

## The Winter Olympics

The Olympic Motto is 'Citius, Altius, Fortius', (or faster, higher, stronger), and when you hear the words "The Olympics", you may see mental pictures of tanned men and women athletes in brightly coloured sportswear, trying hard to live up to the motto, while keeping to the Olympic ideals of friendship, unity, fair play and peace.

The Winter Olympics, on the other hand, might bring to mind very different images. Perhaps scenes of outlandish figures dressed in alien costumes, using strange and complicated pieces of equipment to take them at terrifying speeds down frozen landscapes, or street-wise kids surfing their way down man-made waves.

The Winter Olympics have been held since 1924. They feature the usual mixture of ice and snow events, with an opening ceremony featuring popular groups and artists.

Here is a quick guide to some of the more colourful sports on offer at the games.

### Snowboarding

Snowboarding was first introduced at the 1998 Winter Olympics. Snowboarders compete in two events - the half-pipe and the parallel giant slalom. In the half-pipe, competitors use a semi-cylindrical pipe cut into the snow to jump into the air and do tricks, while the giant slalom is a race between two boarders at a time. Snowboarding is associated with a certain lifestyle which doesn't always sit easily with the Olympic ideal - being a member of a team in such an individualistic sport can be problematic for boarders, and even wearing a uniform can be a touchy subject. "We had the most hideous outfits: pegged jeans that go above your belly button, cheesy cowboy hat, burgundy old-lady pumps," remembers Sharon Dunn, a bronze medallist in Nagano.

### Ski Jumping

In the ski jumping event, competitors launch themselves from a 90 or 120 metre hill, and are judged on the length and style of their jump. In the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, two Japanese ski jumpers, Masahiko Harada and Takanobu Okabe, won the gold and silver medals after both of them jumped 137 metres, the longest ski jumps ever seen at the games. Ski jumping can look more like a test of bravery than a sport, and in 1988 Eddie the Eagle Edwards won the affection and admiration of millions when he competed for Britain, despite having jumped only a handful of times before the event. 'Eddie the Eagle' gave me my favourite moment from the Winter Olympics. Showing more guts than any of his critics Eddie went flying down that massive slide and floated out into the unknown. Although nowhere near as professional as the experts that day, 'Eddie the Eagle' showed what raw courage is made of.  
Mal Walker, Australia.

### Curling

The Nagano Olympics saw the debut of curling. The game is played on an ice rink, where two teams of four players slide `stones` across the ice, trying to get as close as they can to the center of a target (the `tee`). Team mates can sweep the ice in front of the stones to help their progress over the ice. Curling does however have its critics - `since when did sweeping the floor become an international sport?` asks Andrew Stevenson from New Zealand.

### The Skeleton

Perhaps the most unusually named event, which hasn't been seen at the Winter Games for over 50 years, is the skeleton, a race very similar to luge. In the skeleton and the luge, competitors slide down a track made of ice at speeds of around 140 km/h, with nothing between them and the ice except a sled with two metal runners. The participants race head first on their stomachs in the skeleton, while in the luge they travel down the track on their backs, with their feet in front of them.

### Figure skating

Figure skating is a traditional favourite at the Winter Olympics. There are four events, the mens' singles, the womens' singles, the pairs and the ice dancing competition. Fans of the event still remember the 1988 Winter Games, where British figure skaters Jayne Torville and Christopher Dean (Britain) were given maximum points in the ice dancing event, for their artistic interpretation of Ravel's Bolero.