

This Day in History... February 8, 1984

Opening of 1984 Winter Olympics

The 1984 Winter Olympic Games opened in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia (now Bosnia & Herzegovina), on February 8, 1984. These were the first Winter Games – and the second Olympics – held in a communist state.

Sarajevo authorities had shown interest in hosting the Winter Olympics as early as 1970. For the 1984 games, they competed against Göteborg, Sweden, and Sapporo, Japan, for the honor of being host city. Sarajevo was ultimately selected and announced as the host city in 1978. The games would be the first Winter Olympics held in a socialist state and a Slavic-speaking country. They were the second consecutive Olympics held in such a country after the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. Dozens of nations, including the US had boycotted the 1980 Olympics and the Soviet Union would boycott the 1984 Summer Games held in Los Angeles later in the year.

Sarajevo invested in new alpine ski slopes, an ice rink, a bobsled and luge track, a speed skating track, and ski jumps. They also improved their transportation network between sites. Readers of the local paper selected a wolf named Vučko as the official mascot.

The 14th Winter Olympic Games officially opened on Wednesday February 8, 1984. A total of 45,000 spectators were present for the performance which included hundreds of musicians and dancers from various regions of Yugoslavia. The Olympic flag was accidentally raised upside down during the opening ceremony.

The Sarajevo games featured great moments from both veterans and newcomers. British skaters Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean – longtime favorites – earned the first (and so far, only) perfect score in the ice dancing competition. East German women continued their dominance in speed skating, winning nine of 12 medals. Lamine Gueye of Senegal, a first-time nation, was the first Black African skier to compete in the Winter Olympics.

It was a breakthrough year for American competitors as well. Twin brothers Phil and Steve Mahre won the gold and silver medals in the slalom ski event. Phil didn't find out until after the race was over that his wife, Holly, had given birth an hour earlier.

More surprising was skier Bill Johnson's performance. By 1984, Johnson had not yet distinguished himself in international competition. But after a race victory earlier in the year, Johnson predicted that he would win a gold medal in the alpine skiing event. The Oregon native backed up his words, as he beat Peter Muller of Switzerland for America's first-ever gold medal in the event.

Marja-Liisa Hamalainen, a cross-country skier from Finland, was the only athlete at the games to win three medals. She actually won four of them – three gold and one bronze. She won all three individual cross-country events, with distances of 5, 10, and 20 kilometers, and helped the Finnish team win the bronze in the 5x4 kilometer relay race (teams of four racers, who each ski five kilometers).

A then-record 49 countries competed in these games, many for the first time. These were the first Winter Games for the British Virgin Islands, Egypt, Monaco, Puerto Rico, and Senegal. A total of 1,272 athletes (998 men, 274 women) competed, a jump from the 1,072 athletes from 37 countries that competed in the 1980 Winter Games. There were a total of 39 events in 6 sports and 10 disciplines.

The games ended on February 19 and were considered a success. The games helped to modernize Sarajevo and develop winter sports in Yugoslavia. The quality of life increased for many residents and the city hosted several athletic events. However, the Bosnian War and the Siege of Sarajevo in the early 1990s destroyed many Olympic venues, some of which were never rebuilt. Sarajevo eventually began to host some athletic events.



Designed by Robert Peak of Scottsdale, Arizona, these stamps showcase four of the most popular sports in the winter games.

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