



The war years cast a long shadow over the Olympic Games, with cancellations in both 1940 and 1944. So, in 1948 when London hosted at short notice, and despite the darkness of the preceding years and the rebuilding of much of the city's infrastructure, there was an overwhelming desire for a celebration of the human spirit.

The difficulties of staging the world's biggest-ever sporting event in a war-shattered capital were legion. Some athletes were housed in military barracks. Food rationing was still in force. But the hope and idealism of the Olympic flame burned brighter than ever. And the traditional four-year cycle of the Games has never been interrupted again.

London 1948 saw a new record set, with 59 countries competing in 136 events. More than 4,000 individual athletes took part, 385 of them women, including the undoubted star of the Games, Dutch sprinter Fanny Blankers-Koen. Though world record-holder in six events, the rules dictated she could only take part in four. She won them all: the 100m dash, the 80m hurdles, the 200m and the 4x100m relay, running the anchor leg to claim gold.

Among the other stars was 17-year-old American Bob Mathias, who won the decathlon to become the youngest winner of a men's Olympic athletics event.

Two Olympic champions in 1936 - Ilona Elek of Hungary, in women's foil fencing, and Jan Brzak of Czechoslovakia, in the canoeing Canadian pairs 1,000m - managed to successfully defend their titles 12 years on.

Concert pianist Micheline Ostermeyer of France won both the shot put and the discus throw. And Karoly Takacs, from Hungary, having taught himself to shoot with his left hand after his right had been shattered by a grenade, won gold in the rapid-fire pistol event. Among the innovations were the first use of both starting blocks in the sprints and, at the other end of the straights, the photo finish, with the new technology even deciding the winner in the 100m final.

Finally, although few people in post-war Britain

actually owned a television set, 1948 also saw the first broadcasts on home TV sets. In 2000 more than 3.7 billion people, in 220 countries, tuned in to watch the Sydney Olympics.



With the 2012 games still seven years away, the UK is already gearing up following London's selection as the Host City for the Olympic Games.

Bid Leader Sebastian Coe joined Olympians Marlon Devonish and Jade Johnson with hopeful Montell Douglas to launch a set of stamps at the London 2012 offices.

He said: "By backing the successful London bid, the people of the UK have helped London win the most exciting sporting prize ever. These special London 2012 stamps will keep this wonderful achievement at the forefront of people's minds over the next few months. This is a celebratory gesture to be proud of."

Julietta Edgar, Head of Philatelic Sector, Royal Mail, said: "Royal Mail has a proud history of marking world sporting events and the UK's sporting success. "We feel that the incredible energy and dynamism displayed on the stamps encapsulates perfectly the reason that the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games is the greatest show on Earth - and what winning the 2012 bid for London means to people up and down the country."

The stamps, which feature images of athletes in motion as they perform their sport, were released on 5 August to coincide with the opening of the World Athletics Championships in Helsinki.

Previously the Royal Mail has issued sports-related stamps to commemorate the Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games and England's victory in the Rugby World Cup in 2003.

