

1, 2, 3 ... "Hitting for the Cycle" Olympic Style!

By Brian Carberry



The Swedish shooter Ragnar Skanåker participated in seven Games. At his debut in 1972 he won gold. In 1996 he ended his career with 25th and 26th places. In between came the silver of 1984 (photo). Four years later he also took silver, in 1992 bronze.

To win one Olympic medal each colour and to make the, and making the podium in at least three successive competitions has a natural symmetry all of its own.

When a baseball player hits a single, a double, a triple, and a homerun in the same game, it is referred to as "Hitting for the Cycle". In the history of US Major League Baseball, the feat has been accomplished on 300 occasions, as of October 29, 2012.

Olympians who win a bronze, silver, and gold medal in the same sport, event, and discipline over the course of their Olympic career should surely be acclaimed in similar fashion.

By February 7, 2014, the first day of the Sochi Winter Olympics, there will have been 144 occurrences in which an athlete has won medals "for the Cycle" in modern

Olympic history. (including both the Summer and Winter Games). Seventeen (18 %) of these cycles were achieved at London 2012.

Natural Cycles

The achievement highlights the increased proficiency over an Olympian's career. Assuming all athletes aspire to place as high as possible when competing in the Olympics, winning a bronze medal to complete an Olympic Medal Cycle may be "less rewarding" to the Olympian who was hoping for a medal of another colour. As with hits in baseball, the medals need not be won in any specific order; they just need to be won in the same sport, event, and discipline over the athlete's career.

In baseball parlance, hitting a single, a double, a triple, and a homerun in that order over the course of one game is referred to as a "Natural Cycle". So in Olympic events for a "Natural Cycle". The medals have to be won in the successive order of bronze, silver, and then gold. Of the 144 occurrences to date, 27 or 18.8 % have been Natural Cycles.

In aggregate, an examination of those who achieved the Olympic Medal Cycle in the same sport, event, and discipline provides notable and interesting insights to Olympic history.

Defining a Cycle

Careful consideration for inclusion was given, especially with regards to defining when an athlete had competed in the same sport, event, and discipline in successively staged Olympic Games. In many cases, for example ice hockey (women's team) or athletics (men's long jump), this determination is rather straightforward. In other instances, it is not so clear.

In the sports that have their event and disciplines defined by weight class (boxing, judo, taekwondo, weightlifting and wrestling), a review was made of each athlete in these sports who had won at least one medal of each colour.

Those included in the list of Olympic Medal Cycles were determined to have achieved the feat in three independent stagings of the same sport, discipline, and event. Winning medals in two distinctly different



Four Hungarian sabre fencers – 21 Olympic gold medals. Aladár Gerevich (1910–1991) is the only athlete who was able to be Olympic champion with his team six times consecutively, from 1936 to 1960. He won his second gold medal in 1948 in the individual competition. Pál Kovács (1912–1995) reached a total of six golds, among them five team victories (1936–1960), György Jekelfalussy-Piller (1899–1960) was in 1932 Olympic individual and team champion, Rudolf Kárpáti (1920–1999) secured four team victories from 1948 to 1960 and in 1956 and 1960 won the individual event (from left to right).

weight-classes in different Olympic Games was determined as having done so in different events.

Also, a weight classification addition or subtraction between two remaining baseline weight classifications in successive Olympics constitutes a different division; therefore, a different discipline category within the same sport. Athletes who moved into or out of one of these intermediate weight-classifications en-route to obtaining three different coloured Olympic medals are not considered to have achieved the feat. (Those affected include: weightlifting: Mohammad Nassiri (IRI), Nikolay Peshalov (BUL/CRO), Norb Schemansky (USA), Nicu Vlad (ROM), and Ronny Weller (GDR/GER); judo: Kye Sun Hue (PRK), and Angelo Parisi (FRA/GBR).

Gender Exclusivity or Gender Equity

Another area of clarification is in Olympic sports that do not now or have not historically had separate events and disciplines for each gender. In the case of equestrian team dressage-mixed and equestrian team jumping-mixed, whether females competed or not is moot as there were no separate male/female events

The events and disciplines within equestrianism were open to female competitors or “mixed” during the Olympics that these athletes completed the Olympic Medal Cycle in their respective events of team dressage and team jumping (Prix des Nations).

Equestrian events were “mixed” in the 1900 Paris Olympic Games, not held again until the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games, and thereafter remained open to only male commissioned military officers up to and including the 1948 London Summer Olympic Games.

From the 1952 Helsinki Games onwards, equestrian events have been open to any male or female athlete whether they were part of the military or a civilian. Mixed teams have competed in dressage events since 1952 and jumping events since 1956. Equestrianism has remained a “mixed” sport ever since.

After the 1992 Albertville Winter Olympics, the event and discipline of the two-seater luge changed from

one exclusively for men to a “mixed” event. As no females entered the competition for luge two-seater – mixed in the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics, it was determined the Olympic Medal Cycles achieved by Jan Behrendt (GER) and Stefan Krause (GER) should be considered valid.

It is acknowledged that although no females entered this event in 1994, the very fact that they could have done so makes this competition somewhat distinct from the previously contested events which were open exclusively to men. The pool of potential competitors in the event was effectively doubled.

The case of shooter Ragnar Skanåker (SWE) highlights the issue of gender exclusivity. At first glance, it appears that he achieved the “Cycle” in 50 m free pistol. He won gold at the 1972 Games, silver in both 1984 and 1988, and completed the would-be-Cycle by winning a bronze in 1992. From 1976 to 1980, he was up against both men and women.

Events and disciplines within the Olympic sport of shooting were “men only” up to and including 1964. From the 1968 Mexico City Games onwards, all disciplines and events within the sport of shooting were open to male and female competitors or “mixed” events. In 1984, separate events for men and women were introduced were held in all of the shooting disciplines except shotgun. After 1992 these too were made separate events. His record in the event during this period was: 1972 – 1st, 1976 – 5th, 1980 – 7th. When the event became “men only” after 1980, Skanåker’s record in the event: 1984 – 2nd, 1988 – 2nd, 1992 – 3rd, 1996 – 25th.

His finishing position during the “mixed” competitions was on average just outside the medals. In competitions for “men only” he usually made the podium.

In 1972, 1976, and 1980, three different women competed in the 50 m free pistol. Their results are as follows:

Alferdita Tusha (ALB)	1972 – 51 st
Anne Goffin (BEL)	1976 – 43 rd
Maureen Reichert (ZIM)	1980 – 28 th

The “Cycle” of German speed skater Claudia Pechstein (in the photo after her win in Turin) extends from 1992 to 2006. When she won a medal each time over 5000 m, including three golds. In total she won nine medals (five gold, two each of silver and bronze). In 2009 she was banned for two years by the ISU because of indirect evidence. She returned in 2011 and hopes to be at the start in Sochi in 2014.



The average finish of a female competitor during the three “mixed period” Olympics in which Skanåker competed was 40.7.

The argument is an academic one, but should Skanåker be credited with competing in the same sport, event, and discipline across his medal cycle when he won two medals only after the discipline and event became exclusive to male competitors?

Using the reasoning that intermediate weight class inclusions and subtractions add to or subtract from to the pool of potential competitors across different Olympics, one would have to say no, these are not the same events and disciplines. He did however finish ahead of the women in all three “mixed” competitions so it could be argued that he had indeed completed “the cycle.”

The Olympic career of the Italian bob sportsman Eugenio Monti (1928–2003) extended from 1956 to 1968. He won two each of silver (1956), bronze (1964) and gold (1968). In 1960 there was no bob competition. Photo: after the victory in 1968 in the two-man bob with his brakeman Luciano de Paolis.



Art Competitions

At the 1936 Berlin Games, Alex Walter Diggelmann (SUI) won gold in the Olympic Art Competition for painting and graphic arts – mixed for his travel poster titled Arosa I.

Twelve years later, at the 1948 London Summer Olympic Games, Diggelman entered the same Olympic Art Competition of painting and graphic arts – mixed with two posters for consideration. He won the silver medal for a poster aptly titled world championship for cycling. Also, in the same event and discipline at these same Olympic Games he won the bronze for the poster titled world championship for ice hockey. At the 1948 Summer Olympics, the judges withheld a gold medal in the mixed painting and graphic arts competition. While Diggelmann’s accomplishment is technically a completion of the Olympic Medal Cycle, his connection to the feat is thin at best.

Equine Athletes

In equestrian events, horses compete with their riders. Horses are subject to drug testing, age restrictions, travel, training, and are at the very least an integral part of the competition. The IOC does not recognize equine athletes as Olympians. When a rider wins a medal, the horse is not recognized in the same way, but this is surely unfair to the horse.

For this reason, this report includes the horse Ikhor (URS) as having achieved the “Cycle” at the Olympic Games. With rider Ivan Kizimov (URS), Ikhor achieved three different-coloured medals in the team dressage.

Additional Findings

Of the 144 cycles two Olympians went a step further. Eugenio Monti (ITA) completed the cycle in both two-man and four-man bobsleigh. He won his medals in identical order for both 1956 (silver), 1964 (bronze) and 1968 (gold). Speed skater Claudia Pechstein (GER) achieved a natural cycle in the women's 3000 metres: 1994 (bronze), 1998 (silver), and 2002 (gold) and in the 5000 metres: 1992 (bronze), 1994 (gold), 1998 (gold), 2002 (gold), and 2006 (silver).

No athlete has yet accomplished a "Double Cycle", which would be defined as having won two Olympic gold, silver, and bronze medals in the same sport, event, and discipline at the Olympic Games. However, there are two men with five Olympic medals have the chance to do so in the next two Winter and Summer Olympic Games respectively.

Armin Zöggeler (ITA) achieved a natural cycle in the men's luge. He began with bronze in 1994 followed by silver (1998) and then gold in 2002. He followed this with a further gold in 2006 and bronze in 2010. So all he needs only a silver to complete another cycle.

Canoeist Michal Martikán (SVK) needs another bronze medal Rio from the men's Canadian singles slalom to complete a second cycle. Martikán won a bronze in the 2012 London Summer Olympics to complete one cycle. His full record reads 1996 (gold), 2000 (silver), 2004 (silver), 2008 (gold), and 2012 (bronze).

Olympians completing "the Cycle" and with three or more consecutive gold medals: Ten Olympians have so far accomplished both feats in a sport, event and discipline. Of these, four accomplished both feats in the same sport, event and discipline. They are Valentina Vezzali (ITA), Elena Georgescu-Nedelcu (ROM), Claudia Pechstein (GER), and Hans Günter Winkler (GER).

By winning the individual foil bronze in London 2012 fencer Valentina Vezzali (ITA) completed the cycle in fencing. Her bronze medal ended her hopes of four consecutive gold medals. Elena Georgescu-Nedelcu won bronze in the women's eight in 2008. 2008 Beijing to complete the cycle. She had previously won three Olympic golds in succession. Speed skater Claudia Pechstein (GER) completed her cycle with 5000 metres silver in 2006. This came after three successive golds. Show jumper Hans Günter Winkler (GER) won three successive team jumping golds. By winning a silver medal in the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympic Games, he completed the cycle. His bronze medal had come in 1968, preventing him from winning four gold medals in a row.

Six Olympians have completed the "Cycle" and won three successive golds in different events within the same sport. Michael Phelps (USA) did so at the 2012 London Summer Olympics in an unprecedented four different swimming disciplines (men's 4 x 200 metres relay,



100 metres butterfly, 200 meters individual medley, and 4 x 100 metres medley relay). In 4 x 100 metres freestyle relay, Phelps won a silver medal to complete the Olympic medal cycle at these same Games.

Diver Wu Minxia (CHN) won her third successive gold medal in the synchronized springboard. In the springboard at those same Games, she won a gold to complete the cycle. Jason Lezak (USA) won gold at the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics for the third consecutive, men's 4 x 100 meters medley relay. His 4 x 100 metres freestyle relay gold at those same Games completed his medal cycle. Fencer Giovanni Trillini (ITA) earned her third consecutive gold medal at the 2000 Sydney Games in women's team foil team. Four years later in 2004, she completed her "Cycle" with a silver medal in fencing, women's foil.

The German horseman Hans Günter Winkler had between 1956 (in the photo on "Halla" in Stockholm) and 1976 a series of six Olympic participations. He achieved five golds, a silver and a bronze. His active career did not end until the 13th July 1986 after more than 1000 victories.



With 18 Olympic medals the Soviet gymnast Larissa Latynina was for many years the most successful competitor, until she was overtaken by the US swimmer Michael Phelps in 2012. The Ukrainian won three times each between 1956 and 1964 with the team and on the floor. Altogether she attained nine Olympic victories.

The Olympic Cycle of the Belgian fencer Paul Anspach (1882–1981 (on the photo left) extended over four Olympiads or 16 years. In 1908 with the épée team he won bronze, in 1912 individual and team gold, in 1920 and 1924 team silver. Next to him the Italian Nedo Nadi (1894–1940), 18 at the time, who won the foil fencing in Stockholm. In 1920 he achieved five gold medals, and was only absent from the épée individual event.



Larissa Latynina (URS) won gold medals at the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics in the two gymnastics events of women's team and floor exercises. In each case it was her third consecutive gold medal. At those same Olympics, she also won a silver medal in gymnastics horse vault to complete an Olympic Medal Cycle in that event.

Legendary Hungarian fencer Aladár Gerevich completed the cycle with his silver medal in the individual sabre in 1952. Gerevich remains the only Olympian to win a gold medal on six consecutive occasions (A feat accomplished in the men's team sabre).

Four Olympians have combined three consecutive gold medals with "hitting for the cycle" at the same Games. Claudia Pechstein (GER) 2002, Jason Lezak (USA) 2008, Wu Minxia (CHN) 2012 and Michael Phelps (USA) 2012.

Statistics

There are 91 males and 52 females have hit this cycle and in addition one horse. Of these, 53 were accomplished in individual sports and disciplines (43 summer, ten winter), while 91 achieved the feat in a team sport and discipline (72 summer, 19 winter).

The first Olympian to do so was fencer Paul Anspach (BEL) in the men's team épée on August 20, 1920, at the

Antwerp Games. The most recent to achieve the feat was boxer Roberto Cammarelle (ITA) in men's super-heavy-weight +91 kg division at London 2012.

17 fencers have accomplished the feat. This is more than in any other sport. 17 Germans have achieved this, more than any other nation.

Conclusion

The six Olympic Games that have yielded most instances of an Olympic Medal Cycle are as follows:

Beijing 2008	22
London 2012	17
Munich 1972	14
Montreal 1976	11
Sydney 2000	8
Turin 2006	8

The medal cycles achieved at these six Olympic Games account for 55.6 % or over half of all the Olympic Medal Cycles up to and including London 2012.

It may be asserted that longer Olympic careers, a progression of additional events contested as part of the Olympic program, and greater competitive parity have contributed to more Olympic medal cycles in the last forty years. However, there does not appear to be any linear rationale to the presentation of the phenomena.

Winning medals "for the Cycle" is an impressive feat worthy of distinction. To achieve the feat, an individual or team must have been at the top for a dozen years. It should also be remembered that many great Olympians do not feature in these lists. Many won gold and only gold in their careers. ■

Sources

Wallechinsky, David/Loucky, Jamie, The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics (2012 edtn.).
 Ibid, The Complete Book of the Winter Olympics (2010 edtn.).
 Journal of Olympic History, Special Edition "Olympic Art Contests", Vol. 14, May 2006.
www.olympedia.org
www.databaseolympics.com
www.sports-reference.com/olympics
www.retrosheet.org

The author also wishes to acknowledge the help provided by the following: Michael Bowlby, April Carberry, Jeroen Heijmans, Bill Mallon, William Platt, Richard Stanton, Stephan Wassong, Nicholas Wolaver.

Brian Carberry added a table to his article, but it is so extensive that it cannot be published even on a double page of the Journal. Interested readers can therefore get in touch directly with the author, who will certainly send them the table. His email: JBCar1996@aol.com.