

## *QUIICK GUIDE TO THE ANCIENT OLYMPIC GAMES*

### WHAT WAS THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES?

The ancient Olympic Games, were the biggest event in their world. They were the scene of political rivalries between people from different parts of the Greek world, and the site of controversies, boasts, public announcements and humiliations.

The Olympic Games began over 2,700 years ago in Olympia, in southwest Greece. The Games were part of a religious festival. The Greek Olympics, thought to have begun in 776 BC, inspired the modern Olympic Games (began in 1896) The Games were held in honour of Zeus, king of the gods, and were staged every four years at Olympia, a valley near a city called Elis. People from all over the Greek world came to watch and take part.

### WHAT WAS THE "OLYMPIC TRUCE"?

The city-states of Greece were often at war. This made travel between them dangerous. So messengers sent out from Elis announced a 'sacred truce' (peace) lasting one month before the Games began. This meant people could travel to Olympia in safety. The Olympic Games were more important than wars because they were a religious festival. The messengers went all over the Greek world, as the map shows.

The Greeks took the Olympic games quite seriously. Nearly all the ancient Greek cities sent teams to participate in the ancient Greek Olympics. If two or more Greek city-states happen to be at war with each other when the game date arrived, war was halted for the duration of the games.

### THE MAIN SPORTS AT THE OLYMPICS.

#### - **Pentathlon**

The Pentathlon became an Olympic sport with the addition of wrestling in 708 B.C., and included the following:

## - **Running / Jumping / Discus Throw**

### **Running**

Running contests included:

- the stade race, which was the pre-eminent test of speed, covering the Olympia track from one end to the other (200m foot race),
- the diaulos (two stades - 400m foot race),
- dolichos (ranging between 7 and 24 stades).

### **Jumping**

Athletes used stone or lead weights called halteres to increase the distance of a jump. They held onto the weights until the end of their flight, and then jettisoned them backwards.

### **Discus throw**

The discus was originally made of stone and later of iron, lead or bronze. The technique was very similar to today's freestyle discus throw.

### - **Wrestling**

This was highly valued as a form of military exercise without weapons. It ended only when one of the contestants admitted defeat.

### - **Boxing**

Boxers wrapped straps (himantes) around their hands to strengthen their wrists and steady their fingers. Initially, these straps were soft but, as time progressed, boxers started using hard leather straps, often causing disfigurement of their opponent's face.

### - **Pankration**

This was a primitive form of martial art combining wrestling and boxing, and was considered to be one of the toughest sports. Greeks believed that it was founded by Theseus when he defeated the fierce Minotaur in the labyrinth.

### - **Equestrian events**

These included horse races and chariot races and took place in the Hippodrome, a wide, flat, open space.

## WHAT HAPPENED TO CHEATERS.

Anyone who violated the rules was fined by the judges. The money was used to set up statues of Zeus, the patron god of the Games at Olympia.

## WHO COULD COMPETE AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES?

All free male Greek citizens were entitled to participate in the ancient Olympic Games, regardless of their social status. Orsippos, a general from Megara; Polymnistor, a shepherd; Diagoras, a member of a royal family from Rhodes; Alexander I, son of Amyndas and King of Macedonia; and Democritus, a philosopher, were all participants in the Games.

Only men, boys and unmarried girls were allowed to attend the Olympic Games.

Married women were not allowed to participate in, or to watch, the ancient Olympic Games. However, unmarried women could attend the competition, and the priestess of Demeter, goddess of fertility, was given a privileged position next to the Stadium altar.

## WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF WOMEN DURING THE OLYMPIC GAMES?

Married women were not allowed into the Olympic Games. Any women caught sneaking in were punished! Women could own horses in the chariot race though.

Unmarried women had their own festival at Olympia every four years. This was the Heraia, held in honour of Hera, wife of Zeus. Women could compete in running races, though only unmarried girls took part. Winners were awarded crowns of sacred olive branches, the same as men. As a rule Greek women did not go in for sport, unless they were Spartans.

Not only were women not permitted to compete personally, married women were also barred from attending the games, under penalty of death. (Maidens were allowed to attend.) Athletic competitions for women did exist in ancient Greece. The most famous was a maidens' footrace in honor of the goddess Hera, which was held at the Olympic stadium. There were 3 separate races for girls, teenagers, and young women.

The length of their racecourse was shorter than the men's track; 5/6 of a **stade** (about 160 m.) instead of a full **stade** (about 192 m.). The winners received olive crowns just like Olympic victors.

## HOW WERE THE ATHLETES TRAINED?

Athletics were a key part of education in ancient Greece. Many Greeks believed that developing the body was equally important as improving the mind for overall health. Also, regular exercise was important in a society where men were always needed for military service. Plato's *Laws* specifically mentions how athletics improved military skills. Greek youth therefore worked out in the wrestling-school (**palaestra**) whether they were serious Olympic contenders or not.

The **palaestra** (wrestling-school) was one of the most popular places for Greek men of all ages to socialize. Many accounts of Greek daily life include scenes in these wrestling-schools, such as the opening of Plato's *Charmides*.

Young men worked with athletic trainers who used long sticks to point out incorrect body positions and other faults. Trainers paid close attention to balancing the types of physical exercise and the athlete's diet. The Greeks also thought that harmonious movement was very important, so athletes often exercised to flute music.

Ancient competitors were required to train at Olympia for a month before the Games officially started, like modern competitors at the Olympic Village.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: further information at [www.olympicground.com](http://www.olympicground.com) (1º ESO- Ancient Olympics)

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