

Olympic Games in Helsinki 1952, some posterior experiences

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The Games of the XV Olympiad were organised in Helsinki from 19th of July to 3rd of August 1952. Helsinki was planned to host already the 1940 Olympic Games, but those Games had to be cancelled because of World War II (as was the case for the 1944 Games, too). At the time of the Helsinki Games I was only eight years old, wherefore my reminiscences about the games are only few. I remember that the adults listened radio (TV did not exist in Finland!) to hear reports from the games: reports about the duels between Czech Emil Zatopek and French Alain Mimoun, about the Finnish gold medallists (e.g. Kelpo Gröndahl in wrestling and Sylvi Saimo in canoeing) etc.

Helsinki Olympic coin

My personal experiences relating to the Helsinki Olympic Games are from later years. I am a collector of Finnish special coins – silver and golden festal coins. The first Finnish festal (or collector) coin ever minted was the silver Helsinki Olympic coin. Its nominal value was 500 Finnish marks (“old marks” used until 1962 and equivalent to 5 “new marks”, new marks were in use 1963 – 2001, and equivalent to 85 eurocents; its relative value today – 2008 – is about 14.50 euros). In all 18 500 coins in 1951 and 586 500 coins in 1952 were minted. The collection value of the Olympic coins today is about 500 € (1951 coin) and 50 € (1952 coin). It is worth to note that the Helsinki Olympic coin was the first special coin in the whole world minted to celebrate the Olympic Games. The next Olympic coin had to be waited until 1964 when Austria minted its collector coin for the Winter Olympic Games held in Innsbruck. Nowadays it is a tradition that every Olympic Games has its own Olympic coin.



The first Olympic coins in the world: Helsinki Olympic coins (minted 1951 and 1952)

Helsinki Olympic flame

Perhaps the most important symbol of the Olympic Games is the Olympic flame. Traditionally, the flame of the Olympic torch is lit in Greece and transported (mainly by running) to the Olympic City. In Helsinki there was two flames, the authentic Greek flame and a domestic flame lit in Lapland. The Lappish flame was lit on top of Taivaskero (“Heaven fjeld”), an arctic hill in the Pallas hill district at midnight on July 6, 1952 and it was put together with the Greek flame. According to a legend, the flame was lit by the midnight sun via a parabolic mirror. This is, however, only a legend: the weather was cloudy and the sun was not visible. The torch had to be lit manually.

Fifty years later, in summer 2002 when the 50 years anniversary of the Helsinki Olympic Games was celebrated, there was a reconstruction of the Olympic flame lighting on Taivaskero fjeld and its transportation as a relay to Helsinki. Before the year 2002, I had hiked several times in Lapland’s fjeld district and climbed also to the top of the Taivaskero hill. There exists a memorial of the lighting ceremony of the 1952 Olympic flame. In the beginning of July 2002, I travelled with my son Antti to Lapland and to the Pallas area to participate in the 50 years anniversary ceremony for reconstructing the lighting of the Olympic flame on top of the Taivaskero hill.



Left: Antti Virtanen sitting (2002) at the memorial of the 1952 Olympic flame on Taivaskero

Right: Finnish text on the memorial stone: On this place on Taivaskero the Helsinki Olympic flame was lit on 6th of July, 1952

The day (6th of July, 2002) was cloudy, even rainy. In spite of this, a couple of hours before midnight we started to climb up to Taivaskero. The visibility was only a few meters but the path was well enough marked and we – together with some tens of others – were able to reach the top of the hill on time. As in 1952, the midnight sun was not visible; the tops of the hills were even inside the clouds. The torch had again to be lit manually (the organisers had brought even this time a parabolic mirror on the place). The lighting was done by Eero Mäntyranta, “the King of Innsbruck”, multiple Olympic Gold medallist and World Champion in cross-country skiing (in Innsbruck Mäntyranta won two gold medals and one silver medal). After the flame was lit, it became possible to start the torches way as a torch relay towards Helsinki. Helsinki was reached on 19th July, 2002, exactly 50 years later than the Opening Ceremony of the Helsinki 1952 Olympic Games took place. The torch relay visited also Vaasa on its way to Helsinki and we had another possibility to see the flame some days after the start.



Left: Lighting of the Olympic torch on Taivaskero “from the Midnight sun” at Midnight on 6th of July 1952

Right: 50 years anniversary reconstruction of the lighting of the Helsinki Olympic flame on Taivaskero at Midnight on 6th of July 2002. Gold medallist Eero Mäntyranta holding the torch, the (unused) parabolic mirror on the left.