

1924 Olympics - 100th Anniversary

Lake Placid's Charles Jewtraw Won the First Gold Medal at the First Winter Games

By Michael Burgess

Paris will host the Olympic Summer Games for the third time this year. The city hosted the 1900 games and 2024 is the 100th anniversary of the last summer games in Paris in 1924. It was in that year that the first international winter sports competitions were also held in Chamonix, France, near Mt. Blanc, January 25 - February 5, 1924. Since the summer games were to be held in Paris, Chamonix was selected so that the same nation hosted both competitions.

At Chamonix, the first winter Olympic gold medal ever awarded was at Chamonix to 23-year-old Charles Jewtraw, a speedskater from the Lake Placid area. He won the 500 meter race in 44 seconds, defeating 26 other skaters.

Years later, Jewtraw told *Sports Illustrated* magazine, "It was like a fairy tale. I was a poor boy from Lake Placid. I'd been national champion, but I'd retired from skating. I wanted to move on. I was being tutored for Bowdoin College—I'd never finished high school, but I wanted my education. Then I got a telegram saying we would send an Olympic team to France. I hadn't trained at all. I didn't want to go. My tutor convinced me I should. I was so sick crossing the ocean that I kept praying the ship would sink. I wasn't even nervous the day of the race. Why would I be? I knew I couldn't win."

The modern Olympic games were re-established in Athens in 1896 with summer competitions. The next Olympics in 1900 were the first held in Paris. In the following years, there had been an effort to establish a winter Olympic games. Figure skating had been held in London in the 1908 summer games and then in Antwerp in 1920 ice hockey and ice skating competitions took place. Scandinavian countries had their own Nordic games and were opposed to the international games, which they felt would eclipse the Nordic games which they did. After the Antwerp games, the winter games were finally approved by the Olympic committee in 1921 as "International Winter Sports Week." Only later were the games retroactively designated as the first Olympic Winter Games.

Chamonix in the Alps was chosen because it was on a rail line. In those days the wealthy were the primary audience. At Chamonix, there were sixteen events in speedskating, figure skating, hockey, ski jumping, cross country skiing and nordic combined events. There were about 300 athletes from sixteen countries at Chamonix. The United States sent 24 athletes, including some from the Lake Placid area. The US hockey team won the silver medal. Figure skater Beatrice Loughran won the silver medal and a bronze medal was won by Anders Haugen only after a scoring error was discovered 50 years later and Haugen received his medal in 1974 at age 85. Lake Placid had already become a winter sports location in the United States in the early part of

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the 20th century. The Lake Placid Club had started winter sports competitions on the frozen lake ice in 1904. By 1920 Lake Placid hosted its first international event in speedskating. The following year of 1921, Lake Placid hosted the International College Winter Sports Games. Even though he had won the US skating championship in 1921 and 1923, Jewtraw didn't think he had a chance to win. He was in awe of the skaters from Europe, especially the Scandinavian countries.. He had never raced the 500 meter distance or raced in a competition where he had to switch lanes during the race.

Jewtraw later described the exhilaration of the moment winning, "I stood in the middle of the rink, and they played The Star-Spangled Banner. The whole American team rushed out on the ice. They hugged me like I was a beautiful girl. Oh my God...." "My teammates threw me in the air. The loudspeakers were booming out in French, 'Charlie Jewtraw of the U.S. of A. wins the first race in the first Winter Games!' Oh my God."

Jewtraw lived to see Lake Placid host the Olympic Winter games in 1932 and 1980. In 1957 he donated his medal to the Smithsonian Museum. He retired in Florida and died at the age of 95 in 1995. Lake Placid has sent more than 100 athletes to compete in every winter games since Chamonix hosted the first winter games 100 years ago.

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