

# Critical thinking on ancient greece: sports and olympic games

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In the beautiful Greek city of Olympia in the times of Homer (est. 800-701 BC) in honor of the god Zeus a sports event, known to all mankind – the Olympic Games – began. According to Miller (2006), alongside with the inception of the Olympic games in 776 BC Greece began to awaken from the Dark Ages (p. 2). The ancient Greeks spoke differently about their inception. Some said that the competition was initiated by the supreme god after his victory over his father Kronos. Others said that the father of the Olympic Games was supposedly the son of Zeus, the majestic Greek hero Heracles. There were also other legends about the birth of these sporting events, however let`s concentrate on the Games themselves.

The Olympic Games were a significant event for the entire ancient Greece, going beyond the frames of purely sports event. In contrast to the present, these competitions were more than a sports event for the participants as well. Those, who won, received the honor and respect, free food and drink, at home they often were chosen as honored individuals and as officers at their native cities. Winning the Olympics was considered to be a great honor for an athlete, and for the polis he represented. Starting from the VI century following an example of the Olympic Games other all-Greece competitions of athletes began: the Pythian Games, the Nemean and Isthmian games, also in honor of various ancient Greek gods. But the Olympics were the most prestigious competition among all. The Olympic Games were mentioned in the works of Plutarch, Herodotus, Pindar, Lucian, Pausanias, Simonides and of other ancient authors (Miller, 2006, p. 116).

The mandatory part of the ancient Olympic Games was the religious ceremony. According to the established custom, the first day of the Games

was allocated for sacrifice: athletes spent the day at the altars and shrines of their patron gods. A similar ceremony was repeated at the final day of the Olympic Games, when the awards were given to the winners. At the time of the Olympic Games all wars in ancient Greece were ceased, and a truce – *ekechejria*, and representatives of the poleis at war held in Olympia peace talks to resolve the conflicts.

Having begun as a local event, the Olympic Games eventually became an event of the Panhellenic scale. The Games attracted numerous people not only from Greece itself, but also from its city-colonies ranging from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. To participate in the Olympics was allowed to all freeborn Greek citizens. The slaves and barbarians, i. e. persons of non-Greek origin, were banned from participation in the Olympic Games. The organization of the ancient Olympic Games included a control not only over the course of the Games themselves, but also over a preparation of athletes for the competitions. Control was carried out by hellanodikes, most reputable citizens of Greece. In next 10-12 months before the Games athletes trained extensively, and then passed a special examination before a committee of hellanodikes.

The basic principle of competitions was honesty of participants. Before the competition, they took an oath to follow the rules. Hellanodikes had the right to deprive the champion his title if it was found out that he had won by fraud, and the guilty athlete was subjected to fines and corporal punishment. In addition, to participation in the Games were not permitted persons convicted of a felony or of blasphemy. Entrance at the competitions was free of charge. But access to them was allowed exclusively for men, for women it

was denied upon penalty of death. An exception was made only for a priestess of the goddess Demeter: for her in the stadium, there was a special marble throne built to her honor.

The most popular sport in ancient Greece was the chariot races, in which the two rivals on chariots were racing furiously in circles trying to reach the finish line first. The race took place with the attacks on the other chariots and horses that were allowed and resulted in a frenzied delight of the audience. Some of the sports disciplines in Ancient Greece are markedly different from disciplines we know nowadays. Greek athletes wore long-jumping with no run-up, but carried out a standing long jump, what is more, – with stones (later with dumb-bells) in hands. Javelin and discus throwing (eventually, instead of throwing a stone, athletes switched to an iron discus) was conducted from a small hill. Moreover, a spear was hurled not at a distance, the main thing was accuracy of a throw – an athlete was to hit specific targets. In wrestling and boxing there was no division of participants into weight categories, and a boxing match lasted till one of the contestants acknowledged himself defeated, or was not in position to continue the combat. There were very peculiar species in cross-country disciplines: running in a full armor (i. e. in a helmet, with a shield and a weapon), race of heralds and trumpeters and others (Golden, 1998, p. 45-46).

The dominating democratic political order of Ancient Greece favored the development of sports activity among citizens of polises at the territory of Greece. The state machinery of Ancient Greece fostered it as well considering sports activities to have the positive impact on a society, just as Olympic Games had positive effect on conflicting parties. Nevertheless

modern sports are descendants of the ancient Greek ones, sports nowadays differ a lot, mostly in their simpler, more athletic-friendly character.

## References

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