

History of the ancient olympics



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The Origins and History of the Ancient Olympics

Introduction

The first ancient Olympic Games can be traced back to 776 B. C and were celebrated until 393 A. D (Young, 1987). The Games continued for twelve centuries and were dedicated to Olympian gods. Olympia became the site of these historic ancient games that sowed the seeds for the most coveted sporting international event of modern times, the Modern Olympics. The site of the Ancient Olympics is located in the western part of Peloponnese. According to Greek mythology, Peloponnese is the island of Pelops, the Founder of the Olympic Games (Young, 1987).

Olympia, in Greece is the sanctuary site for the ancient Greek gods. The central part of Olympia was dominated by the majestic temple of Zeus. The ancient games enjoyed a secular tradition and aimed at securing good relations between the cities of Greece and showing physical qualities and evolution of the performances accomplished by the youth. The Olympic Games were held in four years intervals at the ancient stadium in Olympia that could accommodate more than 40, 000 spectators. The surrounding areas around the ancient Olympic stadium were continuously developed until the 4th century BC and were used as training grounds for athletes or to serve as homes for the Olympic judges (Young, 1987).

The Ancient Olympics allowed only free men who spoke Greek to participate in the Games. The ancient games had a slight international spirit as they included participants from other parts of Greece. The Greeks that came to the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia shared the same religious beliefs and spoke the same language. The athletes were all male citizens of the city-

states from every corner of the Greek world, coming from as far away as Iberia (Spain) in the west and the Black Sea (Turkey) in the east (Reeser, 2005)

In the ancient Olympics, married women were not allowed to participate in any way. However unmarried women could only spectate. The ancient Olympic Games though did not allow female participants; an exception was made at the Herean Games, staged every four years to honour Hera, wife of Zeus, allowing female athletes to participate in the games. Kyniska, daughter of King Archidamos of Sparta, was the first woman to be listed as an Olympic victor in Antiquity. The events were judged by the 'Herald', a Hellanodikis (Greek Judge). The Olympic victors in ancient times received their awards immediately after the competition. The Herald, after announcing the name of the victor, placed a palm branch in his hands. Red ribbons were tied on his head and hands to symbolize his victory. The official award ceremony that took place on the last day of the Games was a proud day for the victor. From the elevated vestibule of the temple of Zeus, the Herald announced the name of the winner, his father's name and the name of his homeland. The winner was finally honoured with the Herald placing the sacred olive tree wreath or 'kotinos' on the winner's head (Reeser, 2005).

The Olympic Games, originally created to honour Zeus, was the most important national festival of the ancient Greeks, and a focus of political rivalries between the nation-states. However, all competitions involved individual competitors rather than teams. Winning an Olympic contest was regarded more highly than winning a battle and was proof of an individual

athlete's personal excellence. The winners were presented with garlands, crowned with olive wreaths, and viewed as national heroes (Young, 1987).

Although records of the Olympics date back to 776 BC when the Olympics were reorganized and the official "First Olympiad" was held, Homer's *Iliad* suggests that they existed as early as the 12th century BC. Emperor Theodosius I of Rome discontinued them in the 4th century AD, and they did not occur again until they were reinstated in Athens in 1896 (Young, 1987).

Originally, the Olympics was confined to running, but by the 15th Olympiad, additional sports were added, such as the pentathlon which was made up of five different events, boxing, wrestling, chariot racing, as well as a variety of foot races of varying lengths, including a long-distance race of approximately 2.5 miles. Athletes usually competed without clothes proudly displaying their perfect bodies. Women, foreigners, slaves, and dishonoured persons were forbidden to compete; women, once they were married, were not allowed to spectate any Olympic events, except for chariot races (Reeser, 2005).

The actual events taking place have changed significantly since the Ancient Olympics. Evidence shown in pictures, dating from circa 490-480 BC, depicts two men wrestling. Above them hang a discus in its bag and a pair of jumping weights called 'halteres'. Long jumpers used the weights to increase their competition distances by vigorously swinging them forward at the moment of takeoff. The coach or trainer stands to the left of the wrestlers, leaning on his staff and holding a long forked branch. (Rhizopoulou, 2004).

The ancient Olympic Games began in the year 776 BC, when Koroibos, a cook from the nearby city of Elis, won the stadium race, a foot race 600 feet long. According to (Wei, 1996), this was the only athletic event of the games for the first 13 Olympic festivals or until 724 BC. From 776 BC, the Games were held in Olympia every four years for almost 12 centuries (Young, 1987).

The marathon was not an event of the ancient Olympic Games. The marathon is a modern event that was first introduced in the Modern Olympic Games of 1896 in Athens, a race from the northeast of Athens to the Olympic Stadium and the athlete had to complete over a distance of 40 kilometres. The race commemorates the run of Pheidippides, an ancient “ day-runner” who carried the news of the Persian landing at Marathon of 490 B. C. to Sparta (a distance of 149 miles) in order to enlist help for the battle. According to (finely, 1976) during the fifth century B. C. Ancient Greek historian Herodotus, Pheidippides delivered the news to the Spartans the next day. The distance of the modern marathon was standardized as 26 miles 385 yards or 42. 195 km. in 1908 when the Olympic Games were held in London. The distance was the exact measurement between Windsor Castle, the start of the race, and the finish line inside White City Stadium (Wei, 1996).

Although the ancient Games were staged in Olympia, Greece, from 776 BC through 393 AD, it took 1503 years for the Olympics to return. The first modern Olympics were held in Athens, Greece, in 1896. The man responsible for its rebirth was a Frenchman named Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who presented the idea in 1894. His original thought was to unveil the modern Games in 1900 in his native Paris, but delegates from 34 countries were so

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enthralled with the concept that they convinced him to move the Games up to 1896 and have Athens serve as the first host (Wei, 1996).

The idea of the Olympic torch or Olympic Flame was first inaugurated in the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. There was no torch relay in the ancient Olympic Games. There were known, however, torch relays in other ancient Greek athletic festivals including those held at Athens. The modern Olympic torch relay was first took place at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. The Modern Olympic flag of five linked rings, each with a primary colour used in the flags of the nations competing in the games, was introduced in 1908. There is no ancient basis for this modern symbol (Rhizopoulou, 2004).

THE POLITICS OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

The celebration of the Olympic Games in antiquity was an occasion for citizens of scattered Greek city-states to assemble. At the Games they discussed important political issues, celebrated common military victories and even formed political and military alliances.

But the Games were not only a forum in which to discuss political events; they were also the cause of political conflict. Control of the Sanctuary and the Games brought with it prestige, economic advantages and, most importantly, political influence. As early as the 7th century BC we hear of disputes over the control of the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia between the city of Elis (30 miles to the north) and the small neighbouring town of Pisa (Wei, 1996).

In 668 BC, according to Pausanias (a 2nd century AD Greek traveller), the powerful tyrant of Argos (named Pheidon) was asked by the town of Pisa to

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capture the Sanctuary of Zeus from the city-state of Elis. Pheidon, with his army of well-trained hoplites (armed soldiers), marched across the Peloponnesos, secured the Sanctuary for the town of Pisa, and personally presided over the conduct of the games. But Pisa's control of the Sanctuary was brief: by the next year Elis had regained control (Fineley, 1976).

The Olympic Truce was instituted by the city-state of Elis to protect against military incursions which interrupted the Games. Every four years, special heralds from Elis were sent out to all corners of the Greek world to announce the approaching Olympic festival and games. Along with this news, they would announce the Olympic Truce, which protected athletes, visitors, spectators and official embassies who came to the festival from becoming involved in local conflicts. Later, political tyrants of the 7th and 6th centuries BC attempted to achieve influence by more peaceful means. They participated in the athletic and equestrian contests of the Olympic Games and dedicated conspicuously lavish offerings to Olympian Zeus at the site of the games (Finley, 1976).

Nowadays there is a strong connection between salesmanship and sports and some would even say that the line between sales pitching and fast pitches has become completely blurred. At Olympic competitions, athletes' uniforms and equipment bear the discreet but readily identifiable trademarks of their manufacturers. After the Games, we are presented with images of Olympians endorsing products and appearing on cereal boxes. Later, some Olympic celebrities become commodities themselves, as TV shows and record labels cash in on their fame (Wei, 1996).

Even in the Ancient Olympics, the victorious athletes were still celebrated and became famous for their outstanding abilities and achievements. Sculptors were commissioned to create statues of victorious athletes to be set up in the Sanctuary or in the home town of the athlete. According to Pliny, most of the statues set up in the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia were idealistic images of athletes. We are told that only if an athlete had won three Olympic victories could a realistic likeness of the athlete appear in the Sanctuary. In the Ancient Olympics, if an athlete was found guilty of cheating or bribing officials, they would be subjected to some form of public humiliation. For example if athlete's were found guilty of cheating the they were made to created statues of the eventual champions which were placed in stadium so that people could celebrate them (Rhizopoulou , 2004).

THE MODERN OLYMPICS

Today's Modern Olympic Games have 32 different categories of competitive events. When you consider that of these many, like track and field, have several events within the category and then break down further to men's and women's and team and individual competition, it is nearly impossible to keep track of the Games as they progress. Things were much simpler in the past. The Ancient Olympics had 13 events which were divided into 6 main categories and only men were allowed to participate in the events (Vassill, 2004).

The main categories were boxing, equestrian events, pentathlon, running and jumping. The Equestrian events were broken down into two sub-

categories: chariot racing and riding. The Pentathlon was a combination of five events: discus, javelin, jump, running, and wrestling (Crowther, 1996).

Boxing in ancient Greece had fewer rules than boxing today. There were no rounds and boxers fought until one of them was knocked out, or admitted he had been beaten. There was no rule that prevented a boxer from hitting an opponent when he was down. There was no weight class in either the men's or boy's divisions and the contestants were chosen randomly. The boxers did not wear gloves but wrapped their hands and wrists with leather straps called himantes. and this meant that their fingers were left free (Vassill, 2004).

Equestrian events were divided into classes of chariot racing and riding. The chariot races consisted of both the 2-horse chariot and the 4-horse chariot and there were separate races for chariots drawn by foals. There was a race of carts included in this event that consisted of competition between carts drawn by teams of 2 mules. The length of the chariot races was 12 laps around the stadium track which was approximately 9 miles (Vassill, 2004).

Riding was the other equestrian event and the course was 6 laps around the stadium track which equaled 4.5 miles. The jockeys rode without stirrups and the races were broken down into competition between foals and full-grown horses. Because it was so expensive to train, feed and equip the participants the owners were awarded the olive wreath of victory instead of the riders (Wei, 1996).

The most physical event of the Ancient Olympic Games was the pankration. This grueling event consisted of both boxing and wrestling. The hands were

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not wrapped in the leather himantes. The only limitations on physical brutality were the rules against biting and gouging the opponent's eyes, nose, or mouth with fingernails. Kicking in any part of the body was allowed. There were separate divisions for men and boys, but like in boxing there was no weight division and the opponents were chosen at random (Vassill, 2004).

The pentathlon, like the modern event, consisted of a 5-event combination. The 5 events of the Ancient Olympic Games were discus, javelin, jumping, running and wrestling. The Greeks considered this the most beautiful of the contests as it combined the endurance of the race course and the bodily strength necessary for the other physical events. The discus was made out of either of iron, stone, bronze, or leads and was shaped to resemble the discus of today. The sizes varied and the boys competed with a lighter weight than the men. The ancient Greeks thought the precision and rhythm of an athlete throwing the discus as important as his strength (Wei, 1996).

The javelin was a throwing event as in the modern games and like the discus the competition was based on the distance the object was thrown and in the case of the javelin the precision. The javelin was made of wood, with either a sharpened end or an attached metal point. The javelin had a thong for the throwers' fingers that was attached close to the center of gravity of the instrument that increased the precision and distance of the throw (Wei, 1996).

The jump event was similar to the modern long jump but with a major exception. The jumpers carried stone or lead weights called *halteres*. These weights, shaped like telephone receivers, were carried out in front of the

jumper when they jumped the weights were thrust backward and dropped during the descent to increase the distance of the jump (Fineley , 1976).

Running was broken down into 4 types of races in the Ancient Olympic Games. The stadion was the oldest of the events and consisted of a sprint covering one stade (192 meters) which was the length of the stadium. Other races were the 2-stade race and the long distance run ranged from 7 to 24 stades. The most grueling of the races was the warrior race designed to build and test the speed and stamina Greek men needed for military service. The race was 2 to 4-stades in distance and was run by an athlete wearing armor. The standard armor of that time weighed approximately 50-60 pounds and of course included a helmet and shield (Fineley, 1976).

Wrestling was similar to the modern sport in that the athlete was required to throw his opponent to the ground landing on a hip, shoulder, or back for a fair fall. To win a match required 3 fair falls or throws. Genital holds and biting were not allowed and breaking your opponent's fingers was also not permitted (Vassill, 2004).

The art and sculpture of ancient Greece is alive with the depictions of the Olympics and the events described in this article. One can feel the excitement and spirit of the Ancient Olympic Games in that art. In modern games the spirit of the Olympism of old is recreated in the ceremonies and competitiveness of the event (Fineley, 1976)

In conclusion the Ancient Olympics were held to honour Zeus. There were 13 events in the Ancient Olympics' compared to the 32 events in the modern Olympics. Most of the events that were held at the Ancient Olympics are still
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part of the modern day Olympics. In the ancient Olympics only men were allowed to compete whereas nowadays men and women are allowed to compete in all of the events. The athlete who won gold medals at the Ancient Olympics had sculptures with their picture on them so that people could celebrate their victory. Nowadays, there are some traditions that are still valued and for many athletes, winning an Olympic gold medal is still the main highlight of their career.

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