent parts were reunited in Tokyo.

A few days later, there was an unusual meeting between the high priestess Aleka Katseli and designated cauldron lighter Yoshinori Sakai in Tokyo. Katseli wore the traditional Greek chiton as she greeted Sakai, dressed in his university tracksuit. On the morning of the ceremony, Sakai ate *sekihan* (festive red rice) with his coach before setting out for the stadium.[7] A small group of runners brought the flame from the Imperial Palace to the stadium on the final day. The average age of the participants was 17.

Sakai carried the flame up 163 steps to reach the cauldron. "When I entered the stadium carrying the torch, I was under so much stress that I could not even take a look at the spectators in the stadium. When I ran up the stairs and stood on top of it I could relax. I am glad I fulfilled my duties."

He had dreamed of attending the 2020 opening but he passed away at the age of 69 in 2014, though it is hoped that members of his family will be present for the opening in July. ■

1 Tokyo 2020 media conference, 11 March 2020.
2 Ibid.
3 Speech at flame lighting ceremony, 12 March 2020.
4 *Japan Times*, 20 December 1961.
5 *Japan Times*, 22 August 1964.
6 *Japan Times*, 19 September 1964.
7 Interview conducted for Tokyo 2016 promotion in 2007.

Free Speech for Olympic Athletes

By Richard W. Pound

When critics apply their denouncements with a palette knife or fling them on canvass like Jackson Pollock, intellectual rigouris often lost in the swirl and splash. Similarly, when the operational matrix is "ready – fire – aim," insufficient attention gets paid to context. In the compulsion to shoot, accuracy is sacrificed.

Take the International Olympic Committee's Rule 50 for example. It provides that no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas. A subset of this rule applies to medal presentations and prohibits demonstrations on the podium. There is a perfectly simple explanation for such a rule, but in some quarters, it has been harshly criticized as an unjustifiable incursion on the rights of free speech enjoyed by Olympic athletes. Let's set a few facts in order.

1. The Olympic Games are an international event, now involving some 206 National Olympic Committees (and, by extension, governments), approximately 40 International Sports Federations and, for summer Games, about 11,000 athletes. There are a lot of moving parts, not to mention additional factors such as media, spectators and organisational officials.
2. There are many different and complex international tensions among the 206 countries whose athletes will participate.
3. The Olympic Games are, however, a special phenomenon during which, even if the world as a whole is not working well, there is an oasis at which the youth of the world can gather for peaceful competition, free from the tensions which their elders have created and with which they will be required to cope before and after the Games. Of course, the Games "bubble" will not last, but each time the Olympic Games are celebrated, a small step is taken – if the Games can work, even if only for seventeen days, perhaps, some day, so might the world.
4. Can anyone in today's world provide a better example of international peace and goodwill on such a scale? With a reach and emotional bonding measured in billions of people?

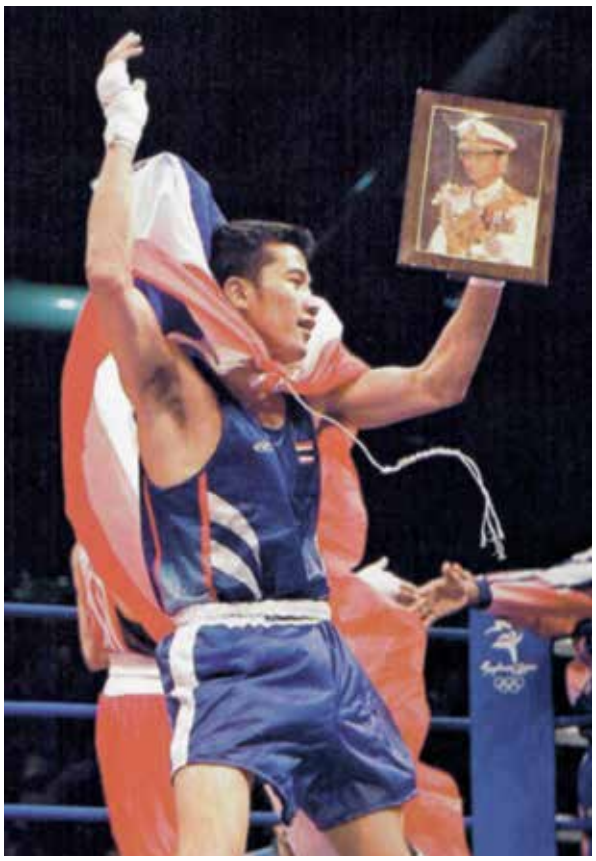
Now, back to Rule 50 and the misguided furore surrounding it.

First, this is not a new rule and, second, it is one wholly consistent with the underlying context of the Olympic Games, during which, politics, religion, race and sexual orientation are set aside. The guidelines causing the furore were produced by athletes themselves, after extensive consultations. It is athletes who bear the risk of losing the moment they have trained for their whole lives by a protest on the podium.

Everyone has the right to political opinion and the freedom to express such opinions. The IOC fully agrees with that principle and has made it absolutely clear that athletes remain free to express their opinions in press conference, in media interviews and on social media. But, in a free society, rights may come with certain limitations. Rule 50 restricts the occasions and places for the exercise of such rights. It does not impinge on the rights themselves. Many other governmental and sporting organisations have similar rules restricting demonstration. Remember too that allowing protests on the podium means accepting all protests, not just those with which you may agree.

As is the case with countries, no organisation is perfect. Some, however, including the IOC, are committed to principles and a spirational goals. The IOC is committed to use sport to bring people together in peaceful circumstances, to use it as part of their overall development and to help expose them to others from around the world. The Games can demonstrate to the world that all things are, indeed, possible, if there is a will to make them happen, tempered by goodwill and mutual respect.

Rule 50 is a reminder that, at the Olympic Games, restraint is an element of that mutual respect. It is entirely appropriate for the IOC, which created the Games, to establish rules that are consistent with the fundamental underlying principles. It is not hubris, as some critics have claimed, but rather a conviction that



Still allowed or already banned? Thailand's Olympic champion Wijan Ponlid with the image of King Bhumibol in the boxing ring at the Games in Sydney.

Photo: PRESSENS BILD, Stockholm

a better world is possible with a balance of rights and concomitant responsibilities.

Those who merely thunder about past mis-steps miss the plot. What is important is the future, informed by the past, but not shackled by it. What is important is what we do next, not preoccupation with opportunities perhaps unrecognised at a particular time.

It is our lot to be living in a highly differentiated world. It is our duty to bring about change, to create consensus on living together in a manner that respects, not condemns, diversity and that accepts the right to be different, understanding that there is no perfect ideology or a one-size-fits-all paradigm. The human equation is too broad for such an ersatz solution.

The Olympic Games are, in themselves, no panacea for all of the challenges that face us. But the principles that give rise to the Games can illuminate a way forward that integrates fundamental humanistic values. Avoiding vengeance, especially misguided vengeance, is an admirable beginning.

Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter codifies that important principle. We all need to be reminded of what we have inherited and, without sacrificing any right to freedom of speech, embrace the special experience of the Olympic Games as a building block for a better future. ■

Rule 50 Guidelines (excerpt)

Where are protests and demonstrations not permitted during the Olympic Games?

- At all Olympic venues, including:
  - On the field of play
  - In the Olympic Village
  - During Olympic medal ceremonies
  - During the Opening, Closing and other official Ceremonies
- Any protest or demonstration outside Olympic venues must obviously comply with local legislation wherever local law forbids such actions.

During the Olympic Games, where do athletes have the opportunity to express their views?

While respecting local laws, athletes have the opportunity to express their opinions, including:

- During press conferences and interviews, i.e. in the mixed zones, in the International Broadcasting Centre (IBC) or the Main Media Centre (MMC)
- At team meetings
- On digital or traditional media, or on other platforms.

It should be noted that expressing views is different from protests and demonstrations. It should be noted, too, that these guidelines are also applicable to any other accredited person (trainers, coaches, officials, etc.).

Here are some examples of what would constitute a protest, as opposed to expressing views (non-exhaustive list):

- Displaying any political messaging, including signs or armbands
- Gestures of a political nature, like a hand gesture or kneeling
- Refusal to follow the Ceremonies protocol.

What happens if an athlete or participant fails to respect these policies?

If an athlete or participant is in breach of Rule 50 and the Olympic Charter, each incident will be evaluated by their respective National Olympic Committee, International Federation and the IOC, and disciplinary action will be taken on a case-by-case basis as necessary.

(Developed by the IOC Athletes' Commission)