

Visualizing world peace through the Olympic truce

By [Amy Bass](#)

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At the ancient Olympic Games, the Greeks grounded their athletic endeavors in their polytheism. Starting with the first foot race in 776 BC in the sacred space of Olympia, men—all men, though regardless of wealth or stature—saw athletic competition as a means of honoring the Olympian gods, particularly Zeus. Through their physical accomplishments, the humans believed they could gain some sort of immortality.

The connections between body and soul seem endless. What made the ancient Olympics unique, however, is how those religious rituals connected directly to the diplomatic relations of the day. Central to their creation was the spirit of *ekecheiria*, or truce. In an effort to stop the ongoing wars of the Greek states, King Iphitos consulted the oracle at Delphi, which advised him to introduce sport every four years as a means to disrupt the cycle of wars. The truce—which lasted months—allowed safe travel for athletes and spectators to and from the games, suspended the death penalty, ended wars for a time and made it possible to visualize peace.

The ancient games came to an end in 393 when [Emperor Theodosius](#), a Christian, banned all pagan cults, including athletics. But when [Baron Pierre de Coubertin](#) revived the idea of the Olympics in the late 19th century, their potential impact on global relations was not lost on him. Various rituals and ceremonies saturate the modern version of the Olympics, helping to create the necessary transformation that separates the everyday—and all of the conflict that accompanies it—from the Olympic.

As the [Winter Games in Sochi, Russia](#), grow near, the swelling conversations regarding sexuality, terrorism, environmentalism and human rights make it hard to find the beauty that hopefully remains possible with any Olympics. Each and every Olympic Games is wrought with political turmoil, whether it be the overt white supremacist ideologies of [Berlin in 1936](#), the terrorist conflict in [Munich in 1972](#), or the U.S. boycott of the [Moscow Olympics](#) in 1980 and the Soviet boycott of the [Los](#)

[Angeles Olympics](#) in 1984. There are also the economic difficulties that can drown host cities, along with the ethical dilemmas of doping, team selection and outright cheating. (Did you watch [badminton in London](#) in 2012?)

But the spirit of the ancient games remains, even if it is sometimes hard to find. In 1992, the International Olympic Committee began [an initiative](#) to more directly reincorporate the concept of ekecheiria into the modern Olympics, to ensure the safety of athletes and “to encourage searching for peaceful and diplomatic solutions to the conflicts around the world”—with a specific emphasis on using “sport to establish contacts between communities in conflict” and creating “opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation.”

There is much to criticize about the IOC and the global party it throws every two years: elitism and aristocracy, the domination of industrialized nations, corporate greed and flagrant bouts of political fence-sitting, whether with Nazi policies in Germany in the 1930s or the recent [homophobic legislation in Russia](#). However, the IOC has not just paid lip service to the concept of ekecheiria. For example, after much internal back-and-forth and a lot of global pressure, the [IOC took a stance against apartheid South Africa in 1968](#) and held fast on the issue until the racist political structure fell. It banned Afghanistan from competition when the Taliban took power. And the IOC successfully appealed to the United Nations to allow athletes from Yugoslavia to compete in [Barcelona in 1992](#)—and currently allows for [independent identities](#) to exist for peoples from places such as Puerto Rico, East Timor and Palestine.

In 1993, upon the IOC’s appeal, [the UN General Assembly asked its members to observe the Olympic truce](#). Every two years since then, the UN has renewed the resolution, in hopes of “building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal.” The IOC created the [International Olympic Truce Foundation](#) in 2000 with similar goals.

Of course, global conflict does not cease because of the Olympic Games, just as two weeks of athletics every four years did little to make the ancient Greeks permanently put down their swords. Indeed, in many ways, the Olympics spotlight all that is wrong with the world, demonstrating just how different we all are and making it seem impossible for peace to exist, even for two weeks.

At Sochi—on the heels of [bombings in Russian cities](#) such as Volgograd—media attention to the various threats from Islamist groups such as Vilayat Dagestan, which warns of more “surprises” for visitors and athletes alike, has turned eyes in every direction except peace. Where might there be space for ekecheiria at these games?

Again, the Olympics, without question, are flawed. But when—if—you watch the Winter Games in Sochi, take a moment to think about the rare opportunity they give us to look at who we are, what we do, how we perceive others and how they might perceive us. Good, bad or ugly, there is something to be said for the kind of global experience one gains from the Olympics. [From the Parade of Nations in the opening ceremony](#) to the joyous congregations of athletes mixing together at the closing, the world gets a sense of what it at least looks like for thousands of people from around the globe to come together.

The oracle at Delphi asked King Ifitos to imagine what peace looked like through the spirit of ekecheiria. And if we do not at least do that, how will we know when, or if, peace ever arrives?

This post was corrected Jan. 29, 2014.