

## THE OLYMPIC GAMES (3)

### The Ancient Olympic Games

The ancient Olympic Games had been conducted in Elis near the western coast of Greece in the sacred valley in Olympia. The exact origin is unknown; however, the importance of these religious festivals and competitions was such that time was measured by the four year interval between the games called the Olympiad. Olympiads were conducted from 776 BC until 393 AD with no cancellations. The site of the Games, the stadium of Olympia, was an oblong area about 643 feet in length by about 97 feet wide northeast of the Altis beyond Mt. Kromion. The Games lasted five days and they were conducted in honor of the Olympian Zeus in the belief that the spirits of the dead were gratified by such spectacles which had delighted them during earthly life. Athletic competition took place on the second day following the first day of preparations; rituals, banquets and sacrifices were made on the final three days. The continuously warring states and tribes laid down their arms, suspended trade and paid tribute to the manhood of the nation during the period of "Hieromenia" (safe travel) and the Olympics.



Originally, a run of about two hundred meters was the only athletic event. The contestants were men who competed in the nude. As time passed, more events were included and even a few women competed. Chariot races, wrestling, boxing, running carrying arms and weight throwing were added. Almost everything about the ancient Olympic Games was ritualistic. For example, the olive wreaths for winners only were cut from a sacred tree that Hercules himself had planted by the temple of Zeus. Only a child with a living father and mother using a special golden knife could cut the branches for the wreaths. Winners had their name, their father's name and the name of their country "shouted" to the public by a herald who won a competition and wore an olive wreath himself. The competitions were often violent and bloody, particularly a boxing and wrestling combination called "pancrantium." Winners and losers were often permanently disfigured. In one case, a wreath was awarded and placed on a wrestler who died momentarily after he defeated an opponent who had acknowledged defeat by hand signal.

Numerous animal and human sacrifices were made to Zeus and oaths were taken on pig entrails. Scandals in the form of bribes and accepting bounty for winning became commonplace and in conflict with the oath of honor that the competitors took signifying that they "free born" Greeks and without taint against the gods. All athletic competition was strictly amateur. Statues called "Zanes" were positioned at the stadium entrance listing the names of dishonored competitors and a visible warning against further violations by the competitors about to enter the Olympic arena.

Facilities included baths of all types; hot, cold, vapor and steam as well as drying and rest rooms. The Doric columned gymnasium (covered) featured a running track almost as long as the outdoor stadium. A line of small houses and temples on a terrace formed the main shrine at Olympia. Each house or temple became a treasure trove and each was built by a different Greek city state. A large olive grove

was situated to the north and various altars with sacred fires continuously burning were found in the surrounding area. Greek mythology informs us that Prometheus had stolen the sacred fire from Zeus.

Athletes practiced in the gymnasium especially when it rained. They were required to train daily and eat a diet high in cheese and consume only water for drink. Athletes were required to swear to have trained for the ten months preceding the Games. During Rome's occupation of Greece, Emperor Nero desired to enter the chariot race. The Greeks bent over backward to let him win by slowing down and waiting for him to catch up after he fell out of his chariot. Perhaps it was because he brought five thousand bodyguards with him. Nero's entry in the Games demonstrated the decline in Greek spirit and the quality of true sportsmanship in the Olympics.

There were no long distance races in the ancient Olympic Games. However, in 490 BC nearly 10,000 outnumbered Athenians and their allies led by Miltiades, met the Persians at Marathon between the mountains and the sea. Miltiades called for Pheidippides, a famous runner now a soldier, to run back to Athens, a distance of eight leagues, and declares a victory over the Persians who were fleeing by sea. Pheidippides, dropped dead after delivering his message of Athenian victory. The modern marathon race is a tribute to this historical Greek historical event.

Some of the ancient Olympic Games history was recorded on pottery or sung in odes; however, long periods failed to produce any records of Olympic performance when only the winner was recognized. In 393 AD the Christian Emperor Theodosius I finally declared a permanent end to the ancient Olympic Games by offering an official edict stating that the Olympics were pagan in nature. Theodosius II the boundary walls razed in 426AD. Volcanic eruptions and earthquake, Slavonic invasions, and malaria served to diminish the Olympic site over the continuing time period!

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