The Olympic Games

How They All Began

The Olympic Games

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INTRODUCTION

Nothing New Under the Sun

Sarah Yeomans

It's back—that special two week festival, held every fourth summer, when elite athletes from all over the world gather to pummel one another in the spirit of brotherhood: the Olympic Games. In time for this year's Summer Games, we look back at the ancient Olympiad and find that indeed there's nothing new under the summer sun.

The heavily-marketed concept of the Games as a peaceful, clean, harmonious, amateur sporting event is a fictitious reflection of the games in ancient times. As scholar Jenifer Neils explains in her review essay, the ancient Games were characterized by strife, violence, cheating, highly specialized professional training and high stakes political agendas. Sound familiar? Her review continues, discussing books that explain the world of ancient athleticism and demonstrate its similarities with our own modern sports culture. For example, the elevation of accomplished athletes to demi-god status in society is not a new phenomenon; ancient athletes had tremendous financial and cultural motivations to succeed and could often great achieve personal wealth and fame if they did so. Topics such as diet, training, sports medicine and drugs were all of major concern to athletes and their trainers in the ancient Olympic Games - the very subjects that dominate the media coverage of sports competition today.

In contrast to the works reviewed by Neils, Michael B. Poliakoff strives to put some distance between the brutality of the ancient games and the gentler, more sportsmanlike competition of the modern Olympic Games. He points out that while modern boxing regulations provide for a controlled environment and safety measures for athletes, ancient Greeks, he wryly notes, "recognized a number of ways to make the sport safer—and ignored all of them." In fact, he goes on to reveal that boxers often used equipment that enabled them to cause more damage to their opponent, rather than less. The lack of weight classes in boxing and wrestling would pit smaller athletes against much larger ones, and choking an opponent was perfectly acceptable method of subduing an adversary. Adding to an athlete's vulnerability was the fact that he competed in the nude. Framing the Games as a ritual designed to emulate battlefield heroism rather

than friendly competition, Poliakoff emphasizes that the modern Olympic Games are far more benign and controlled than their brutal predecessors in the ancient world.

David Gilman Romano offers an overview of the ancient Olympiads, discussing in detail the site of Olympia itself and the mythic origins of the original games. The first known Olympic festival is thought to have taken place in 776 B.C. in honor of Zeus, though archaeological evidence suggests that Olympia had been the site of athletic contests from as early as the 11th century B.C. By 457 B.C., a massive temple had been constructed at Olympia, dedicated to Zeus, the patriarch of Greek deities. Romano goes on to discuss the construction of other large structures dedicated to the Olympiads as the Games took their place firmly within the religious and cultural traditions of the Greek world. He tells us of the enigmatic Olympic Register—a fragmentary record of Olympic victors thought to have first been compiled by Hippias of Elis in the 5th century B.C. Though incomplete, the register lists victorious athletes by name and accomplishment, and offers us the opportunity to view the ancient Olympiads through a more personal, human lens.

While most authors focus on the games themselves and the athletes who competed in them, Tony Perrottet takes up the question of why regular Greeks would make a long journey to an overcrowded and blazingly hot venue. The journey itself was usually made on foot over 200 miles and took approximately two weeks. Conditions upon arrival were often poor at best, and deadly at worst. Perrottet describes poor or non-existent sanitation, a lack of fresh drinking water, an unrelenting sun, and hordes of disease-carrying black flies. So how does one explain the nearly 70,000 spectators that journeyed to Olympia every fourth year for the better part of 12 centuries? Because, explains Perrottet, a journey to Olympia was a religious pilgrimage, and the Games themselves were one of the most important sacred festivals in the ancient Mediterranean. Spectators who made the journey were not just fanatical sports enthusiasts but also dedicated devotees of Zeus, who believed that making such a journey was to participate fully in the religious life of their society.

While the Olympic Games and the site that gave them their name loom large in our modern sports culture, Stephen Miller reminds us that the competitions held in Olympia were not the only panhellenic sports events of the ancient world. He describes a site in the Arcadian mountains called Nemea, where athletes would compete in games called the Nemeads. As the archaeologist responsible for the excavation of the site over a 20-year period, Professor Miller is an ideal tour guide as he leads us through a descriptive tour of the ancient sports facilities. An amusing sidebar explains the modern fascination with the ancient competition: the Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games has reinstituted the games of old, and participants compete in the same competitions as the ancient athletes once did. One exception has been made for modern sensibilities, however. In the modern Nemean Games, participants have the option of wearing clothing.

As the opening ceremonies of the 2012 London Olympic Games approach with pageantry and fanfare, spectators and sports enthusiasts will flock to London and significantly more will tune in on their televisions. Airplanes and modern media technology make being an Olympic fan

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a much easier endeavor today than it was 2500 years ago, and the circumstances in which the Games take place are both safer and more comfortable. However, the Games' popularity today demonstrate that competitive spirit and passionate fandom are nothing new. Let the Games begin!

REVIEWS

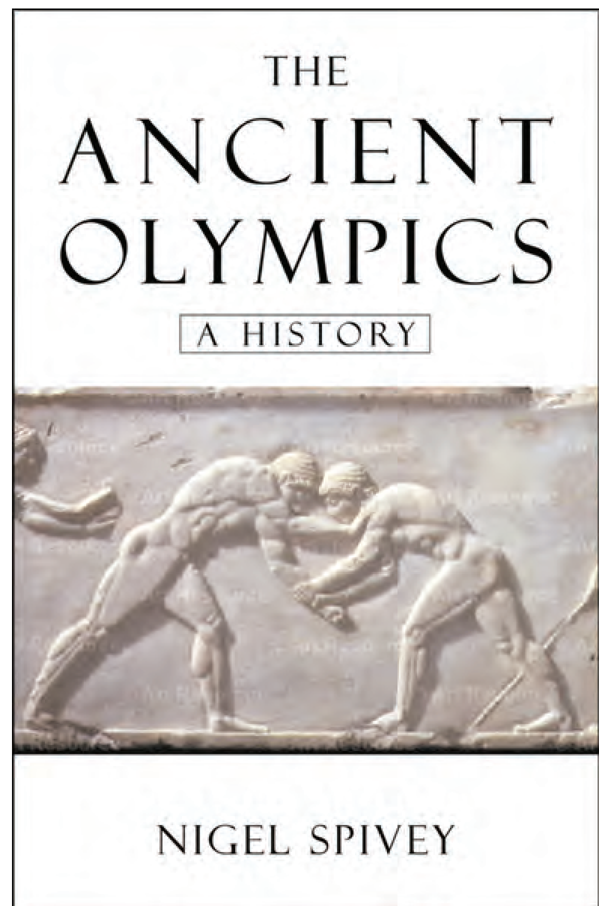
The Sporting Life

Five Books on Ancient Athletics

Jenifer Neils

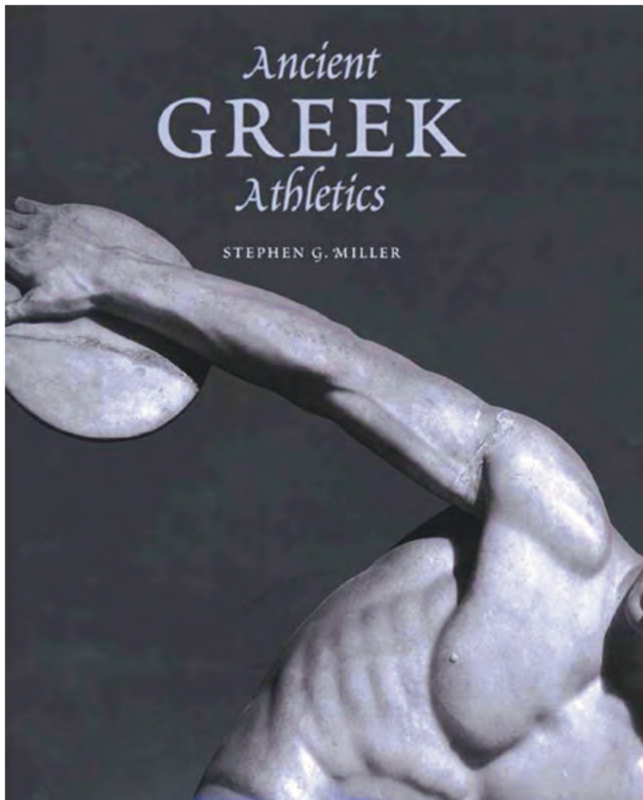
Every four years sports-obsessed Americans become captivated by a spectacle that traces its origins back nearly three millennia to the shadowy Dark Age of ancient Greece.

We know almost nothing about the first Olympic festival of 776 B.C.E. (or even if it was actually inaugurated on that traditional date). But the athletic-religious festival's subsequent development and impact on Greek society are the subject of numerous books—some newly published to coincide with the first modern Olympic Games to be held in Greece since their founding in 1896.



The book most obviously pitched at the 2004 Olympics is British classicist Nigel Spivey's *The Ancient Olympics* (Oxford University Press, 2004), which examines the military, social, political and commemorative aspects of the games. Like many revisionist scholars, Spivey wants to demonstrate that our view of the Olympics as a peaceful, clean, harmonious, amateur sporting event is completely erroneous; rather, it was characterized by strife, violence, cheating and highly specialized professional training—more NFL than Little League, or what George Orwell called "war minus the shooting."

Spivey demonstrates how political leaders from the would-be Athenian tyrant Kylon (sixth century B.C.) to the Judean king Herod (37-4 B.C.) used the games to advance their own agendas; the most infamous was the wealthy Alcibiades, who in 416 B.C. entered seven chariot teams at Olympia to assure a victory, which he then exploited to influence a military expedition three years later (it turned out disastrously). The rigorous training of athletes not only allowed them to earn a living but also to be upwardly mobile; much as an Olympic win today means lucrative endorsements, in antiquity victory meant free meals at state expense, tax exemptions and everlasting fame in the form of poetic encomiums and victory statues. Spivey argues persuasively that the remarkable longevity and resilience of the Olympics—over a period of some 1,200 years—were due to its gradual expansion from a purely local festival to one with trans-Mediterranean drawing power. For example, victory lists show local athletes dominating in the early years, colonists from Sicily and South Italy winning events in the sixth century B.C., and competitors from the eastern Mediterranean taking home olive crowns in the Hellenistic period and later.



The best of the new books on the ancient games is Stephen G. Miller's *Ancient Greek Athletics* (Yale University Press, 2004). With nearly 300 illustrations, a glossary and an extensive bibliography, this book will serve for years to come as the *locus classicus* for the history of sport in ancient Greece.

Miller traces the development of athletics from Bronze Age bull-leaping on Crete to the Roman emperor Nero's ten-horse chariot win at Olympia in 67 A.D. (though Nero quit before finishing the race, he was still awarded the olive wreath). *Ancient Greek Athletics* also discusses the other panhellenic "crown" competitions held at Delphi, Isthmia and Nemea. (Miller, an archaeologist with the University of California at Berkeley, discovered Nemea's stadium in 1974 and helped reconstruct its starting gate. His article "The Other Games: When Greeks Flocked to Nemea" appears in this issue.) The book's excellent diagrams help us visualize the mechanics of ancient sport—such as the use of jumping weights (carried by long-jumpers), or the staggered start of the horserace. Liberally supported with quotes from ancient authors, *Ancient Greek Athletics* is thorough, convincing and

lucid—accessible to the general reader and suitable as a textbook for courses on Greek athletics.

Three other books, though not so new, remain useful for the study of ancient Greek athletics and culture. A somewhat quirky but informative book by the German archaeologist Ulrich Sinn—*Olympia: Cult, Sport, and Ancient Festival* (Marcus Wiener Publishers 2000), an English translation of the 1996 German edition—also deals with the development of the festival. Sinn wants the reader to envision Olympia "without athletes," in its earlier phase as an important cult center *before* the contests were formally instituted. He emphasizes the relatively unknown facts that Olympia served as a gathering point for rich agriculturalists (hence its many bronze votive statues of cattle), that it was the site of an important oracle of Zeus (much as Delphi was the site of an oracle of Apollo) and that after the Persian Wars it became an arbitration center where city-states resolved their disputes. With an archaeologist's eye, Sinn examines Olympia's altars and temples, the spectator facilities and even the plumbing. Although he pays attention to the female deities worshiped on the site, he fails to mention the footraces for girls held in honor of Hera.

In his thought-provoking *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge University Press, 1998 [reprinted 2000]), historian Mark Golden does not delve into such minutiae as the scoring of the pentathlon; rather, he considers the big issues, like the relationship of athletics to warfare and religion. His wit and timely references—he draws analogies with Shaquille O'Neal, *Die Hard 3* and Canadian ice hockey—make for enjoyable reading, and his control of the vast bibliography is impressive.

Judith Swaddling's *The Ancient Olympic Games* (British Museum Press, 1980; 2nd edition 1999) is aimed at the interested lay reader. It presents the basic information in a readable form and is illustrated with color photographs of objects in the British Museum, where Swaddling is a curator. The revised edition includes discussion of exercise, diet, sports medicine and drugs—subjects of considerable interest in today's Olympics—as well as the revival of the Olympic Games more than a century ago at the instigation of the French nobleman Pierre de Coubertin.

Although contemporary culture is clearly saturated with competition of all kinds, this obsession was even more pervasive in antiquity. Mythical or fictional characters, like Sophocles's Orestes, compete in contests (Orestes participates in a chariot race at the Pythian Games in Delphi). In Plato's dialogues, men often compete to get the better of an argument. Ancient Greek playwrights competed in drama competitions, and ancient Greek singers competed in singing competitions. Even the apostle Paul—writing, of course, in Greek—tells us to fight the good fight, finish the course and earn the "crown" of righteousness.

Competition is here to stay, and the 2004 summer Olympians will have much in common with their first-millennium B.C. counterparts, including the heat, the flies and the hucksters.

Ancient Combat Sports

Michael B. Poliakoff

"You know that the Olympic crown is olive, yet many have honored it above life," wrote the Greek orator Dio Chrysostom (c. 40-110 C.E.).[1] Indeed, the occasional philosopher or doctor may have condemned the brutality and danger of ancient athletics, but the Greek public nevertheless accepted a good deal of hazard, injury and death.[2]

This is particularly true of the three Greek combat events—wrestling, boxing and pancratium (a combination of boxing and wrestling that allowed such tactics as kicking and strangling). Their history at ancient Olympia is long and eventful: Wrestling entered the program in 708 B.C.E., boxing in 688 B.C.E. and pancratium in 648 B.C.E. These grueling sports reveal much about the aspirations and values of ancient Greece, about what was deemed honorable, fair and beautiful, both in the eyes of those of who competed and those who traveled to Olympia to watch.

Combat sports were designed to be as physically taxing and uncomfortable as possible. This meant no time limits, no rounds, no rest periods, no respite from the midsummer sun.

One of the three ancient Greek combat sports, wrestling was celebrated for its complexity, as it required not only strength but precise skills and cunning. Wrestlers like those depicted on this fourth-century B.C.E. silver coin probably knew of the legendary exploits of Homer's Odysseus, who uses his wits to wrestle the massive Ajax to a draw in Book 23 of the Iliad.

Erich Lessing

His eyes fixed in an intense, burning glare, a wrestler controls his opponent in this 6-inch-tall bronze statue found in Alexandria, Egypt, dating to the second century B.C.E. One of the three ancient Greek combat sports, wrestling was celebrated for its complexity, as it required not only strength but precise skills and cunning. Wrestlers like those depicted on this statuette probably knew of the legendary exploits of Homer's Odysseus, who uses his wits to wrestle the massive Ajax to a draw in Book 23 of the Iliad.

According to some ancient authors, such as Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.) and Philostratus (third century C.E.), boxers could bear their opponents' blows more readily than the unremitting heat.[3] And the combat athlete might well have gone from one hard-earned and injurious victory straight into another round of competition.

Nor were there weight classes, so the ambitious but undersized athlete simply took his chances against larger competitors. In the event of a mismatch, the superior athlete was unlikely to show mercy. Some athletes were so terrifying that their opponents simply defaulted, allowing them to win *akoniti* (dust-free), without having to get dirty. A late-second-century C.E. athlete named Marcus Aurelius Asclepiades—who won the pancratium at many festivals, including the games held at Olympia—boasted in an inscription that he "stopped all (potential) opponents after the first round."[4] An inscription honoring the

Anthony Milavic

This second-century C.E. inscription from Olympia memorializes the 35-year-old boxer Agathos Daimon, whose nickname was "The Camel." Agathos Daimon had triumphed at the Nemean Games but died while competing at Olympia, after having "prayed to Zeus for victory or death." The inscription is a sobering reminder of the hazards involved in ancient combat sports. The Greeks weren't ignorant of the safety precautions taken in modern boxing; they simply chose to ignore them. As another Greek inscription, from the first century B.C.E., makes clear: "A boxer's victory is gained in blood."

Erich Lessing

A muscled boxer pauses, perhaps following a bout, in this first-century B.C.E bronze sculpture now in Rome's Museo Nazionale. Wrapped around his wrists are thin strips of oxhide, which protected the pugilist's knuckles and lacerated his opponent's face. In antiquity, boxing matches were brutal; there were no weight classes to protect smaller competitors (though men and boys fought separately), and bouts ended in submission, knockout or even death.

Erich Lessing

Preparing to fight, a boxer wraps his wrists with oxhide strips, in this red-figured amphora dating to the fifth century B.C.E. These so-called soft thongs, or himantes meilichai, *were in use until the fourth century B.C.E., when they were replaced by the even more devastating sharp thongs* (himas oxus), *gloves of leather 1 to 2 inches thick.*

wrestler Tiberius Claudius Marcianus recounts that at one festival, "when he undressed, all his opponents begged to be dismissed from the contest."[5]

The ancient Olympic world adhered to values very different from our own (or what we ideally think of as our own). In a speech given in 1908, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, said: "The purpose of these Olympiads is less to win than to take part in them,"[6] a sentiment later echoed by the sportswriter Grantland Rice:

> For when the One Great Scorer comes
> to mark against your name,
> He writes—not that you won or lost—
> but how you played the Game.

Preparing to fight, a boxer wraps his wrists with oxhide strips, in this red-figured amphora dating to the fifth century B.C.E. These so-called soft thongs, or himantes meilichai, *were in use until the fourth century B.C.E., when they were replaced by the even more devastating sharp thongs (*himas oxus*), gloves of leather 1 to 2 inches thick.*

Erich Lessing

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A wrestler lifts his opponent off the ground, holding him firmly in his grasp, in this 6-inch-tall, second-century B.C.E. bronze statuette discovered in Alexandria, Egypt. The philosopher Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) encouraged Athens's youth to wrestle, and the historian Plutarch (c. 46-120 C.E.), in his Quaestiones conviviales, *calls wrestling "the most technical and the trickiest" of sports. A Greek wrestling manual, dating to the first or second century C.E., confirms Plutarch's view, illustrating the intricacy of drills the Greeks used to teach tactics and counter tactics.*

The ancient Greeks did not view their Olympics in this way. A second-century C.E. inscription found at Olympia relates the ancient Olympic spirit with quiet dignity:

The chasm between ancient and modern widens further once we look more closely at the specific combat events contested at the panhellenic games.

The Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur, whose rules govern modern Olympic boxing, has precise requirements for boxing gloves—they must weigh 10 ounces, half of that weight consisting of padding, and they must be engineered to absorb, rather than transmit, shock. Association boxers must also wear headgear, mouth guards and ear protectors during their bouts; they must also use protection for the groin and lower abdomen. According to the guidelines of the Atlantic branch of the U.S.Amateur Boxing Association, "The main objective of Olympic-style boxing's rules and the actions and decisions of the referee is the safety and protection of boxers." What is remarkable about ancient Olympic boxing is that the Greeks recognized a number of ways to make the sport safer—and ignored all of them.

Scala/Art Resource, NY

This sixth-century B.C.E. drinking vessel, attributed to the so-called Heidelberg Painter, depicts a wrestler about to flip his opponent, as judges look carefully on. A variety of throws and holds were permitted in ancient Greek wrestling, such as headlocks, hip throws, body lifts and arm bars. Though tactics such as snapping an opponent's fingers were not technically permitted, they were sometimes overlooked by judges. Leontiskos of Messene, for example, broke a finger or two on his way to claiming two Olympic wrestling victories in the fifth century B.C.E.

"A boxer's victory is gained in blood," begins an inscription dating from the first century B.C.E., praising a tough and successful boxer.[8] The Greeks celebrated the hazards of boxing and the damage it caused, and their art did nothing to sanitize this damage. Boxers in vase paintings bleed from the nose; sculpted statues show broken noses and cauliflower ears. A second-century C.E. manual on the interpretation of dreams, by the Greek soothsayer Artemidorus, observes that boxing dreams ominously foretell a deformed face and loss of blood.[9]

Until the fourth century B.C.E., Greek boxers bound their hands with thin strips of oxhide. These "soft thongs" (*himantes meilichai*), as the Greeks called them, did nothing to protect boxers against concussions or facial lacerations. On the contrary, they protected the boxer's knuckles against fracture and the wrist against sprain: In effect, they simply encouraged more vigorous and damaging blows. The "sharp thongs" (*himas oxus*) that replaced them—consisting of a pad of leather, 1 to 2 inches

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1906

Other than biting or eye-gouging, any form of unarmed combat was tolerated in the brutal sport of pancratium, a kind of extreme fighting that did, on occasion, result in death. Strangling, kneeing the genitals, kicking, punching, locking onto limbs and joints—all were legal means of gaining a submission. Pancratiasts usually fought bare-fisted, but in this black-figure Attic vessel by the Theseus Painter, dating to around 500 B.C.E., they wear oxhide thongs similar to those used by boxers.

thick, tied over the boxer's knuckles—were even more damaging. Exactly when they became standard equipment is unclear, but a vase dated 336 B.C.E. shows a highly developed form of the thongs.

In Book 8 of the *Laws*, Plato says that during practice sessions boxers put on padded gloves called *sphairai* instead of thongs.[10] These padded gloves, however, were never used in competition. Needless to say, modern attempts to protect a boxer's eyes from injury—by mandating gloves that keep the thumb from being bound together with the fist—find no parallel in antiquity; ancient texts mention boxers whose eyes had been struck out.[11]

The boxing rules enforced by the judges at Olympia were minimal. As in other sports, boys and men competed in separate events—though, as already noted, there were no weight divisions that protected the welterweight from the crushing blows of the heavyweight. Clinching (the act of holding onto your opponent's body to slow a fight down) was forbidden, and we find depictions of judges using their sticks to punish such infractions. Technique mattered insofar as it led to submission or insensibility; the concept of winning by points or by judges' decision is modern, not ancient. In the absence of a knockout (or worse), the vanquished pugilist could hold up a finger to signal submission, a moment often seen in Greek vase paintings.

Unlike boxing and pancratium, a wrestling match typically did not end with submission or incapacitation, but rather with one competitor achieving technical mastery over his opponent. The ancients admired wrestling for the level of skill and science it required. Homer's Odysseus is the archetypal clever wrestler who deflects and neutralizes the massive strength of a far larger man (Ajax) in Book 23 of the *Iliad*. A statue honoring one Aristodamus of Elis for his victory at Olympia in 388 B.C.E. is inscribed with text reading, "I did not win by virtue of the size of my body, but by my technique."[12] In the *Laws*, Plato praised wrestling as a form of exercise well suited for the training of Athens's youth. Plutarch referred to the sport as "the most technical and the trickiest," and a surviving section of a first- or second-century C.E. wrestling manual shows how well developed the drills for tactics and counter tactics were.[13]

To gain a fall, the Greek wrestler had to take his opponent down, making the man's back or shoulders touch the ground or stretching him out prone. Three falls were necessary to win a contest. Not every fall was clear. Greek literature sometimes refers to disputes over whether a fall occurred.[14] The tactics depicted in Greek art suggest that very forceful holds and throws were common. Vase paintings and sculpture show headlocks and hip throws, shoulder throws and body lifts, including the reverse body lift that the formidable Russian wrestler Aleksander Karelin has used with such devastating effect in recent Olympiads. If a fall did not result from a wrestler's being thrown on his back, action would continue on the ground. Joints could be forced against their normal range of movement, and sculptures show a variety of arm bars and shoulder locks that would be illegal in modern Olympic wrestling.

The struggle was likely to be bitter and intense, however sophisticated the tactics. Greek sources are quite clear that choking an opponent into submission, though apparently uncommon, could result in a legitimate fall.[15] The great British historian of ancient sport E.N. Gardiner (1864-1930) may have written that “Wrestling, at all events in the early days before it was corrupted by professionalism, was free from all suggestions of that brutality which has often brought discredit on one of the noblest of sports,”[16] but the evidence proves otherwise. A recently discovered inscription from Olympia records a judges’ decree passed in the late sixth century B.C.E. forbidding wrestlers to break each other’s fingers and empowering the judges to flog athletes who disobeyed the rule.[17] Nevertheless, Leontiskos of Messene won the Olympic crown in wrestling in both 456 and 452 B.C.E. by using this tactic.[18]

Aside from biting or gouging into the soft parts of an opponent, all means of unarmed combat were legal in pancratium. A Greek synonym for pancratium, *pammachon* (total fight), describes the sport well. In fact, pancratium differed from modern “extreme fighting” largely by virtue of its having been a central, rather than marginal, part of the athletic world of its day. Exhibiting the power and extension of the legs, kicking was an essential part of pancratium, almost to the point of being an emblem of the sport. Driving the knee into an opponent’s genitals was a particularly effective tactic. Pancratiasts also punched and applied strangle holds and locks on their opponents’ limbs and joints, all with the purpose of forcing their rivals to concede the contest. One famous pancratiast, Sostratos of Sikyon, won 12 crowns at Nemea and Corinth, two at Delphi and three at Olympia (in 364, 360 and 356 B.C.E.) by using Leontiskos of Messene’s trick of bending back an opponent’s fingers. Sostratos used the tactic so effectively that many potential opponents forfeited their matches rather than meet him in the stadium.[19]

In his *Anacharsis*, the second-century B.C.E. writer Lucian imagined a typical pancratium bout:

> These folk standing up, who also have been coated with dust, punch and kick at each other in their attacks. And now this poor wretch looks like he is going to spit out even his teeth—his mouth is so full of blood and sand, having just taken a blow on the jaw.[20]

Typically, pancratiasts fought bare-fisted, leaving the hands free for wrestling and strangling holds, but at least two vase paintings show that sometimes they preferred the lacerative potential of the thong.

Gouging and biting were punished as foul play, and one vase painting shows a trainer vigorously flogging two pancratiasts for digging into each other’s faces. Greek authors, including the physician Galen (c. 129-199 C.E.), observed that quite a lot of gouging and biting did take place nonetheless—which is not entirely surprising in a contest that permitted, and rewarded, snapping an opponent’s fingers and kicking his genitals.

Reliving the Death of an Olympian

A new PBS documentary on the history of the Olympics captures the drama—and casualties—of the Greek combat sports. *The Real Olympics* was written and produced by Antony Thomas, whose controversial film *The South African Experience* caused the government of his native South Africa to ban him from the country in 1977. The ban went the way of the Apartheid regime, and indeed, much of the action in *The Real Olympics* was filmed in South Africa, where 35 local young athletes were recruited to star in the documentary. In May 2003, I flew to South Africa to train the actors, not only in the art of the discus, javelin and long jump, but also in the intricacies of the pancratium. Among the many sequences in the two-hour documentary is a reenactment of the final moments of the life of Arrhichion, who in the sixth century B.C.E. spectacularly died while winning his pancratium bout at Olympia. The actor playing Arrhichion shows how the venerated athlete, trapped by his opponent's standing body scissors and stranglehold, managed to dislocate his opponent's ankle while collapsing lifeless to the ground. Despite the scene's realism, no actors were injured during the filming!**—M.B.P.**

It is hard to say how often contests turned lethal. Greek texts seem quite clear that boxing was regarded as more injurious and dangerous than pancratium. But pancratium's hazards were very real, as is best evidenced by the extraordinary story of one Arrhichion.

Arrhichion of Phigalia had twice won the pancratium event at Olympia. In 564 B.C.E., his third attempt to win an Olympic crown, he advanced to the finals. During the final bout, Arrhichion was standing up when his opponent, whose name is not recorded, jumped on his back, clamped a leg scissors around his waist and strangled him with a forearm against his throat. Realizing that he was suffocating, Arrhichion chose to exit Olympia in a blaze of glory. Catching his opponent's right ankle in the crook of his right knee, he clamped his opponent's left leg to his own body with his left arm, thus preventing his opponent from releasing the hold. As he lost consciousness, Arrhichion fell toward the left while straightening his right leg against his opponent's ankle, wrenching it from its socket. His opponent, in agony, threw his hand in the air, signaling concession, not realizing, as he fell, that Arrhichion's corpse lay beneath him.

Just who participated in these grueling and often injurious ancient contests? The evidence is clear: everyone from blue bloods to men of modest means.[21] Diagoras of Rhodes, who boasted of both royal and mythical lineage (he claimed to be descended from Herakles), won in boxing at the 464 B.C.E. Olympics. His three sons all won Olympic events in boxing or pancratium, and his two grandsons won Olympic crowns in boxing.[22] In the first or second century C.E., Tiberius Claudius Rufus of Smyrna battled an opponent in the finals of the pancratium at Olympia until darkness and

the bravery of the performers convinced the judges to award both men the Olympic crown; the inscription honoring Tiberius Claudius Rufus notes that he was a personal acquaintance of the Roman emperor, implying the significant wealth and prestige of his family.[23]

Aristotle, on the other hand, tells of a fishmonger who won the boxing crown at Olympia (unfortunately, he provides no further details),[24] and the snobbish fifth-century B.C.E. Athenian general Alcibiades competed only in chariot racing, explaining that the other contests were populated by men of humble birth.[25] Indeed, one manifestation of the Greeks' democratic brilliance is that at ancient Olympia, competitors—rich or poor, aristocrats or tradesmen—were simply athletes; stripped naked for competition, they sought to prove they were the best in the Greek world. Although the incentive of valuable prizes or money (which the victors received at all ancient games, including those at Olympia) might have been powerful, especially for those of slender means, it does not explain why wealthy aristocrats eagerly joined in contests of this nature.

The lure for all Greeks was *kleos* (fame), the perfect antidote to the grim, disembodied obscurity of death. The Homeric poems, which were for the Greeks what the Bible became for later Western society, are permeated with the deeds of heroes, for which they are rewarded with *kleos*. Hector, the eldest son of King Priam and the Trojans' greatest warrior, speaks for all when he says that his heart did not know how to shrink back in battle, since the time "when [he] learned to be brave and always to fight in the front ranks of the Trojans, guarding [his] father's honor and [his] own also" (*Iliad* 22.458-59).

In time, however, phalanx warfare, with its highly organized ranks and files, eliminated the need for one-on-one combat, which figured centrally in the battles of an earlier age (as, perhaps, preserved in Homer). Greek city-states thus came to view their wartime victories as the achievements of the entire people, not of a heroic general, however brilliant or valorous he might have been.[26]

Only in combat sports could the Greek man prove his mettle in fighting one-on-one. (Indeed, nowhere else in Greek civic life was aggression both tolerated and encouraged. We know from surviving court speeches that the Athenians severely punished even casual acts of assault and battery with sanctions including the death penalty.)[27] By placing combat sports in the context of warfare, we can understand the baffling paradoxes of what the Greeks considered fair play. Just as on the battlefield, no handicap was awarded to smaller or weaker opponents. There were no weight classes in the combat sports to prevent a stronger man from brutalizing a weaker or less-experienced fighter. Athletes in the combat sports could not avoid thirst, discomfort or the heat of the sun, and warfare allowed for no periods of rest. The great athletic festivals, then, were a surrogate for the world of heroic combat that had vanished from Greek reality but was alive in the Homeric poems.

To win in competition was to strive for the heroic, to enjoy unending *kleos*. As the Greek poet Pindar (c. 522-440 B.C.E.) wrote, "He who braves the contest's struggle with success wins the fairest sense of inner peace for the remainder of his days."[28] The modern world will rightly depart—and depart sharply—from the ancient world's disregard for the safety of its competitors. Nevertheless, look this summer on the faces of those in Athens who brave a contest's struggle and then prevail: Their hard-earned joy is one of the continuities between ancient and modern times.

Notes

1. Dio Chrysostom 31.110.
2. See Michael B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 89-91.
3. See Cicero, *Brutus* 69; Philostratos, *Gymnastika* 11, Heroikos 15 (147 K.); Pausanias 6.24.1.
4. See *Inscriptiones Graecae* 14.1102; Luigi Moretti, *Iscrizioni agonistiche greche. Studi pubblicati dall' Istituto Italiano per la Storia Antica* 12 (Rome: Angelo Signorelli, 1953), no. 79; and Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, p. 106.
5. J.G.C. Anderson, *Journal of Roman Studies* 3 (1913), p. 287 n. 12.
6. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, "Les 'Trustees' de l'Idée Olympique," *Revue Olympique*, July 1908.
7. J.G.M.G. Te Riele, *Bulletin de Correspondence Hellenique* 88 (1964), pp. 186-87.
8. G. Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca* (Berlin, 1878), p. 942; and Moretti, *Inscrizioni agonistiche greche*, no. 55.
9. Artemidorus, *Oneirocriticus* 1.61-62.
10. Plato similarly recommended that soldiers engage in military exercises with weapons equipped with protective buttons on their tips. See Plato, *Laws* 830a-831a; see also Plutarch, *Praecepta rei publicae gerendae* 32 (Moralia 825e), with further discussion in Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, p. 73.
11. Libanius 64.119 and Galen, *Protrepticus* 12 (1.32 K.)
12. Denys Page, *Epigrammata Graeca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, LII, 283 ff; also see Joachim Ebert, *Griechische Epigramme auf Sieger an gymnischen und hippischen Agonen. Abhandlungen der Saechsichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, philologisch-historische Klasse* 63.2 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1972), no. 34.
13. Plato, *Laws*, 796b; Plutarch, *Quaestiones conviviales* 2.4 (Moralia 638d). For a translation of the wrestling manual, see Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, pp. 52-53.
14. For further information on disputes over scoring a fall, see Ambrose, Commentary on Psalm 36.51, in *Patrologia Latina* 14.1038-39; see also Aristophanes, *Knights*, pp. 571-73.
15. Lucian, *Anacharsis* 1.8; Nonnus, *Dionysiaka* 37.602-9.
16. E.N. Gardiner, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 25 (1905), p. 14-31.

17. Peter Siewert, “The Olympic Rules,” in *Proceedings of an International Symposium on the Olympic Games*, William Clulson and Helmut Kyrieleis, eds. (Athens, 1992), pp. 111-17.
18. Pausanias 6.4.3 tells of Leontiskos’s skill at breaking fingers.
19. Sostratos the pankratiast is known from Pausanias 6.4.1-2 and a surviving inscription: Moretti *Iscrizioni agonistiche greche*, no. 25; see also Ebert, *Griechische Epigramme*, no. 39.
20. Lucian, *Anacharsis* 3.
21. See H.W. Pleket, “Games, Prizes, and Ideology,” *Stadion* 1 (1976), pp. 49-89; and David C. Young, *The Olympic Myth of Amateur Greek Athletics* (Chicago: Ares, 1984).
22. The story of Diagoras and his family was often told in antiquity. See in particular Pausanias 6.7.1-7 and 4.24.1-3; Pindar praised Diagoras in a victory ode, Olympian 7, and Cicero tells the story, in *Tusculan Disputations* 1.46.111, of a spectator who saw Diagoras carried on the shoulders of his sons who had triumphed in boxing and pancratium on the same day at Olympia; the spectator remarked, “Die, Diagoras, for you cannot go up into heaven”—in other words, there is nothing greater that any mortal man could ever have.
23. Tiberius Claudius Rufus’s victory is commemorated on a surviving inscription, *Inscriften von Olympia* 54/55. For further discussion, see Reinhold Merkelbach, *Zeitschrift fur Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 15 (1974), pp. 99-104; and Walter Ameling, *Epigraphica Anatolica* 6 (1985), p. 30.
24. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1365a, 1367b; and Page, *Simonides XLI*, pp. 238-239
25. Isocrates, *On the Team of Horses* 16, pp. 2-35.
26. Note how the Athenians forbade the successful generals of the Persian wars to erect monuments to themselves; see Aeschines, *Against Ktesiphon*, pp. 183-186, with discussion in M. Detienne, “La Phalange,” in J.-P. Vernant, ed., *Problemes de la guerre en Grece ancienne* (Paris, 1968), pp. 127-28; also see Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, 112 ff.
27. See Isocrates, *Against Lochites* 20.9-11 and Demosthenes, *Against Meidias* 21.45.
28. Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 1.

When the Games Began

Sport, Religion and Politics Converged in Ancient Olympia

David Gilman Romano

It's one of history's curiosities. A rural sanctuary of Zeus in a relatively obscure part of Greece—far from the bustle and brilliance of Athens—became the site of the most famous athletic-religious festival of the entire ancient world, the direct precursor of the modern Olympic Games.

As in antiquity, we call these celebrations Olympiads, and we number them sequentially. Athletes from around the world participate in events also contested in long-ago Olympia: the javelin, the long jump, footraces, wrestling and boxing. Even the words we use to refer to these events are often the same ("discus," "pentathlon"), as are the names of places for competition and training ("gymnasium," "stadium" and "hippodrome").[a]

From *Ancient Greece*

Nestled in a valley bordered by the Alpheus and Kladeus rivers, the ancient sanctuary of Olympia hosted the earliest, and most prestigious, Greek athletic-religious festival. Starting in 776 B.C. as a simple foot race dedicated to Zeus, the quadrennial Olympic games expanded into a five-day festival—during which 100 bulls were sacrificed to Zeus, and athletic events were contested—that attracted tens of thousands of people to Olympia from all over the Greek-speaking world.

According to the fifth-century B.C. Greek poet Pindar,

> If you wish to celebrate great games
> look no further for another star
> shining through the sky
> brighter than the sun
> or for contests greater than the Olympic Games.[1]

Erich Lessing

Every four years, athletes, dignitaries, emissaries and tourists traveled to Olympia for an athletic-religious festival in honor of Zeus. The festival began with the second full moon following the summer solstice—that is, the end of July or the beginning of August. At first, in the eighth century B.C., the festival was small and the athletes came from the nearby cities and towns of the western and southern Peloponnesus. By the fifth century B.C., however, athletes were flocking to Olympia from all over the Greek-speaking world for the five-day celebration, and 100 bulls were sacrificed to Zeus at Olympia's sanctuary.

Olympia is actually located far from the mountain that gives the site its name. Mount Olympus, the tallest mountain in Greece (9,570 feet) and the mythological home of the Greek pantheon, sits hundreds of miles to the north. Olympia lies at the juncture of the Alpheus and the Kladeus rivers, in a wide, fertile river valley only 7 miles from the Ionian Sea.

The Olympic Games were the oldest and the most prestigious of the four great panhellenic festivals (or national festivals, as opposed to the numerous local festivals celebrated all over the Greek world), each of which was dedicated to a god. The games at Olympia (Zeus) were supposedly inaugurated in 776 B.C.; the games at Delphi (Apollo) in 582 B.C.; the games at Isthmia (Poseidon) also in 582 B.C.; and the games at Nemea (Zeus) in 573 B.C. (See Stephen G. Miller's "The Other Games: When Greeks Flocked to Nemea".)

The victors in all of the panhellenic events received symbolic awards, in the form of wreaths. Those who won events at local festivals, however, generally received prizes

Vanni Archive/Corbis

Zeus (the headless central figure) oversees preparations for a chariot race between the hero Pelops (to the left of Zeus) and King Oenomaus (to the right of Zeus), who ruled the area around Olympia. Now in Olympia's museum, these statues originally adorned the east pediment of the fifth-century B.C. Temple of Zeus at Olympia.

In Greek myth, Oenomaus promises his daughter, Hippodameia (left of Pelops), to any man who can beat him in a chariot race. Pelops bribes Oenomaus's charioteer, Myrtilus (shown kneeling next to Oenomaus's wife, who stands to the right of her husband), to loosen the linchpins of his master's chariot. After Pelops wins the race, he celebrates by establishing the religious/athletic festival at Olympia. In honor of Pelops, the region of Greece where Olympia is located is called the Peloponnesus ("Pelops Island").

of some material value; victors in the games at Argos won a shield, for example, while those who won in Athens received amphoras filled with olive oil. The panhellenic victors, too, often received a little something in addition to honor; they were routinely rewarded with cash and privileges upon returning home.[b] A fifth-century B.C. inscription recounts that Athenian citizens who won competitions at panhellenic festivals got a free meal every day for the rest of their lives in the *prytaneion* (town hall), along with other civic honors.[2]

Two Greek myths account for the origins of the ancient Olympic Games. According to Pindar, Heracles created the site of Olympia for the festival:

> [Heracles] measured out a sacred precinct for his father most mighty; he fenced in the *altis*[c] and set it apart in the open, and he made the surrounding plain a resting place for banqueting.[3]

The second-century A.D. writer Pausanias relates that Heracles won victories at Olympia in wrestling and pancratium.[4]

In another story, a young man named Pelops travels to the western Peloponnesus to compete for the hand of Hippodameia, the daughter of the wealthy king Oenomaus. According to Pindar, Pelops and Oenomaus compete in a chariot race, during which the king is killed. Pelops wins the race, marries Hippodameia and establishes the Olympic

The Art Archive/Dagli Orti

A Doric colonnade encloses Olympia's third-century B.C. palaestra, a large square courtyard where ancient athletes trained for the games. A series of rooms and halls opened off the colonnade, including three chambers that functioned as a library, and a room that served as a dining room.

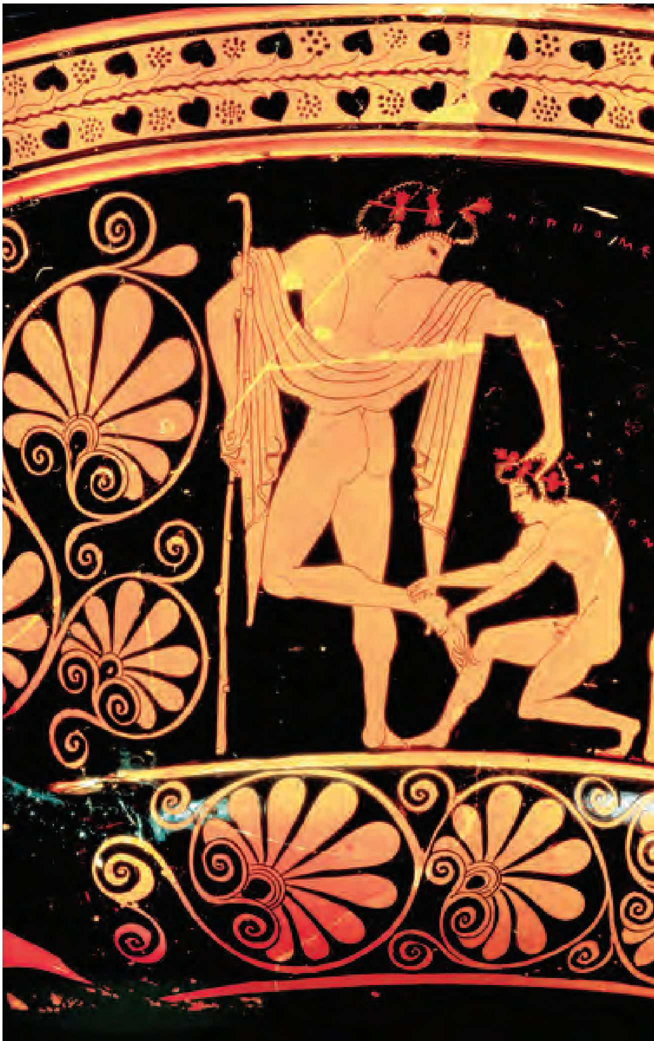
Games.[5] The region of Greece where Olympia is found is thus named the Peloponnesus, or "Pelops Island." At Olympia, the ancients erected a shrine to Pelops, called the Pelopeion.

Both myths are depicted in the sculptural program of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. The pedimental sculpture from the east facade depicts the moment before the chariot race between Pelops and Oenomaus, and the metopes—or relief carvings—inside the front and rear porches include depictions of Heracles's 12 labors (one was to clean the Augean Stables, which Heracles accomplished by diverting one of the two rivers that meet at Olympia, the Alpheus).

The exact origins of the Olympic festival, however, are lost in the shadowy dark ages of Greek history. The 776 B.C. date is based on the Olympic Register, a listing of Olympic victors compiled by Hippias of Elis in the fifth century B.C. and then worked on by others throughout antiquity. But there is evidence that the religious cult, and possibly even the athletic contests, may be even older. Pottery found in recent German excavations at Olympia suggests that cult activity in the area of the *altis* (the

The Art Archive/Dagli Orti

Only naked athletes and the judges who officiated at the games were permitted to pass through this entranceway, described by the second-century A.D. writer Pausanias as "the secret entrance." The arched gate, newly constructed at the time of Pausanias's visit, opened into a vaulted tunnel that led to Olympia's stadium, which was built in the fourth century B.C. on the site of a running track (dromos) *dating centuries earlier.*



Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY

An athlete balances on one foot while his trainer helps him stretch, on this sixth-century B.C. red-figure krater painted by Euphronius. The athletic/religious festival at Olympia was dedicated to Zeus, the chief god of the Greek pantheon, and victorious athletes were thought to be the favorites of Zeus–largely because they combined prodigious athletic prowess with moderation and modesty.

enclosed heart of the sanctuary) dates to the late 11th century B.C.[6] Bronze dedications from the tenth and ninth centuries B.C. have also been discovered at Olympia, including tripods and miniature charioteers—which may indicate that equestrian games were held at this early date.

The sanctuary of Zeus lay just south of Cronus Hill (named after Zeus's father). The principal part of the sanctuary was the *altis*, a walled enclosure that included the ash altar of Zeus, the altar of Hera (Zeus's wife), the Pelopeion, the Temple of Hera, the Temple of Zeus and the Temple of Rhea (Zeus's mother). Statues were set up in and around the *altis* to honor victorious athletes and to commemorate military victories and political alliances.

The ash altar to Zeus was probably the earliest structure at the sanctuary. At the beginning of each Olympic festival, participants would march into the sanctuary and sacrifice 100 bulls to Zeus at this altar. In the second century A.D., according to Pausanias, the altar consisted of a stone platform, where animals were sacrificed; piled on this base was a tower of ash, where the thighs of the sacrificed animals were burned. Pausanias observes that the ash altar reached 22 feet into the air. Following the sacrifice of the bulls, the crowd consumed the meat at a great public banquet.[7]

The massive Temple of Zeus, built between 471 and 457 B.C., was 210 feet long and 90 feet wide—only 16 feet shorter and 10 feet narrower than the Parthenon in Athens (which was completed some 20 years later). The temple's Doric colonnade consisted of six columns at each end and 13 columns along the sides, and the roof supported tiles made of Pentelic marble (from Mount Pentelicus, near Athens, which also supplied the marble for the Parthenon). The temple's pediments, 40 feet above the

Erich Lessing

The stern countenance of Theodosius I—depicted on this 10-inch-high, fourth-century A.D. marble bust—seems to express the Roman emperor's reputation as a staunch defender of Christianity. Originally a Spanish officer in the Roman army, Theodosius ruled the eastern empire from 379 to 395 A.D. His edict of 393 A.D. forbade all pagan worship and festivities, including the Olympic games, and marked an end to a millennium-long tradition.

ground, were adorned with sculptures depicting scenes from Greek myth—Lapiths battling Centaurs on the west end, and Pelops, Oenomaus and their entourages on the east end (where visitors entered).

Inside the temple, completely filling its west end, was a 40-foot-high bronze statue of Zeus sitting on a throne—which became one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The statue was made by the Athenian sculptor Phidias (c. 490-425 B.C.) in a common Greek style called chryselephantine, meaning that it was covered with gold and ivory (like the statue of Athena in the Parthenon, which was also made by Phidias).

To the west of the Temple of Zeus was a modest fifth-century B.C. facility where the Olympian athletes bathed. The building had a series of tubs, in which the athletes reclined and had water poured over their heads. A 5-foot-deep swimming pool, measuring 79 feet by 52 feet, lay adjacent to the baths; this pool also dates to the fifth century B.C.

In the third century B.C. a palaestra was added just north of the bath building. This was a large open-air courtyard enclosed on all four sides by a colonnade, which was surrounded by rooms. The Greek word "palaestra" means "the place of wrestling," so wrestling and other events were probably practiced in the courtyard.

In the second century B.C. a large gymnasium was constructed to the north of the bath facility. This structure included a roofed racecourse, 600 feet long, allowing runners to train under cover. The gymnasium also included a large open-air courtyard for practicing the discus, javelin and long jump.

A vaulted entrance led from the *altis* to the stadium, and this was the route that athletes and judges would follow during the games.

The Olympic stadium evolved considerably over the years. It began as a simple rectangular running track, or *dromos*, on which the athletes competed. Gradually spectator facilities were added around the sides of the race track. Archaeologists have found starting lines carved in stone at both ends of the *dromos*, 600 feet apart (the length of a *stadion*). Spectators used the northern slope of the Cronus Hill to view the contests. By the mid-fifth century B.C., the *dromos* was surrounded on four sides by artificial earth embankments on which 45,000 spectators could watch the contests.

Spectators at Olympia stood while watching the games. The word *stadion*, in fact, may have originally meant "the standing place"—only later coming to mean the length of the stadium (and, for us, the stadium itself). The judges, however, had a small seating section reserved for them on the southern embankment of the stadium. There were also simple seats for dignitaries and diplomats.

The hippodrome—for equestrian events—was located south of the stadium, in the broad, flat plain north of the Alpheus River. Although the hippodrome has not been excavated, Pausanias gives us a description of the structure with particular attention to the mechanical starting gates, designed by one Kleoetas, which provided a fair start for as many as 40 chariots at one time. The starting line had the triangular shape of the prow of a ship, with each of the two sides more than 400 feet long. A mudbrick altar at the tip of the "prow" held a bronze eagle with outstretched wings. The contestants lined up along the wings of the prow, behind ropes held by officials. They then moved slowly forward; when they came even with the altar, the ropes were released and the race began. The hippodrome track was probably about 2,000 feet long and 650 feet wide. One lap of the hippodrome would have been about three-quarters of a mile long.[8]

Athletes at ancient Olympia competed to please Zeus. An Olympic champion was the man most pleasing to the god, and the qualities that made him attractive to the god were *aidos* (modesty and self-respect), *sophrosune* (moderation) and *arete* (excellence).

Pausanias tells us that the athletes who competed at Olympia had to swear an oath in the bouleuterion (the archives building), before a statue of Zeus Horkios (Zeus holding a thunderbolt in each hand) and upon slices of boar's flesh—that they would do nothing to dishonor the Olympic Games.[9] The athletes also had to swear that they had followed the regulations for training during the ten preceding months. The athletes trained at Elis, another town in the western Peloponnesus, for the month directly before the festival at Olympia.

From the Olympic Register, we have the names of more than 794 ancient Olympic champions,[10] who won a total of 1,029 events.[11] The first recorded victor was Koroibos

of Elis, who won the *stadion* race in 776 B.C. The last champion we know about was Zopyrus, a late-fourth-century A.D. boxer from Athens.[12]

Unfortunately, the Olympic Register is incomplete, nor does it include athletes who competed but did not win. In the 293 Olympiads from 776 B.C. to 393 A.D., 4,760 events were contested; our known 1,029 victories constitute less than 22 percent of the total number. If the ratio between victors and victories recorded in the Olympic Register (794:1,029) is representative of what actually happened over the entire history of the games, we would expect to have 3,672 ancient victors—meaning that we know nothing at all about 2,878 Olympic champions. Possibly future scholars will discover the names and deeds of at least some of these unknown heroes.

Is it possible to determine the greatest Olympic champion? We know of seven athletes who won three times in a single day, the so-called *triastes*. The only known athlete to accomplish this feat on more than one occasion was Leonidas of Rhodes, who achieved *triastes* status at four different festivals between 164 B.C. and 152 B.C. He was a swift, powerful runner, winning the *stadion* (a sprint of 600 feet, or one length of the stadium), the *diaulos* (a sprint of 1,200 feet, or two lengths of the stadium) and the *hoplitodromos* (a race with armor). Leonidas's 12 gold medals (or, rather, olive wreaths) may well make him the greatest Olympic athlete of antiquity, perhaps even of all time.

The ancient Olympic festival, based so completely on the cult of Zeus, came to a close because of competition from another religion: Christianity. Following Constantine (274-337 A.D.), most Roman emperors embraced Christianity as the state religion and, as such, sought to end pagan cults and festivals, like the cult of Zeus at Olympia. The most conspicuous competition for the Christian church came in the form of the festive, intense and wildly popular Olympic Games. In 393 A.D. the Roman emperor Theodosius I closed all pagan temples and called for the end of pagan festivals.

Ancient Olympiads: A Glossary of Events

stadion 600-foot sprint, one length of the racecourse.

diaulos 1,200-foot sprint, two lengths of the racecourse.

dolichos distance race of 2-3 miles, 16-24 lengths of the racecourse.

hoplitodromos race in which the men wore armor.

pentathlon competition of five events: discus, javelin, long jump, wrestling and a *stadion* race. (The discus, javelin and long jump were only contested as part of the pentathlon, not separately.)

pancratium combination of boxing, kicking and wrestling—like modern Thai kick-boxing.

tethrippon four-horse chariot race.

synoris two-horse chariot race.

apene mule-cart race.

calpe a race for mares.

Date	**Event**
776 B.C.	*stadion* (600-foot sprint)
724 B.C.	*diaulos* (1,200-foot sprint)
720 B.C.	*dolichos* (distance race of 2-3 miles)
708 B.C.	*wrestling*, pentathlon
688 B.C.	boxing
680 B.C.	*tethrippon* (4-horse chariot race)
648 B.C.	pancratium, horse race
632 B.C.	*stadion* and wrestling for boys
628 B.C.	pentathlon for boys (discontinued same year)
616 B.C.	boxing for boys
520 B.C.	*hoplitodromos* (race in armor)
500 B.C.	*apene* (mule-cart race; discontinued 444 B.C.)
496 B.C.	*calpe* (race for mares; discontinued 444 B.C.)
408 B.C.	*synoris* (2-horse chariot race)
396 B.C.	competitions for heralds and trumpeters
384 B.C.	chariot racing for teams of 4 colts
268 B.C.	chariot racing for teams of 2 colts
256 B.C.	races for colts
200 B.C.	pancratium for boys

Growth of the Olympic Games

During the span of 1,200 years, from 776 B.C. to 393 A.D., only 23 events were contested as a part of the festival at Olympia. They fall into four categories: men's competitions (8 events), boys' competitions (5 events), equestrian races (8 events), and specialty competitions for trumpeters and heralds (2 events). These 23 events were not introduced all at once but gradually over time. Following is a list of what events were added when, according to the Olympic Register:

The Other Olympiad

Games for Girls

In his *Description of Greece*, the second-century A.D. traveler Pausanias tells of a second festival held at Olympia, called the Heraia.

Every four years a committee of 16 married women, one from each of the cities of the region, wove a sacred robe called a *peplos* for Hera (the wife of Zeus) and held games—footraces for unmarried girls—in three age groups. The three races were held in the stadium at Olympia, though the race was only 5/6 the length of the *dromos* (the running track in the stadium) for boys and men.

HIP/Scala/Art Resource, NY

Pausanias vividly describes the girls running their races: their hair hangs down their back, their *chiton* reaches to just above the knees, and they bare their right shoulder as far as the breast (as can be seen in the early-fifth-century B.C. bronze figurine, probably from Sparta). Each victor received an olive wreath, a portion of the cow that was sacrificed to Hera, and the right to make an offering to Hera.

The Temple of Hera, the earliest temple at Olympia, was built around 600 B.C. It was a Doric structure originally with wooden columns, though these were gradually replaced with stone columns. Some scholars believe that in the beginning this temple was used to house both the cult of Zeus and the cult of Hera, since the Temple of Zeus at Olympia was not built for almost 150 years.—**D.G.R.**

The 12 Greatest Ancient Olympians

Leonidas of Rhodes	(*stadion*, *diaulos*, *hoplitodromos*): 12 victories in four festivals from 164 B.C. to 152 B.C.
Herodoros of Megara	(competition for heralds): 10 victories in ten festivals from 328 B.C. to 292 B.C.
Hermogenes of Xanthos	(*stadion*, *diaulos*, *hoplitodromos*): 8? victories in three festivals from 81 to 89 A.D. (the Olympic Register is somewhat unclear).
Astylos of Kroton	(*stadion*, *diaulos*, *hoplitodromos*): 7 victories in three festivals from 488 B.C. to 480 B.C.
Hipposthenes of Sparta	(boys' wrestling, wrestling): 6 victories in six festivals from 632 B.C. to 608 B.C.
Milo of Kroton	(boys' wrestling, wrestling): 6 victories in six festivals from 536 B.C. to 516 B.C.
Chionis of Sparta	(*stadion*, *diaulos*): 6 victories in three festivals from 664 B.C. to 656 B.C.
Nero of Rome	(competition for heralds, tragedy, lyre, *tethrippon*, foals *tethrippon*, 10-horse chariot): 6 victories in one festival in 67 A.D. (these games were later declared illegitimate).
Gorgos of Elis	(*diaulos*, *hoplitodromos*, *pentathlon*): 6 victories in four festivals (dates unknown).
Aelius Granianus of Sikyon	(*diaulos*, *hoplitodromos*, pentathlon): 5 victories in four festivals from 133 to 145 A.D.
Demetrios of Salamis	(*stadion*, pentathlon): 5 victories in three festivals from 229 to 237 A.D.
Diogenes of Ephesus	(competition for trumpeters): 5 victories in five festivals from 69 to 85 A.D.

Notes

a. There are startling differences as well. Whereas the ancient festival was held in Olympia over a period of about 1,200 years, the modern games move around the world from city to city. The modern games, too, are much larger and more extravagant, probably the greatest secular gathering of peoples in the history of mankind. At the 2000 games in Sydney, Australia, for example, 10,651 athletes from 199 countries competed in 300 events, for which 6.7 million tickets were sold. And 3.5 billion people watched the games on television!

b. The Greek word *athletes* means "one who competes for a prize (*athlon*)" and could refer to those who won symbolic prizes as well as prizes of material worth.
c. The *altis* at Olympia was an enclave of temples, altars and freestanding statuary enclosed by a wall—the cult center of the sanctuary.

1. Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 1.5-8.
2. *Inscriptiones Atticae*, vol. 1 (2), 77.
3. Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 10.43-45.
4. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 5, 8, 4.
5. Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 1.
6. Helmust Kyrieleis, "Zu Anfangen des Heligtums von Olympia," *Olympia 1875-2000, 125 Jahre Deutsche Ausgrabungen* (Mainz am Rhein, 2002), pp. 215-217.
7. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 5, 13, 8-11.
8. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 6, 20, 10-19.
9. Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 5, 24, 9.
10. L. Moretti lists a total of 794 individual Olympic victors in two publications: *Olympionikai, i vincitori negli antichi agoni Olimpici* (Rome: MemLinc, 1957).
11. This number includes Olympic victories of uncertain date and authenticity.
12. This information comes from a bronze inscription from the clubhouse of the athlete's guild at Olympia. The building was constructed in the first century A.D. by Nero and was in continuous use until the late fourth century A.D. (see U. Sinn, *Olympia: Cult, Sport and Ancient Festival* [Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2000], pp. 114-118).

Walking to Olympia

Who Went, How They Got There, and Where They Stayed

Tony Perrottet

There was a man who thought the journey to Olympia would be too much for him, and Socrates said: 'What are you afraid of? Don't you walk around all day in Athens? Don't you walk home to have lunch? And again for dinner? And again to sleep? Don't you see that if you string together all the walking you do in five or six days anyway you could easily cover the distance from Athens to Olympia?'"

—Xenophon, *Memorabilia*

Archivo Iconografico, S.A./Corbis

Ancient Greek spectators could never be accused of being couch potatoes: They had to be in good shape just to get to the Olympic Games.

Most travelers went on foot, picking their way over rocky trails that curled snake-like through mountains and ravines. Including rest days and stopovers, many people would have

The 200-mile trip from Athens to Olympia began at Athens's Dipylon Gate and proceeded past the Kerameikos Cemetery, with its carved steles and funerary sculptures. On foot, the journey took roughly two weeks, and travelers needed both stamina and strength to negotiate the rocky trails and treacherous mountain passes along the way. (The large-bellied travelers depicted on the fourth-century B.C. vase painting might not have been hardy enough to manage such a trip.) At least the Greeks didn't have to worry about being ambushed by highwaymen: A sacred truce, honored throughout the Greek world, protected all those traveling to the Olympics and the other panhellenic athletic festivals at Delphi, Nemea and Isthmia.

The Art Archive/Dagli Orti

The 200-mile trip from Athens to Olympia began at Athens's Dipylon Gate and proceeded past the Kerameikos Cemetery, with its carved steles and funerary sculptures. On foot, the journey took roughly two weeks, and travelers needed both stamina and strength to negotiate the rocky trails and treacherous mountain passes along the way. At least the Greeks didn't have to worry about being ambushed by highwaymen: A sacred truce, honored throughout the Greek world, protected all those traveling to the Olympics and the other panhellenic athletic festivals at Delphi, Nemea and Isthmia.

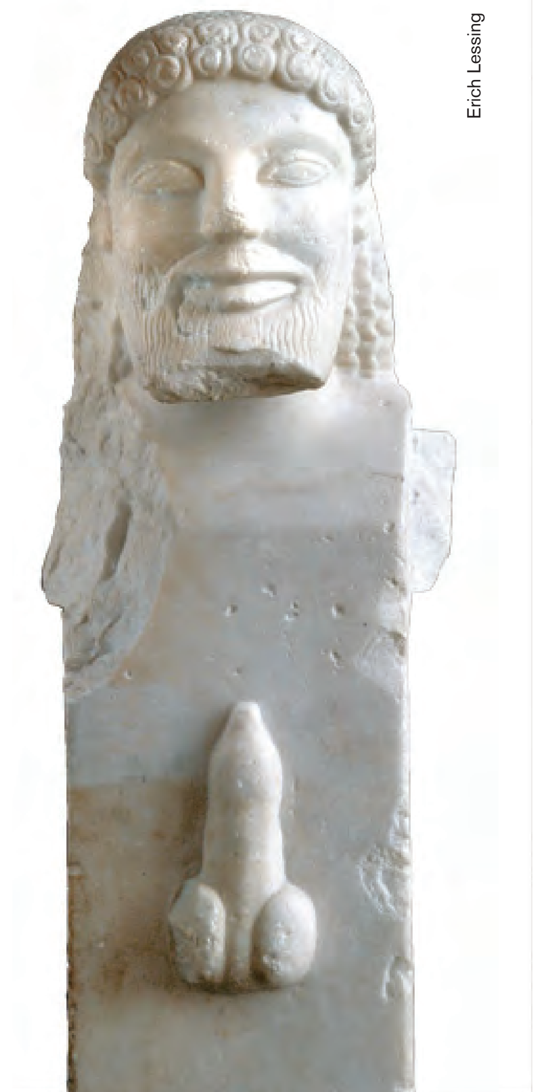
allowed two weeks to reach the site of the games at Olympia, located in the Peloponnesus in southwestern Greece, about 200 miles west of Athens. Along the way, ancient travelers passed through a traditional rural world, dotted with temples full of sacred relics, encountering vignettes of eerie piety. According to the second-century A.D. travel writer Pausanias, Olympia was where the aura of divinity was most tangible on earth, and the closer travelers got to their goal, the more the air seemed to glow with a sense of pagan wonder. In this way, the journey was a kind of pilgrimage.

Today, the road from Athens to Olympia, driven by multitudes of rental cars, follows almost exactly the same route as it did 2,500 years ago—although at times it takes a serious leap of imagination to recapture the dreamlike atmosphere of ancient times. The initial escape from the Greek capital follows a six-lane highway littered with billboards. But after a few miles, the rural foundation of Greece reasserts itself, and we can at least begin to see some of the same majestic mountain views that greeted groups of rank-and-file Greek spectators as they trudged toward the Olympic Games.

Fans traveling from Athens would have left the city through the Dipylon Gate, kissed their fingertips in homage as they passed the last shrines of the city, and set off past Kerameikos Cemetery, against whose solemn funerary sculptures prostitutes plied their trade at night. From here, they could take one last glance back at the Acropolis, crowned by the Parthenon and a giant bronze statue of the goddess Athena. Athens was the largest and richest city in mainland Greece, and was universally regarded as the most artistically graceful in the entire Mediterranean world. Athenians themselves were the Parisians of antiquity—vain, verbose, divisive, energetic, cerebral, brilliant, contradictory and, to non-Athenians, unbearable. Deeply superstitious despite their worship of Reason, they would have made careful sacrifices for a safe journey the day before.

We can picture a group of those ancient travelers, perhaps a dozen friends and family members, walking together. The male travelers would all be wearing linen *chitons*, the loose, sleeveless tunics made from two squares of white cloth loosely draped over the body, leaving one shoulder exposed. These tunics were usually worn to below the knees, but on the road they were hitched up by a belt to make walking easier. The men also wore leather sandals tied up the calves and wide-brimmed hats called *pastasoi*. The one or two intrepid women in the group would have worn brightly-colored tunics that were ankle-length, with finer hats over their ribbon-adorned hair. Some wore brooches and jewelry, and carried parasols.

Greeks tended to travel light, with only a pouch slung over the shoulder containing a single change of clothes, a short cape (*chlamys*), some cooking utensils and a woolen blanket for bedding. The better-off travelers would have brought a servant as bearer, or a donkey with panniers for provisions. Wealthy women brought



Erich Lessing

The route leading out of Athens was lined with pillars known as Herms. These representations of Hermes, the patron god of travelers, show only the deity's face and erect penis. The marble Herm shown here, a little more than 2 feet tall, dates to the sixth century B.C. Found in Siphons, one of the islands of the western Cyclades, the pillar is now in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

Sonia Halliday

The Doric columns of a mid-sixth-century B.C. temple rise above the ruins of ancient Corinth, with the hilltop site of the city's acropolis looming in the distance. After a week on the road, travelers heading from Athens to Olympia would have reached Corinth, where they would have stopped for a much-needed break. Corinth was known for its drinking establishments and its prostitutes, who turned tricks in the temple to Aphrodite, located on the crest of the hill. Travelers thus left Corinth refreshed, ready to take on the serpentine and picturesque road winding through the Arcadian mountains.

more luggage, with cosmetics boxes and gowns. The truly rich, as we will see, were a different breed, traveling across Greece in luxury safaris.

Thanks to the Olympic Truce—a cease-fire honored throughout the Greek world—travelers enjoyed a degree of safety unheard of elsewhere in the Mediterranean. They weren't just spectators going to an over-hyped sports meet. They were holy pilgrims, and to interfere with them was an act of sacrilege against Zeus himself. Wars were stalled; feuds were put aside; highwaymen lay low. Even the powerful king Philip of Macedonia (382-336 B.C.), father of Alexander the Great, had to apologize when some of his mercenaries shook down an Athenian traveler on the way to the Olympics.

Most travelers on foot could make 15 miles a day on decent roads. The highway started out well paved from Athens, the route marked by pillars dedicated to Hermes, the patron deity of travelers; called Herms, these pillars showed the god's face and erect penis. But conditions quickly deteriorated, and the travelers' pace slowed. To cross the narrow isthmus connecting the peninsula of the Peloponnesus to the rest of Greece, wayfarers had to shuffle in single file on a dangerous, narrow trail along dizzying cliffs. In Greek legend, it was here that a villain named Scyron ordered hapless passersby to wash his feet before giving them a swift kick in the face, sending them plunging down into the turquoise sea. The crumbling ledges and scree made this a nerve-wracking trail; travelers could trip and fall to their deaths, or even be dragged down the cliff by panicking mules. (Only in the second century A.D. did the Roman emperor Hadrian finally improve the route, turning it into a fine highway wide enough for two chariots to pass abreast.)

It was a relief, after a week on the road, to reach Corinth, gateway to the Peloponnesus and a crossroads to the eastern Mediterranean. This beguiling rest stop was renowned for its luxurious marble arcades lined with drinking shops and a temple to Aphrodite that was attended by

Dan Smith/Getty Images

Upon finally arriving at Olympia, the truly distinguished spectators—ambassadors and officials—avoided the hordes and stayed at an inn called the Leonidaion, a large squarish building with an open interior courtyard (the remains of the building's foundation are shown). A philanthropist named Leonidas of Naxos built the inn in the fourth century B.C. Everyone else headed for the altis, *or sacred precinct of Zeus, with aristocrats setting up elaborate tents, equipped with marble tiles and mosaic floors, and the poor throwing down their bedding wherever they could, turning the site into a kind of sprawling refugee camp.*

From *Ancient Olympic Games*

Upon finally arriving at Olympia, the truly distinguished spectators—ambassadors and officials—avoided the hordes and stayed at an inn called the Leonidaion, a large squarish building with an open interior courtyard (a model of the Leonidaion is shown in the foreground). A philanthropist named Leonidas of Naxos built the inn in the fourth century B.C. Everyone else headed for the altis, *or sacred precinct of Zeus, with aristocrats setting up elaborate tents, equipped with marble tiles and mosaic floors, and the poor throwing down their bedding wherever they could, turning the site into a kind of sprawling refugee camp.*

hundreds of proficient sex workers. Streams of road-weary travelers from Thebes, Argos, Thessaly and Megara converged here for some R-&-R, and were joined by the first contingents of spectators arriving from across the seas.

These international arrivals came from Greek colonies as far away as Spain and the Black Sea. As Plato put it, the Greeks perched around the Mediterranean "like frogs around a pond," and for a few silver coins, traveling spectators could sleep on the decks of the innumerable Greek merchant ships crisscrossing the seas. The vessels were built for stability rather than speed, gliding close to shore under a single square sail. An ancient cruise was not without its pleasures: Servants would prepare dinner in the galley, and wine would be shared amongst the passengers to fuel learned conversation under the stars.

From Corinth, one could hop a boat west to Elis, but most took the ancient highway that wound through the mountains of Arcadia. Today, this road is still one of the loveliest in Greece. Often no more than a single lane, it coils around villages perched on precipices, past quiet waterfalls and over archaic stone bridges. In shady grottos, men in peaked caps play backgammon and sip sweet black coffee outside taverns where sides of lamb are roasted over coals. Orange trees drop their fruit across the byways, and the road is occasionally blocked by herds of goats driven by white-bearded Orthodox priests in black robes, who emerge momentarily from their isolated retreats.

For ancient travelers, Arcadia was the folkloric heartland of Greece, ruled by the god Pan, who played his pipes in secret caves and furiously masturbated. They passed enchanted springs where lepers swam to cure themselves, clusters of holy men carried saplings on their backs as part of a chthonic fertility rite, and crowds of women wailed and tore their faces in mourning for the hero Achilles, who had been killed at Troy many centuries before. In the forests were tree stumps roughly carved into statues of the gods and oaks adorned with the horns of sacrificial animals. Wayfarers could pause at remote temples, where for a modest fee priests would show them mythological artifacts like the thighbones of giants (actually dinosaur fossils),[a] the

hides of monstrous Gorgons, and personal artifacts supposedly once belonging to Ulysses or King Agamemnon, all lovingly burnished by torch-light and framed by curtains of purple and gold.

For accommodation in these backwaters, travelers stopped at rural inns called *pandokeion* ("places that take all comers")—dark and fetid little boxes with hard, narrow beds, leaky roofs and mosquito-filled ceilings. Even the well-to-do often had no choice but to put up in these grim roadside hovels, whose owners were often associated with disease and ill omens: It was believed that if a sick person dreamed of an innkeeper, he or she would soon die. Female hoteliers were widely regarded as witches, who could turn hapless male travelers into mules or magically string them up to the rafters by their genitals. And the cuisine at these sordid pit-stops was even worse than at the cheapest roadside diner today. Rumors circulated of unlucky ancient travelers finding human flesh and knucklebones in the stews.

In a way, the rough conditions of the journey to Olympia were good preparation for the five days at the festival. When weary travelers finally found themselves gazing upon the green valley of the Alpheus River, they would have been dazzled by the sheer beauty of the sanctuary. They would have made their first tour of the site in a daze, drinking in the illustrious artworks, the sheer color and excitement of the crowd, the stadium they had heard about all their lives.

So long as one was not too finicky about the conditions.

Of course, the rich had it better than the poor. Ambassadors and officials, for example, had reservations at the one luxurious inn in ancient Olympia, the Leonidaion—a sumptuous two-story complex named after Leonidas of Naxos, the visionary philanthropist who built it in the fourth century B.C. These lucky guests could stretch out in one of the 20 suites on each floor—the roomiest, on the corners, were 35 square feet—all with views of a central courtyard garden with flowers, fountains and Doric columns.

Those without a reservation at the inn were sent out into the fields, to the Sacred Precinct of Zeus, a walled-off enclave of pagan temples and shrines. The wealthiest travelers arrived in sumptuous convoys attended by teams of horses, grooms and stable boys. Their slaves would have already raced ahead to the sanctuary to pitch silk tents with copious awnings that recreated all the comforts of home—marble tiles and mosaic floors, favorite artworks and cedar dining tables, ivory wash basins and statuettes. These high-society sports fans could dine on plates of beaten gold, drink from crystal goblets and sleep on down pillows, all the while attended by retinues of chefs, secretaries and retainers. The placement of these aristocratic tents around the site required as much diplomacy as seating arrangements at a banquet—some spots being more prestigious than others. The nouveau riche Greeks from Sicily and Asia Minor were particularly flamboyant. In 388 B.C., the tyrant Dionysios I of Syracuse set himself up in an enormous tent of golden silk, with lavish carpets and a team of professional actors to read his poetry. (The extra spending did him little good—he was

denounced by orators for his cruelty as a ruler, his poetry was booed by the crowd as doggerel, and his tent was looted by an angry mob.)

In 67 A.D., the emperor Nero descended on Olympia like an occupying general, with a thousand wagons and high-stepping horses shod with silver and bridled with gold. His route was swept clean by outriders gaily clad as Africans, and handsome Greek boys with faces painted white were engaged to dance around the emperor's carriages. Nero's banquets at the festival were just as excessive as back home in Rome: Guests were served on silver plates studded with diamonds, and they drank out of goblets carved from great chunks of lapis lazuli. His wife brought 500 asses with her on the trip, so that she could bathe in their milk every morning, thus preserving her creamy complexion.

As for the less-exalted spectators, most simply flung their bedding wherever they could, huddling between altars, crowding elegant colonnades, nestling between the statues of illustrious sporting champions. Others rented space in temporary shelters or put up their own tents, sprawling like refugees across the surrounding countryside. The smoke from thousands of cooking fires created a pall of pollution. Crowd control was enforced by local officials with whips. Not for nothing does our word *chaos* derive from the ancient Greek; with its lack of basic sanitation or facilities and with the rowdy, anarchic throngs it drew, the Olympic festival was the Woodstock of antiquity.

Even Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.) once slept in a makeshift barracks, head to toe with snoring, drunken strangers. Plato made fast friends with his new roommates, sharing simple meals and going to all the contests with them. Only after the Olympics, when the philosopher's new friends visited him in Athens, did they discover his true identity. "They were amazed at having had such a great man amongst them without recognizing him," reports the author Aelian (c. 165-230 A.D.) in his *Varia Historia*. "He had behaved towards them with modesty and simplicity, and had won the confidence of them all without even resorting to philosophical discussions."

By necessity, the ancient Greek sports fan could not have been too finicky about personal hygiene. The irregular water supply at Olympia was an ongoing problem in the summer. Rain might not have fallen for several months in this corner of southern Greece, making the chalky waters of the Alpheus River undrinkable. The nearby Kladeus River would have receded to a stagnant trickle.

During heat waves, the lack of water could be dangerous. The plane trees of the sacred grove gave little protection from the sun, and shelters turned into ovens during the day. There was no shade at all in the sports arenas, where for religious reasons spectators were actually forbidden to wear hats. Not surprisingly, the second-century A.D. writer Lucian reports that spectators at the games would collapse from heat stroke. Some would even expire. Ironically, the philosopher Thales of Miletus (c. 620-565 B.C.)—who once wrote that water was nature's most precious gift—died of dehydration on the Olympic festival meadow.

The organizers did what they could to ease the drought. Wells were sunk at the site—nine have been excavated by archaeologists, their interiors lined with shell-limestone—and local vendors were appointed to bring fresh drinking water on mule-back from a spring 2 miles up in the valley. But this water could not come close to providing for the masses; 40,000 people could fit into the stadium, and historians have estimated that the total crowd, including workers and hangers-on, could easily have reached 70,000.

As for washing, the athletes and VIPs had decent bathhouses; everyone else went dirty. Even before the games began, the air was thick with body odor. This pungent atmosphere was not improved by the thousands of cooking fires lit every morning and night, sending clouds of smoke and billowing ash into spectators' eyes.

What could the enterprising organizers provide in the way of personal facilities for the hordes? Public sanitation, even in the richest Greek cities, was never a top priority; not until the age of imperial Rome were large-scale sewers developed. At Olympia, the pine forests and the dry river beds to the south and west became mass latrines, with odors wafting intermittently over the proceedings.

During the five days of the games, conditions for spectators would continue to deteriorate. Rotting garbage was dropped into the makeshift wells, including the bones of hundreds of sacrificial animals. Not surprisingly, summer fevers ripped through the crowd. Lucian, perhaps with some exaggeration, noted that spectators "would die in droves of the epidemics," presumably gastroenteritis and diarrhea. The huge numbers of black flies can hardly have helped. The Greeks did not realize that the insects transmitted bacteria, but they knew how maddening the pests were—which is why, before the games, Olympic officials sacrificed at the altar of Zeus Aponymos, "the Averter of Flies," to minimize infestations. It seems they had some success. Pliny the Elder (23-29 A.D.) reported that after this ritual, the flies began to perish in droves. Aelian says that the swarms voluntarily retired to the opposite bank of the Alpheus River and only returned to Olympia when the festival was over.

And yet, as the attendance figures suggest, none of these miseries could keep ancient sports fans away. The games were sensationally popular, the greatest recurring event in antiquity, held without fail for a mind-boggling run of nearly 1,200 years. For the Greeks, it was considered a great misfortune to die without having been to Olympia. One Athenian baker boasted on his gravestone that he had attended the games 12 times. "By heaven!" raved Apollonius of Tyana, a holy man of the first century A.D. "Nothing in the world of men is so beloved by the Gods."

What was the secret of the games' longevity? What kept the hordes coming back, generation after generation? It was a question that the Athenian philosopher and avid sports buff Epictetus pondered late in the first century A.D. He argued that visiting the Olympics was a metaphor for human existence itself. Every day was filled with difficulties and tribulations: unbearable heat, pushy crowds, grime, noise and endless petty annoyances.

"But of course you put up with it all," he said, "because it's an unforgettable spectacle."

This essay is adapted from The Naked Olympics *by Tony Perrottet, © 2004 by Tony Perrottet. Published by arrangement with Random House, an imprint of Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.*

Note

a. See Adrienne Mayor, "Sea Monsters and Other Ancient Beasts: A Tale from a Grecian Urn," *Archaeology Odyssey*, March/April 2002.

The Other Games

When Greeks Flocked to Nemea

Stephen G. Miller

The Olympics may be the best known of ancient Greece's athletic competitions, but the sanctuary at Olympia was only one of four sites where games were held. Greeks also flocked to games at Delphi, Isthmia and Nemea. These so-called panhellenic festivals were governed by a sacred truce that protected people traveling to any of the four sites—where men from throughout the Greek-speaking world competed in boxing, wrestling and track-and-field events. A crown of vegetal matter was awarded to the victors—olive at Olympia, laurel at Delphi, pine at Isthmia and wild celery at Nemea. The best athletes were those who won at least once at each of these games; circuit-victors, they were called.

In 573 B.C. Nemea became the last of the four sites to receive panhellenic status. Nemea sits in a small valley in the Arcadian mountains of the northeastern Peloponnesus. The valley is naturally swampy, viable only for grazing; indeed, the name "Nemea"

Photo courtesy of Stephen G. Miller

After some 12 weeks of digging through more than 20 feet of earth, author Stephen G. Miller's excavation team discovered the fourth-century B.C. stadium floor at Nemea. A temple dedicated to Zeus was also built in the fourth century B.C., amid a grove of cypress trees. Three of the temple's columns have survived from antiquity; the other two have been reconstructed by Miller's team.

Photo courtesy of Stephen G. Miller

After some 12 weeks of digging through more than 20 feet of earth, author Stephen G. Miller's excavation team discovered the fourth-century B.C. stadium floor at Nemea, as shown in this photograph from 1974. A temple dedicated to Zeus was also built in the fourth century B.C., amid a grove of cypress trees. Three of the temple's columns have survived from antiquity; the other two have been reconstructed by Miller's team.

derives from the verb *nemein*, meaning "to graze." In the summer, however, the valley dried out sufficiently for the Nemean Games to be held.

Myth tells us that the Nemean Games were founded in memory of an infant named Opheltes, who was killed by a serpent when his nurse, Hypsipyle, set him on a bed of wild celery. Thus the Nemean Games were, like all the other panhellenic festivals, funeral games; the judges wore black robes as a sign of mourning, and the wild-celery victory crown had a direct connection to the story of the baby's death.

In the southwestern part of the Nemean sanctuary are the remains of the Hero Shrine of Opheltes. This sixth-century B.C. man-made mound seems to mimic the Pelopeion, the shrine at Olympia associated with the cult of the hero Pelops. The elongated Nemean mound was built of alternating layers of reddish and whitish earth; the layers, roughly between 6 and 8 inches thick, seem to have been sieved, since they are almost completely devoid of stones and pebbles.

Each layer contained one or more drinking vessels. The most common type was the two-handled *skyphos*, which, in some layers, was buried along with the wine jugs known as *oinochoai*. In one case, an *oinochoe* was surrounded by four *skyphoi*—a sort of ancient martini set. In another, an *oinochoe* was positioned on its side with its mouth opening onto another jug, as if liquid were still pouring from one vessel into the other. It appears that the builders first "purified" the earthen fill by filtering it through a sieve; then they sanctified each layer by the pouring of a libation. The ritual was concluded when the libation vessels were set in the ground, the final step in the process of sanctification.

The layers were built up in one construction, probably during a single year, but were subsequently "repaired" in some areas. The parts of the mound that have been excavated have revealed no evidence of an actual burial.

In addition to serving as a shrine, the mound was also used by spectators, who sat on its slopes to watch the games. In the sixth century B.C., the stadium at Nemea ran along the eastern side of the mound. The surface of the stadium's racetrack seems to have been a layer of white clay, and letters carved on the track's stone starting blocks distinguished the different lanes; these letters are dateable to the late sixth or early fifth century B.C. A number of weights, which athletes would have held while jumping—have been found alongside the track and are dateable to the same period.

The equestrian events took place at the hippodrome on the western side of the mound, where a series of clay layers containing chariot tracks have been found. Horse races might have taken place in the morning, so that the spectators could sit on the mound with their backs to the sun. In the afternoon, perhaps, the people moved to the eastern side of the mound, in order to watch the footraces and other athletic events.

Unlike our modern secular Olympic games, the ancient panhellenic festivals were closely associated with religion. A temple existed at Nemea in the sixth century B.C., but around 415 B.C. it was destroyed by a violent conflagration. Arrowheads and spear points suggest that a battle caused this destruction, a battle that may well have taken place during maneuvers by the Spartans against the Argives during the course of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.). The stadium was abandoned, and the games were moved to Argos, about 18 miles to the south. The festival did not return to Nemea until about 330 B.C., when the Temple of Nemean Zeus was constructed about 100 yards northeast of the Opheltes shrine, upon the remains of an earlier Archaic temple.[a]

With the return of the games to Nemea, the entire sanctuary underwent major change. The southern end of the mound was enclosed by a pentagonal wall (again, apparently in imitation of the Pelopeion at Olympia). A bath was constructed over a part of the early stadium track, its drain cutting through still more of the track. And a three-compartment reservoir with a capacity of about 3,500 cubic feet was built in the area of the earlier hippodrome. The new horse track was likely located a short distance to the west.

The Nemeans also built a brand-new stadium, which our team from the University of California at Berkeley began to excavate in 1974.

This new stadium is a quarter of a mile southeast of the Temple of Nemean Zeus, cut back into a hillside between two natural ridges. The earth dug out from between the ridges was piled at the open northern end to form an artificial terrace supporting the track. Although the contours of the earthen fill made the outline of the stadium clear even before we dug our first trench, we did not know at what depth the stadium floor would be found.

Photo courtesy of Stephen G. Miller

Straddling the stone starting line at Nemea's stadium, three men demonstrate how ancient runners began a race. Almost 2 feet wide, with grooves cut into the stone, the starting line is located at the southern end of the track. The runner placed the toes of his lead foot in the front groove and the toes of his other foot in the back groove. At Nemea, a vertical post like this one was set some 17 feet in front of the starting line and was used for long-distance races; the athletes ran up and down the track, turning around the post.

For 12 weeks we dug carefully through the accumulated debris, constantly concerned that we might accidentally dig through the stadium floor without identifying it. This debris, which had washed into the stadium from the hill above, produced no artifacts; not until our 13th week did we begin to find some coins and pottery fragments. On the very last day of the first season (July 19, 1974), a portion of the stone water channel that surrounded the track began to appear. By the end of the day we had also uncovered a small portion of the stone starting line, at a depth of nearly 23 feet.

Patience and persistence had been rewarded, and great celebrations followed that evening. Soon, however, our mood shifted dramatically, for the next morning Turkey invaded Cyprus, our local workmen were mobilized in case of war, and we sent our students back to California.

If we had continued excavating by hand with a crew of 20 local workers for 50 weeks a year, we would have needed 29 years to clear the whole stadium. Fortunately, in 1975 we acquired a Caterpillar front-end loader, which removed more than 3,000 truckloads of silted debris; only the final few feet of earth above the ancient track required digging by hand.

Photo courtesy of Stephen G. Miller

The runner placed the toes of his lead foot in the front groove and the toes of his other foot in the back groove. The painting, a detail from a fourth-century B.C. krater in the Athens's National Archaeological Museum, illustrates this stance. Also depicted on the vessel is a turning post. At Nemea, a vertical post like this one was set some 17 feet in front of the starting line and was used for long-distance races; the athletes ran up and down the track, turning around the post.

Even so, we still needed nine years (which were not consecutive) to complete the stadium excavation. We finished in 1990, with the removal of the major road that led into the valley and bisected the stadium—a project that required a major diplomatic effort.

During the course of the excavations, we determined that the track at the Nemean stadium had been nearly 195 yards long, almost exactly the same size as the track at Delphi, but shorter than the 210-yard track at Olympia. (Of course, in an era when no records of times and distances were kept, and only the winner's name was announced, such differences between the sites were not significant.) We discovered three rows of stone seats along the western side of the track. At Olympia, a simple earth embankment was used for seating. The specially built seats at Nemea were part of an evolution of permanent seating, though they were not as extensive or sophisticated as the elegant stone seats that would later come to be used during the Roman period, at such places as Delphi and Athens.

The stone water channel, a part of which we had uncovered on that last day of the 1974 excavation season at the southern end of the track, continued northward on both sides of the track and fed basins

Photo courtesy of Stephen G. Miller

Before the start of a race, runners at Nemea would line up in front of a catapult-like starting mechanism called a hysplex, *a reconstruction of which is shown. Two cords stretched along the length of the starting line and were attached to wooden posts. When a signal was given, the torsion-sprung posts were released, and the cords fell to the ground. A fair start was thus ensured for every race; any over-anxious runners would have barreled clumsily into the cords.*

Photo courtesy of Stephen G. Miller

Scratched on the walls of the stadium tunnel, a 40-yard-long passageway that led from a locker room (or apodyterion*) to the arena, are graffiti identifying several athletes known from antiquity. One of them was Telestas, who triumphed in boys' boxing at Olympia in 340 B.C.; at Nemea, he marked his name at the bottom of the stone. Above Telestas's name, someone else, perhaps another athlete, added a word:* niko, *meaning "I win!"*

placed at regular intervals around the stadium floor. This kind of channel, which has been found at many other stadiums, including those at Olympia and Delphi, seems to have provided water both for drinking and moistening the track. The water was drawn from a natural spring more than a quarter of a mile away.

A row of blocks next to the water channel supported a wooden platform from where the robed judges oversaw the competition. The judges were from Argos, and a concentration of Argive coins was discovered around and behind the platform. (Written sources tell us that the judges came from Argos, though even in the absence of such evidence, we would assume this to be the case, since Argos controlled the site and the games from the beginning.) On the opposite (western) side of the track, the greatest concentration of coins was from Corinth. So it seems likely that spectators from the two cities assembled on either side of the track, cheering on their own competitors and fueling one of ancient Greece's traditional rivalries.

Photo courtesy of Stephen G. Miller

Clad in a tunic, a barefoot woman strides out of the stadium tunnel at a recent revival of the Nemean Games. In 1995, a group decided to bring back the ancient athletic festival, allowing participants to change in the apodyterion, *oil their bodies and proceed through the tunnel to the arena—just as athletes did in the fourth century B.C. About 1,900 people now belong to the Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games, which will hold the third Nemead beginning on July 31.*

The starting line, at the southern end of the track, was almost 2 feet wide, and was marked with two grooves cut into the stone, as was typical in the early Hellenistic period. The rear edge of each groove was vertical so that the runner's toes could gain purchase, and the front edge was beveled to prevent the runner from tripping. A runner would place the toes of his lead foot in the first groove and the toes of his other foot in the second groove, which was set back several inches. This stance—with one foot slightly ahead of the other, arms extended, body leaning forward in anticipation of an explosive start—is exactly what we see in many ancient paintings and sculptures.

A single stone base with a socket for a vertical post lies a little more than 17 feet in front of the starting line and about 11 feet west of the center of the track. A turning post—attested in written sources and seen in vase paintings—was located here. The long-distance races were run up and down the track, probably 20 times, with all the runners turning around this single post. The sprints were run in lanes with each runner turning around his own individual post. These individual posts were set in the sockets of the starting lines.

The starting mechanism used for the footraces was called a *hysplex*. The *hysplex* consisted of two cords stretched along the starting line, one at waist level and one at knee level. The cords were attached to wooden posts at either end of the starting line. These posts were torsion-sprung (the catapult was then a recent invention, and its technology was used in this mechanism), so that when the starter gave the signal, the posts were released, snapping to the ground and lowering the cords. If an overeager runner started too soon, he became quickly entangled in the cords and tripped—for all the spectators to see.

The *hysplex* would thus guarantee a fair start to every race. Indeed, part of the attraction of such athletic events, then and now, is that winners are determined by strictly objective criteria. The first to cross the finish line, the athlete who jumps or throws the farthest, the wrestler who is still standing—they are the winners.[b]

The Modern Nemean Games (Chitons Optional)

In 1995 a local group of people formed the Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games. They wanted to experience the connection with the past that we had felt in 1994, when we held footraces at the Nemean stadium. The society now has some 1,900 members from around the world, and revived the Nemean Games in 1996 and 2000. Authenticity has been one fundamental aspect of the revival; another has been the idea of participation. Anyone should be able to walk into the *apodyterion*, remove his or her clothes, oil their bodies and proceed barefoot through the tunnel and into the fourth century B.C.

The athletes are summoned to swear the oath, modeled on that used at Olympia: “Do you swear to abide by the rules of the Nemean Games and to do nothing that would bring shame to you, your family or the spirit of the ancient Games?” The athletes respond, *orkizomai*, meaning “I swear.”

Initially, we were concerned about potential damage to the ancient site, but the absence of shoes dramatically reduces wear and tear, and most of what is touched is earth. The columns of the locker room are protected by scaffolding and a tent. Life-sized photographs of the walls of the tunnel provide a place for modern graffiti—a “guest-book” of the new games.

In the two previous Nemeads, more than 1,300 people from 45 countries, ranging in age from 10 to 93, have walked through the stadium’s tunnel. This year, the third Nemead will be held, as in antiquity, beginning with the second full moon after the summer solstice: July 31—**S.G.M.**

The stadium at Nemea was never completed, or at least no wall was ever built to retain the massive earth fill of the northern end of the track (the lack of a retaining wall is the principal reason that the northern end of the track has not been preserved). Why did the Nemeans fail to build such a wall? Probably because, as our excavations have revealed, the Nemean Games were once again moved to Argos in 271 B.C. For what reason, we do not know. In any case, the second relocation of the games allows us to date the stadium and all of the other facilities at Nemea to between about 330 B.C., when the games first returned to Nemea, and 271 B.C.

In 1978 we discovered the stadium's entrance tunnel, through which the athletes would pass on their way into the stadium, along the west side of the track. Both ends of the 40-yard-long tunnel had been silted shut. Scratched on the walls of the tunnel are numerous graffiti, some of which contain the names of known athletes from antiquity. One of the names is Telestas, who won the boxing championship in the boys' category at the Olympic Games around 340 B.C. By the time he scratched his name at Nemea, he must have been a mature, seasoned athlete. Above his "autograph" on the tunnel wall, and scratched in a different hand, is the verb *niko*, meaning "I win!" The author of the word *niko* isn't known—he might have been rejoicing after the competition or self-congratulating beforehand—but the sentiment is very appropriate to the place where athletes passed.[c]

The tunnel itself was cut through the soft bedrock, and its walls and rounded ceiling were built with shaped stones. Athletes would enter and depart the stadium through the tunnel, which led from the stadium floor to a smallish building of about 2,000 square feet with a three-sided interior courtyard. This was the *apodyterion*, or ancient locker room. It was here that the athletes undressed, stored their clothes and oiled their bodies in preparation for competition.

In 1994 we completed our excavations of the stadium.

We landscaped the site, adding paths, signs, benches and water fountains among the oleander, Scottish broom, pine trees and cypress trees that we had planted in 1979, in order to hold back the erosion of the earth embankments. A parking lot and a guard's house were built at the entrance.

The site was turned over to the Greek state, and it officially opened to the public on July 7, 1994. The high point of the celebration, for the 1,500 people who had gathered, was to see the track used for races that duplicated, as precisely as possible, the races that had taken place there more than two millennia earlier. The participants dressed in the locker room, went through the tunnel, and ran out onto the track when their names were called. Judges dressed in black and carried long switches to flog those who committed fouls; and a trumpeter blasted a signal, followed by the herald's announcement of each competitor's name.

A helmet containing marble squares with letters on them was offered to the runners. The letter drawn by each corresponded to one of the lanes. Other judges made

sure that the runners' toes were firmly in the grooves. Theodosios Zavitsas, whose pick first touched the starting line during the 1974 excavations, called the start of the races: "*Poda para poda* [foot by foot], *etim me* [ready], *apite* [go]!" (The words *poda para poda* and *apite* were, in fact, used in the ancient festivals at the start of a race.) With the call, he pulled the release cords of the starting mechanism, the barrier cords were hurled to the ground and the race was on.

The finish line, set at the 300-foot mark, was watched by another set of judges, who tied a ribbon around the winner's head and awarded him a palm branch. The herald announced the name of the winner, who then ran a victory lap around the track while the crowd cheered and showered him with flowers—exactly as had been done in antiquity.

We were not authentic in two respects. First of all, both males and females participated, whereas in antiquity women were banned from taking part in panhellenic games on pain of death. Second, though athletes at the panhellenic festivals competed in the nude, we provided *chitons* (tunics) to those who wanted to wear them. Everyone did. But feet were bare, so that the sense of contact with the ancient soil and the starting blocks was immediate.

At the end of the races, the winners came together to receive their prize—a crown of wild celery. As the shadows grew long, we left the stadium having shared a thrilling and inspiring experience. With the blast of a trumpet, the thwack of the *hysplex*, the thud of feet running down the track and the roar of a real crowd, the stadium at Nemea had come back to life.

Photos courtesy of the author.

Notes

a. Three columns of the second sanctuary, the Temple of Nemean Zeus, still stand; some of the columns were taken down about 425 A.D. by Christians seeking building material for a new basilica in the region; 33 other columns were left lying around, and recently we have begun to reconstruct some of them.

b. This objectivity was largely missing from the musical competitions that were held originally at Delphi and Isthmia, and later at Nemea. These were decided by a panel of judges susceptible to influence and prejudice. Hence the Olympics, which did not include musical competitions, came to be regarded as the purest, most corruption-free of the games.

c. The tunnel would later be used as a place of refuge by an early Christian attempting to avoid the onslaught of the Slavic invasion of Greece in 585 A.D. (By this time, the stadium had long been abandoned, and a farming community populated the Nemean valley.) Before he was caught, he hid his coins under a stone. His scattered skeletal remains and the traces of a wound on the top of his skull tell the story of his violent end, a fate that befell the entire Nemean valley.