



# WOOD IN SPORT EQUIPMENT

## HERITAGE, PRESENT, PERSPECTIVE



Edited by  
Francesco Negro

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The icons represent some of the sports considered in the book (including all sports would have resulted in too small images for proper visualization). The wooden equipment is outlined by the colors of the wood species from which it is made, and by lines representing the grain of wood and the characteristics of the relative wood-based products.

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## A GOOD FOURTH PLACE: THE WOODEN MEDAL

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### THE WOODEN MEDAL

In the ancient Olympic games, winners received just a laurel wreath for their victories. Medals started to be awarded during the first modern Olympic games in Athens 1896, when the champions got a silver (not gold) medal and an olive branch. The tradition of awarding gold, silver, and bronze medals respectively to the first, second, and third placed athletes dates back to the games held in Saint Louis in 1904 (IOC 2019).

The well-known expression “wooden medal” is used to indicate the imaginary prize won by whoever comes fourth, hence just outside the podium. This is clearly just a way of saying, as such a medal is not awarded in the Olympic games. This medal is imaginarily made of wood as it is less precious than the iconic materials used for real medals.

It can be said that the “wooden medal” has two sides, as it is suited to a medal indeed. Its perception, in fact, depends on the way by which it is achieved. On the first side, this medal can represent a missed goal, and can be accompanied by the regret of having lost an opportunity, probably unique. This feeling is stronger when the podium is missed by a whisker: fractions of seconds, or of points, a defeat that materialized in the very last moments of the match, etc. The perspective of a wooden medal can be particularly intimidating for athletes at the peak of their career and aiming at victory. In the above cases an actual wooden medal, even if made of the most valuable wood, would hardly compensate for the missed occasion. The Olympic games are particularly challenging in this sense, as they require great sacrifices and, taking place every four years, do not give the chance for rapid redress.

On the second side, achieving fourth place can still be considered as being part of the

excellence, especially in the Olympic games or in international events in which the best athletes compete. Young athletes may also be more inclined to see this positive side of the wooden medal, as it can be seen as part of a trend of improvement and can give the motivation to taking the final step onto the podium in the future. This can be particularly true in the Paralympic games, where a wooden medal, if truly available, could in fact be seen as a tangible demonstration of the athletes’ determination and courage, that together with equality and inspiration constitute the four Paralympic values [1].

### THE WOODEN SPOON

Another famous trophy is “the wooden spoon”, ideally awarded to the last classified in a sport competition. This expression derives from the Oxford University, where the wooden spoon was granted to the student who graduated with the lowest exam marks (but graduated nonetheless [Stray 2012]). Actual spoons were realized over time, and the last was awarded in 1909. The term wooden spoon is particularly used in rugby, where it is imaginarily awarded to the team that arrives last in the Six Nations tournament.

### WOOD IN MEDALS AND TROPHIES

Although medals and trophies are primarily the reign of metals, wood can actually be found there - the Davis cup being a famous example. Wood can also be found as part of artistic trophies, often as bases, and plaques, and medal boxes; noble hardwoods are often used for such applications.

In the last decade, wooden medals made of laser-cut and inscribed plywood have become more frequent. This technology enables appealing results, and such medals are appreciated also because they provide a recall to

sustainability. Wooden figurines were also given to athletes during Rio 2016 instead of flowers.

An interesting case is that of the finisher medals awarded in 2021 by the Eugene marathon (Oregon, USA). Such medals were made of the timber from the steps of the dismantled grandstand of the Historic Hayward Field [2]. Thus, such medals carry relevant symbolic

value, and can be taken as a small-scale example of how wood can be reutilized in a cascading use.

A final mention goes to the podiums, which are often made using wood-based panels: for instance, the Olympic and Paralympic podiums in Rio 2016 were made of wood coming from sustainably managed forests [3].

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