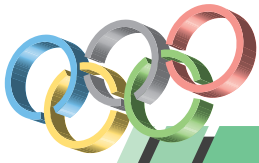


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1998 Nagano Olympic Winter Games Day 1

Nagano Olympics open as largest Winter Games ever



IOC President Samaranch addressing the Olympic opening ceremony.

The 18th Olympic Winter Games got under way with a dash of Japanese style Saturday as sumo wrestlers and local residents performed traditional rituals designed to drive away the evil spirits and purify the host city in central Japan.

Emperor Akihito declared the Nagano Olympics open at 12:28 p.m. as athletes and officials from a Winter Games record 72 countries and territories assembled at the Minami Nagano Sports Park under partially overcast skies to witness the start of the largest winter sports extravaganza ever.

Nearly 2,400 athletes will vie for Olympic honors in 68 events, surpassing the previous record 1,739 athletes who took part in 61 sports events four years ago in Lillehammer, Norway.

The gala event officially began at 11 a.m. with the ringing of the bell at the Zenkoji temple in downtown Nagano, but eager opening-ceremony spectators began filing into the stadium in southern Nagano at 7 a.m.

As the ceremony, beamed to 160 countries around the world, got under way, onlookers got a taste of Japanese culture as residents of nearby localities raised eight "onbashira" log pillars in the stadium -- a custom practiced in Nagano for more than 1,000 years to purify the land.

Then, according to tradition in sumo, yokozuna Akebono performed the "dohyo-iri" ring purification ceremony, the symbolic calling of the attention of the gods and expelling the evil spirits from the competition venue as some 50,000 spectators looked on.

Some 150 local schoolchildren danced and sang the Nagano Games peace appeal song before International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch implored, "Let us build together for (our youth) a peaceful and better world."

The 16-day-long sports competition begins Saturday afternoon with the men's ice hockey preliminaries at the Big Hat and Aqua Wing ice arenas in Nagano.

Nagano is the third city in Japan to host the Olympics, following the 1964 summer Games in Tokyo and the 1972 Winter Games in Sapporo. (Kyodo News)

This paper can also be seen on Shinano Mainichi Shimbun web.

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