

Lillehammer 1994:

The great torch relay

The torch relay from Morgedal to the Olympic Games at Lillehammer in 1994 turned into an over two month-long triumphal voyage from one end of the country to the other. Organised by the Norwegian postal service and Statoil, this pre-Olympic euphoria engaged the whole country. In spite of a 350-year history of postal delivery, the torch relay became the biggest transportation task the postal service had ever undertaken. It was likely also the most enjoyable one.

The Olympic Games at Lillehammer became a united national success. Much of the reason lay in the public enthusiasm that was generated in the wake of the torch relay.

On November the 27th, 1993, the torch was lit in the fireplace at Øverbø, and Princess Märtha Louise carried it out of Sondre Norheim's cabin. People were gathered for a celebration outside the Norwegian Ski Adventure centre, and with Åshild Lofthus, Knut Tore Apeland, and Atle Skårdal as the first torch-bearers, it was a scenic ceremony and a superb program. Minister of culture Åse Kleveland spoke warmly about the Olympic flame from Morgedal, and at 1:30 PM the torch left the village to begin its 74 day-long journey to Lillehammer.

The torch spent its first night in Bø, and from there it travelled to Kongsberg, Drammen, Tønsberg, Skien, Risør and Arendal. On the eighth day between Arendal and Kristiansand, it had accumulated 108 enthusiastic followers, and by the time the torch reached Lillehammer on February 12th, 1994, over 7000 Norwegians had completed a leg of the relay. The flame from Morgedal had covered 8000 kilometres when it finally reached the Olympic village at Lillehammer. There, the Princess' younger brother, Crown Prince Haakon Magnus, stood ready to light the flame in the cauldron on the Lysgårdsbakken hill. Before the Crown Prince was handed the torch, Stein Gruben had ski-jumped the hill with it. All over the world, people sat watching the beautiful ceremony.

Greek authorities reacted negatively to the Norwegian torch relay from Morgedal. In a heated meeting at Christmastime 1993 between the two countries' ministers of culture, Melina Mercouri and Åse Kleveland, it was agreed that a flame would also come from Olympia, and that it was this flame that would burn in the cauldron at Lillehammer. Kleveland no longer spoke of the «Olympic torch from Morgedal» but supported the torch from Greece. The flame from Morgedal was demoted to a «Greeting». Gerhard Heiberg (head of the Lillehammer Olympic Organising Committee and member of the IOC) supported Morgedal and threatened to withdraw from his Olympic committee position! The torch from Greece became a big disappointment for Morgedal, and people in Telemark gave Heiberg their support when he threatened to withdraw. The issue wasn't that important, but his loyal support at the time was much appreciated.

Many rumours circulated after the games as to which flame actually burned at Lillehammer. Whichever way one looks at it, the 74 day-long torch relay from Morgedal is the most comprehensive country wide cultural endeavour in Norwegian history. Local communities all over the country worked hard to present the best cultural display they could muster. The bustling enthusiasm that met the torch bearers every day was the best kind of lead-up the big Olympic celebration at Lillehammer could have had. What exactly burned at Lillehammer is thus only a pyrotechnic detail that was eventually eclipsed by the magnificent event itself.