

A “U-nique” and Happy Homecoming

By Philip Barker

Grand opening of the 30th Summer Universiade on 3 July in Naples. Special effects were used during the lighting of the cauldron.

Photos: Philip Barker



In many ways, the Universiade in Napoli 2019 proved a homecoming for international student sport. Italy had played a leading role in establishing it during the interwar years and hosted the first major gathering after the Second World War.

Then in 1959, Torino was the host city for the first truly global student games under the aegis of the Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire (FISU) in association with the Centro Universitario Sportivo Italiano (CUSI). Coined by Italian journalist Massimo Della Pergola, the name “Universiade” was designed to give an echo of “Olympiad”, used to describe the Olympic cycle. In a pleasant gesture, Napoli 2019 named their media centre in Della Pergola’s honour.

“Be U-nique” was the motto for the Napoli Games. They opened with a spectacular opening ceremony in the newly renovated Stadio San Paolo, home of the Napoli football club. This was where Diego Maradona had been welcomed by thousands of ecstatic fans when he joined the club in 1984. When Argentina’s team entered the stadium, they unfurled a huge number 10 jersey and the home crowd roared their approval to demonstrate

Maradona’s enduring appeal. In response, Maradona sent messages of support on social media.

The Napoli opening ceremony had echoes of that for the 2006 Winter Olympics. It should not have come as too much of a surprise: both ceremonies were produced by Balich World Wide shows. The arrival of the flame was keenly awaited; it had been lit in Torino a month before. It was conveyed to FISU headquarters in Lausanne and then returned to Italy where it was even greeted by the Pope at the Vatican. To “light” the cauldron, Napoli’s captain Lorenzo Insigne took a “penalty”. He launched a flaming football towards the top of the cauldron designed to resemble Vesuvius and special effects re-created the image of lava. As part of an environmental drive, the flame did not burn throughout the games but was recreated with special effects. In the words of the organisers, “Sustainability is key for the new generation so special effects will be used.”¹

Vesuvius was an enduring theme of the Games. It provided the inspiration for the logo with the volcano serving as the backdrop for the sailing events. Just as at the 1960 Olympics, they were held in the bay.

The first Italian medal also came at the nearby diving pool, renovated for the Games. This was where the legendary Klaus Dibiasi had launched his career with gold at the 1963 Mediterranean Games. Dibiasi was already an Olympic champion by the time he won triple gold at the 1970 Universiade held in Torino. In 2019 he was chosen as a member of the colour party, which carried the FISU flag at the opening ceremony.

As in 1959, the crowded sporting calendar affected the entry for some sports. There was no USA team because the Pan American Games were imminent in 1959. In 2019 many swimmers had prioritized the World Aquatics Championships in South Korea. Even so, the competition remained compelling.

Other events were held throughout the region. The archery was perhaps the most spectacular. The palace located behind the competition is known locally as the Italian Versailles. It was perhaps fitting that the very last gold medal should go to the host nation. The pool came alive to see the Italian men win the water polo.

The Games celebrations marked a number of anniversaries. It was a century ago that the newly formed Confédération internationale des étudiants (CIE) laid the groundwork for international student sport. In 1923, Frenchman Jean Petitjean, a moving spirit in the Paris University Club, organised an international student athletics meeting. It what was essentially a modest gathering; the star attraction was Olympic 100 m champion Charley Paddock who travelled from California to compete.

The initiative was taken on by the Italians in 1927. They hosted a gathering of "those who are foremost in the affairs of student sport".² Visitors also enjoyed a soirée at the Termi di Caracalla, a visit to the Vatican, and even a concert conducted by Pietro Mascagni.

These were followed by World Student Championships described as "a complete innovation on a Roman scale".³

In 1933 the Games returned to Italy. This time they were held in Torino and staged in a stadium named after dictator Benito Mussolini. From then on they took place every two years until war broke out in 1939.

When peace returned, the Italians reorganised their domestic university sport and supported the foundation of the FISU. In 1949 they hosted an international week



Vesuvius looms in the background as sailing boats arrive at the finish of the Universiade regatta.

of university sport in Merano. This included football, basketball, fencing, tennis, and athletics. 56 students from West Germany took part, the first time since the Second World War that Germany had been allowed at an international gathering. "They are mostly new names but will undoubtedly make their presence felt", said the Italian press.⁴

This was the era of the Cold War and even student sport was divided. Teams from the Soviet bloc took part in a separate Student Games organised by the International Union of Students (UIE) and there were to be parallel competitions in the 1950s.

Finally, after a competition in Paris in 1957, there came agreement to bring all nations together in 1959 under the FISU banner. It had been expected that Rome would take on the Games but with the Olympics also on the horizon, the city had other priorities. By March 1958, no decision had been made about the host city, but Italian newspapers reported interest from Bologna, Milan, Palermo, Torino, and Naples.⁵

In the autumn of 1958, Torino was selected to host the 1959 Games.⁶ A leading figure in the organising committee was Primo Nebiolo, later to serve as FISU President and also lead the International Amateur Athletics Federation from 1981 to 1999. According to the official report from 1959, "The preparation period was in our opinion a little too late for obtaining any great success at all."⁷



The torch used for the 1970 Universiade in Torino.



Sailing was held in the Bay of Naples, which had previously witnessed the Olympic regatta during the competitions of 1960.

The centrepiece of the first Universiade was an arena now rechristened "Stadio Comunale". The programme featured athletics, basketball, fencing, swimming, diving, tennis, volleyball, and water polo. The Opening Ceremony was held by night and featuring students in medieval costume.

Instead of a torch relay there was "an unusual relay race with the participation of Italian universities – this relay has as a symbolic end, the aim of obtaining the oath from the honourable rectors of all the Italian universities."⁸

It was described as a "bolla" (bull), a term used to describe messages despatched by the Pope in medieval times. It began its journey at the University of Sassari in Sardinia, where it was signed by rector Pasquale Marginesu. "The transference from one university to another will be effected under the supervision of the presidents of the university sports centres", said the organisers.⁹

The bolla took the form of a giant scroll, which was subsequently signed by the rector of every Italian university. It contained the text of the participants' oath, which was ultimately read aloud by Italian swimmer Paolo Pucci on behalf of his fellow competitors.

"We swear that we will participate loyally and fairly in the Universiade – World Games of University Sports – and we will respect the established regulations, for the glory of student sports and for the honour of our country."¹⁰ Later in the evening, a costumed demonstration of Calcio Storico Fiorentino, a historic Florentine game, set the seal on proceedings.

During the week, basketball and water polo were staged in the evening to "meet spectators' requirements".¹¹ On the track, Italy's future Olympic 200m champion Livio Berruti, a student of chemistry,

completed the sprint double. Guisy Leone achieved the same double in the women's competition and won the Olympic 100 m bronze the following year.

The cultural programme was also introduced. Competitors were encouraged to visit museums and galleries free of charge, and a special circus performance too place. When it was all over, FISU President Paul Schleimer of Luxembourg wrote to the organisers: "The remembrance of the Universiade has never left me. The perfection of the organisation, the splendour of the Opening Ceremony, the kindness in welcoming the athletes, the generosity of the Italian public, it made a university sport manifestation with no equal so far."¹²

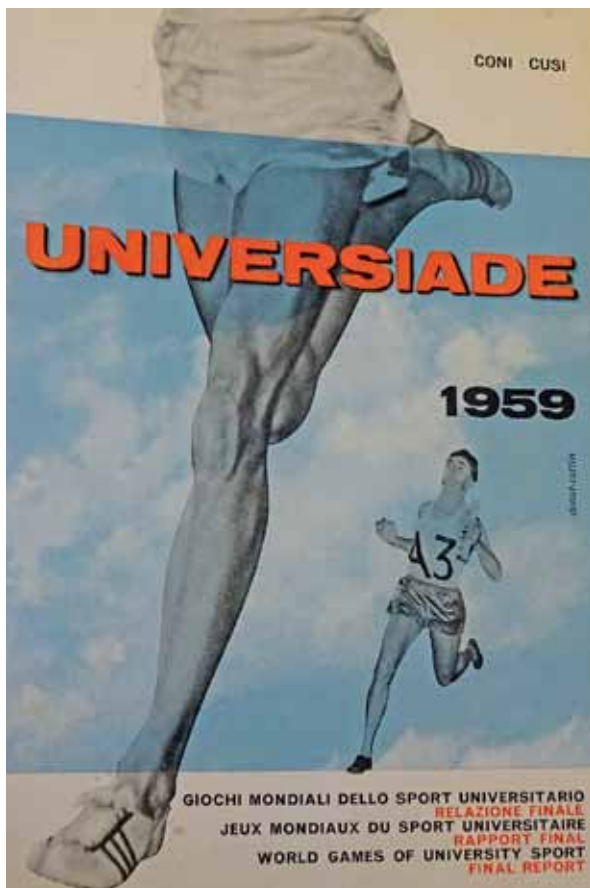
The following year the first official FISU Winter Universiade was held in the French resort of Chamonix. The choice of Sofia as host city for the second Summer Universiade in 1961 was significant. No Eastern bloc nation had yet hosted a major global multi-sport event. A torch relay was introduced for the first time.

Starting at the Golden Sands resort in Varna, it was first taken to Plovdiv, a journey of some 375 km. On its way, the column of cars and motorcycles transporting the torch was greeted enthusiastically by crowds.¹³ When it finally arrived in Sofia, a group of runners carried the torch into the Vasil Levski National Stadium. The cauldron was lit by Dimitar Khlebarov, who went on to win gold in the pole vault.

During those Games, Italy's Primo Nebiolo succeeded Paul Schleimer as FISU president. Nebiolo's tenure

HOST CITIES OF THE UNIVERSIADE

Summer	Winter
1959 Torino (ITA)	1960 Chamonix (FRA)
1961 Sofia (BUL)	1962 Villars (SUI)
1963 Porto Alegre (BRA)	1964 Špindlerův Mlýn (TCH)
1965 Budapest (HUN)	1966 Sestriere (ITA)
1967 Tokyo (JPN)	1968 Innsbruck (AUT)
1970 Torino (ITA)	1970 Rovaniemi (FIN)
1973 Moscow (URS)	1972 Lake Placid (USA)
1975 Rome (ITA)	1975 Livigno (ITA)
1977 Sofia (BUL)	1978 Špindlerův Mlýn (TCH)
1979 Mexico City (MEX)	1981 Jaca (ESP)
1981 Bucharest (ROM)	1983 Sofia (BUL)
1983 Edmonton (CAN)	1985 Belluno (ITA)
1985 Kobe (JPN)	1987 Štrbské Pleso (TCH)
1987 Zagreb (YUG/CRO)	1989 Sofia (BUL)
1989 Duisburg (FRG)	1991 Sapporo (JPN)
1991 Sheffield (GBR)	1993 Zakopane (POL)
1993 Buffalo (USA)	1995 Jaca (ESP)
1995 Fukuoka (JPN)	1997 Muju Chonju (KOR)
1997 Sicily (ITA)	1999 Poprad-Tatry (SVK)
1999 Mallorca (ESP)	2001 Zakopane (POL)
2001 Beijing (CHN)	2003 Tarvisio (ITA)
2003 Daegu (KOR)	2005 Innsbruck (AUT)
2005 Izmir (TUR)	2007 Torino (ITA)
2007 Bangkok (THA)	2009 Harbin (CHN)
2009 Belgrade (SRB)	2011 Ezerum (TUR)
2011 Shenzhen (CHN)	2013 Trentino (ITA)
2013 Kazan (RUS)	2015 Štrbské Pleso (SVK)
2015 Gwanju (KOR)	Granada (ESP)
2017 Taipei (TPE)	2017 Almaty (KAZ)
2019 Napoli (ITA)	2019 Krasnoyarsk (RUS)



Publications from Torino: the official report of the 1959 Universiade and a magazine to promote the 1970 event.

as president lasted until his death in 1999. He was instrumental in the reintegration of the People's Republic of China (PRC) at a time when there was still a bitter Olympic dispute between the two Chinas about Olympic recognition. Nebiolo's influence enabled the PRC to take part in the 1975 Universiade held in Rome.

By this time, Moscow had also staged a Universiade. Their event in 1973 was viewed by many as a proving ground before they put their bid for the 1980 Olympics before the IOC the following year.

The official reports of the Universiades in the early 1970s were able to claim with some justification "the standard of competition was extremely high."¹⁴ In 1970 East German pole vaulter Wolfgang Nordwig set a world record at the Torino Games as a prelude to Olympic success two years later in Munich. His feat was emulated West Germany's Heide Rosendahl in the long jump. Her victory also foreshadowed Olympic victory at the same Games.

Pietro Mennea first won Universiade gold on his home track in Rome at the 1975 Games and then set a longstanding 200 m world record at the 1979 Games in Mexico City.

In gymnastics, the Russian Nikolai Andrianov became the most successful male gymnast of all time and added Universiade gold to his collection at Moscow 1973. Olga Korbut inevitably dominated the headlines in the women's competition. Nadia Comăneci of Romania set

the seal on her career with gold at the 1981 Universiade in Bucharest.

Basketball luminaries such as Alexander Belov, Michael Jordan, and Charles Barkley also graced the Universiade court. In swimming, Gregorio Paltrinieri of Italy won gold either side of his 1,500 m freestyle victory at Rio 2016.

Since 1959, the Italians have staged the Summer Universiade on a further four occasions, twice as emergency hosts, and have also hosted the Winter Universiade on a regular basis.

"We are very proud of Italy's part. We have to say thank you to a lot of people but especially to Primo Nebiolo"¹⁵ insisted Andrea Ippolito of the Centro Universitario Sportivo Italiano (CUSI), a FISU ambassador. ■

- 1 Universiade Napoli 2019, press conference, 2 July 2019.
- 2 Manchester Guardian, 29 August 1927.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Corriere della Sera, 28 August 1949.
- 5 Ibid., 15 March 1958.
- 6 Ibid., 27 September 1958.
- 7 Universiade 1959, Official Report CONI CUSI, p. 74.
- 8 Universiade Torino 1959 Organising Committee, information bulletin undated.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Corriere della Sera, 27 August 1959.
- 11 FISU Universiade 1959, p. 81.
- 12 Paul Schleimer, letter to Primo Nebiolo, 2 October 1939.
- 13 Vecherni Novini, Sofia, 26 August 1961.
- 14 Universiade Torino 1970 Organizing Committee.
- 15 Interview with author, May 2019.