

This Day in History... February 25, 1951

First Pan-American Games

After nearly two decades of planning, the first Pan-American Games were held on February 25, 1951.

The first step toward the Pan-American Games came at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, France. During the Olympic Congress there, members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) from Cuba, Guatemala, and Mexico suggested the creation of regional games to increase sport activities in Central America. Working together, they succeeded in holding the first Central American Games two years later.

At the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, Latin American IOC members proposed an even larger competition, to include all countries in the Americas. The first attempt at these games was held in Dallas, Texas, in 1937 at the Greater Texas and Pan-American Exposition. The program included athletics, boxing and wrestling. Though the games attracted little attention, they were successful enough that Olympic officials from the Americas agreed to meet and discuss a larger competition.



Stamp issued for the 10th games in Indianapolis in 1987.

In 1940 the representatives met in Buenos Aires at the first Pan American Sports Congress. They agreed that the first games would be held two years later in Buenos Aires. However, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 drew most of the participating nations into World War II, and the games were postponed. Once the war was over, the congress reconvened in London during the 1948 Summer Olympics. There, they once again agreed on Buenos Aires as the host city and set the games for 1951.

The first Pan-American Games began on February 25, 1951. Over the following 13 days, 2,513 athletes from 21 nations competed in 18 sports (for a total of 140 events). Argentina won the most medals, the United States came in second, and Chile placed third.

The games proved to be a success and have been held every four years (in the year before the Summer Olympics) since 1951. The United States hosted the games for the first time in 1959, when they were held in Chicago, Illinois.

In 1990, the nations competed in the first and only Winter Pan-American Games. Since 1999, the games have been immediately followed by the Parapan American Games, in which athletes with physical disabilities compete. The most recent games were held in Santiago, Chile in 2023. Over 6,000 athletes participated in 39 sports (for a total of 425 events).

Since 1951, the games have been held 28 times. Currently, the United States has the most total medals, with 4,999 – 2,188 of those are gold. The next Pan-American Games are scheduled for 2027.



Stamp issued for the 3rd Pan-American Games held in Chicago.



Rudolph won silver in the individual 100-meter event and gold in the 4 × 100 m relay at the 1959 games.

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