



## 80 Years As Olympic Timekeeper – Looking back... and Forward

### KEYWORDS

Omega's timekeeping, world records, athletes, performance.

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**ABSTRACT** *The first stopwatch, developed in 1898, measured times to the nearest 1/5th of a second. A combination of timing devices with between one and four units, as was used around 1940. An electromechanically controlled briefcase containing six stopwatches, as used in the 1920s*

For the Europeans, the Olympic adventure started with a long journey by boat, the sprinters used little shovels to dig their own starting holes in the cinder track, the sturdiness of the wooden hurdles meant that it was still inadvisable to collide with them and 24 judges were needed to establish the finishing order of the swimmers – a system that was destined to remain in place and form the subject of numerous discussions for a long time afterwards. Nevertheless, in many ways the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles represented a step into the modern era. The three-level winners' podium was introduced, boxing referees stood in the ring for the first time and, most importantly, responsibility for Olympic timekeeping was assigned to a single company – OMEGA, for the first time. Thirty stopwatches and one watchmaker were sufficient for the task. According to the letter of thanks received from Sports Technical Director, William M. Henry, their work was "highly satisfactory".

The result must also have pleased the International Olympic Committee (IOC) insofar as many more contracts have followed up to Turin 2006, enabling OMEGA to look back at 75 years and 22 editions of the Olympic Games as the Official Olympic Timekeeper. Then there were the Swatch years from 1996 to 2004. And there is no end in sight: Beijing, Vancouver (winter) and London await as the next challenges, which will also include responsibility for data handling inside the stadiums, a task first assumed at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. The Swatch Group's contract with the IOC lasts until 2012, when a new landmark will be celebrated: 25 editions over 80 years with OMEGA.

Having been chosen as the first Olympic timekeeper in 1932, OMEGA has remained at the forefront of advances in sports timekeeping until the present day. No other company has invested so much in timekeeping and supported sport in this way. Many milestones have been set along the road to the level of accuracy we enjoy today.

OMEGA began its involvement with sports timekeeping back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first stopwatch was made in 1898, before times were measured at 16 competitions in Switzerland and abroad in 1905 and at the legendary Gordon Bennett balloon race held in Schlieren near Zurich in 1909, involving 73 balloons and an airship. The company's first contact with Olympics was made in 1916, on the occasion of the sports competitions held to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> birthday of the IOC in Lausanne. As fate would have it, this anniversary fell in the middle of the First World War.

One of the first great innovations was the camera "that

films time", developed in 1946. Originally known as the Racend OMEGA Timer and later renamed Photosprint, it solved the problem of recording runners' times at the end of athletics races.

It made its Olympic debut in London in 1948. OMEGA's first official appearance at the Olympic Games was remarkable in two ways: it was the first occasion that timekeeping had been assigned to a private company and the first time that winners and medalists were timed to the nearest 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a second. OMEGA supplied thirty calibre 1130 stopwatches, which were used in all the timed competitions. The main innovation offered by these stopwatches, which were accurate to the nearest 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a second, was the split-seconds facility, which meant that intermediate times could also be measured. The timekeepers at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam had used their own stopwatches. Times in all sports had only been measured to the nearest 1/5<sup>th</sup> of a second and official times were only provided for the winners in the athletics events. Although the Great Depression and the economic crisis meant that the 1932 games did not break previous participation records, many sporting records were broken, including 14 world records in athletics and three in swimming.

In Helsinki, four years later, the OMEGA Time Recorder brought electronic timekeeping to the world of sport for the first time. In 1961, the Omegascope was launched, making it possible to display times on television screens. In 1966, the International Amateur Athletics Federation became the first governing body to take another step forward by recognizing electronically recorded times as the official times at the European Championship in Budapest. A year later, touch pads were tested out for the first time in the swimming events at the Pan-American Games in Winnipeg. The new technology solved numerous problems and brought an end to debates over swimmers' finishing positions.

In 1979, life was made easier for starters in athletics competitions with the launch of the first carefully developed false start detector. In 1990, OMEGA introduced Scan-O-Vision, a popular version of the photo-finish camera which opened sports timekeeping up to the mass market.

The 2012 Olympic Games in London was even further away, although the contract with the IOC was signed by Nick Hayek, CEO of the Swatch Group, in London on May 2006. London 2012 was a particularly special event for OMEGA: 80 years after Los Angeles, it was for OMEGA's 25<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games as the Official Timekeeper. "We made

great progress together in 1948", said Sebastian Coe, alluding to the 1948 Olympic Games in London, at which OMEGA caused a sensation with its photofinish camera, nicknamed the "Magic Eye" in Great Britain.

OMEGA can look back with pride at its past involvement with sports timekeeping. However, it continues to look forward into the future. In terms of equipment and personnel, the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing will put all past events in the shade. There will be no more revolutionary technical innovations before then, but many new services will be available, such as video control systems for different sports or the offer of increasingly varied information to the public via video walls, TV graphics or the Internet, were it will be possible to follow the competitions in real time.

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