

WRESTLERS WHO HAVE CARRIED THEIR NATION’S FLAG IN THE OLYMPICS

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Among the leading honors of the Olympic Games is being chosen to carry the Olympic torch, lead the nation’s team into the stadium during the opening ceremonies while carrying the country’s flag, or to speak the oath of the athletes. Many of the most famous athletes have received these honors. An athlete’s selection as the flag bearer for the parade of nations during the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games is a profound distinction and honor. As I watched the ceremonies of the London Games of 2012, I was struck by the number of wrestlers there were being mentioned as their nation’s flag bearer. This prompted me to do some further research regarding the history of this tradition, as well as how wrestlers have been involved in this tradition.

The opening ceremony marks the beginning of the new Olympic Games and has grown to be an eagerly anticipated event. The various rituals of the Olympic Games are best understood not as recoveries of Ancient Greek ritual but as inventions of tradition. The Olympic Oath-taking ceremony and the Olympic flag were not introduced until 1920, and the first Olympic Village in 1932. The torch relay is a case in point. It was first introduced in the 1936 Olympics—the “Nazi” Olympics, as a means of linking symbolically the project of constructing a Germanic culture rooted in proclamations of Aryan supremacy to the Hellenic culture of the ancient Greeks. The torch relay became a permanent fixture (2).

The 1908 London Games were the first to use a procession. This was the first Olympic Games opening ceremony with a March of the athletes in which they carried the flags of their countries (2). This was further codified through modifications to the “Olympic Charter” adopted by the 86th Session of the IOC in 1983, “The flag bearers of all countries shall advance and form a semicircle around the rostrum; an athlete of the country where the Olympic Games are taking place shall then advance to the rostrum; he shall mount the rostrum and holding a corner of the Olympic flag in his left hand, and removing his hat, shall raise his right hand and take the following oath on behalf of all the athletes...”

Wrestling was contested in the Olympic Games of 776 BC, and was on the program of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens, in 1896. It has since been part of every Olympic Games, except for Paris in 1900, and wrestlers have certainly had the opportunity to be named as flag bearers. It is evidence of the esteem and respect that wrestlers command amongst their peers that 71 wrestlers have been given this honor. Heavyweight wrestlers are well-represented in this group, and the apex of this might have been the 1996 Atlanta Games where two of the most decorated heavyweights in Olympic history, Bruce Baumgartner and Alexander Karelin each led their teams in the opening procession.

In related honors, Daniel Robin, a world wrestling champion from France, brought the Olympic Flame to the entry of the stadium (penultimate bearer) for the opening ceremony of the winter Olympics in Grenoble in 1968 and was the last Olympic Torchbearer at the closing ceremony of the same winter Olympic Games. Rulon Gardner carried the American flag in the closing ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Games.

Wrestlers as Flag Bearers in the Opening Ceremonies of the Olympics

1928 - Amsterdam	Alberts Zvejnieks of Latvia
1932 - Los Angeles	Georg Gehring Germany Osvald Käpp of Estonia
1936 - Berlin	Josef Klapuchof of Czechoslovakia
1956 - Melbourne	Hamit Kaplan of Turkey Zdenek Růžička of Czechoslovakia Shozo Sasahara of Japan Robert Steckle of Canada

1960 - Rome	Jiří Kormaník Czechoslovakia
1968 - Mexico City	Abolfazl Anvari of Iran Khorloogiin Bayanmönkh of Mongolia Wilfried Dietrich W. Germany Gürbüz Lü of Turkey Branislav Simić of Yugoslavia
1972 - Munich	Harald Barlie of Norway Ghulam Dastagir of Afghanistan Bazarragchaagiin Jamsran of Mongolia Alexander Medved of USSR Abdollah Movahed of Iran Robert N'Diaye of Senegal Gıyasettin Yılmaz of Turkey
1976 - Montreal	Jan Karlsson of Sweden Moslem Eskandar-Filabi of Iran Nicolae Martinescu of Romania Zevegiin Oidov of Mongolia Aleksandar Tomov of Bulgaria
1980 - Moscow	Vasile Andre of Romania Nikolay Balboshin of USSR Czesław Kwieciński of Poland Zevegiin Duvchin of Mongolia Vítězslav Mácha of Czechoslovakia
1984 - Los Angeles	Joseph Atiyeh of Syria Oumar Samba Sy of Mauritania
1988 - Seoul	Vasile Andre of Romania Bogdan Daras of Poland Babis Holidis of Greece Gustavo Manzur of El Salvador Navind Ramsaran of Mauritius Jouko Salomäki of Finland Kartar Dhillon Singh of India Oumar Samba Sy of Mauritania
1992 - Barcelona	Magdiel Gutiérrez of Nicaragua Tibor Komáromi of Hungary Harri Koskela of Finland Héctor Milián of Cuba Alireza Soleimani of Iran
1996 - Atlanta	Bruce Baumgartner of the USA Alexander Karelin of Russia Jozef Lohyňa of Slovakia Rozy Rejepov of Turkmenistan Dolgorsürengiin Sumiya abazar of Mongolia
2000 - Sydney	Namig Abdullayev of Azerbaijan Omrane Ayari of Tunisia Haykaz Galstyan of Armenia Amir Reza Khadem of Iran Sergey Lishtvan of Belarus Badmaanyambuugiin Bat-Erdene of Mongolia Raatbek Sanatbayev of Kyrgyzstan Hamza Yerlikaya of Turkey Andrei Wronski of Poland
2004 - Athens	Leopoldina Ross Davyes of Guinea-Bissau Kyoko Hamaguchi of Japan Alexander Medved of Belarus John Tarkong of Palau
2008 - Beijing	Sixto César Barrera Ochoa of Peru Nicolae Ceban of Moldova Elgin Loren Elwais of Palau Karam Gaber of Egypt Farid Mansurov of Azerbaijan Ramaz Nozadze of Georgia Mehmet Ozal of Turkey Sahit Prizreni of Albania

2012 - London	Anabel Laure Ali of Cameroon Mijian Lopez Nunez of Cuba Maria McQueen Dunn of Guam Sinivie Boltic of Nigeria Augusto Midana of Guinea-Bissau Sushil Kumar of India Saori Yoshida of Japan Nurmakhan Tinaliyev of Kazakhstan
2016 – Rio	Mijian Lopez Nunez of Cuba Augusto Midana of Guinea-Bissau Asnage Castelly of Haiti Nicolae Ceban of Moldova Florian Skilang Temengil of Palau Jaime Yusept Espinal Fajardo of Puerto Rico Isabelle Sambou of Senegal Riza Kayaalp of Turkey
2021 Tokyo	Mijain Lopez of Cuba Joseph Essombe of Cameroon Odunayo Adekuoroye of Nigeria Yui Susaki of Japan Myles Amine of San Marino

Espy (1) has stated that, “The Modern Olympic Games symbolize the struggle between man’s ideals and the reality within which he must live.” This reality is often manifested in nationalistic aggression and conflict. We can keep the athletes at the center of our work by making every effort to emphasize the humanity of our athletes through symbolic gestures and rituals in which they are center stage. We can take pride in the achievements of the athletes as they represent our nations, as well as how our athletes represent our sports. We must do this not with a sense of superiority, but as a celebration of excellence!



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2. Whannel, Gary *Caught in the Spotlight: Media Themes in the Build-up to the Beijing Olympic Games* Pathways: Critiques and Discourse in Olympic Research, Ninth International Symposium for Olympic Research 2008 p. 247-255.
3. Modifications to the Olympic Charter adopted by the 86th Session *Olympic Review*, 1983 April No. 186 p. 204-215



Daniel Robin (FRA) in opening ceremonies in Grenoble Winter Games 1968



Rulon Gardner (USA) and flag in closing ceremonies in Sydney Games