

The Olympics: Ancient versus Modern

By Dr. Stephen Instone

Origins

Traditionally it has always been said that the Games started at Olympia in 776 BC, about the time that Homer was born. But for several centuries before that date Olympia had been a cult site for the worship of Zeus, a numinous location away from human dwellings, overlooked by a hill, with the sacred River Alph flowing through it.

What was it that caused people to change from honoring Zeus solely with dedicatory offerings, to honoring him through athletics? Several factors seem to have been involved. One is the rise of the Greek *polis*, or city-state. As city-states in different locations grew, each wanted a means of asserting its supremacy, so would send representatives to Olympia to become supreme in physical competition.

Connected with this is the development of military training. The Games were an attractive means of getting men fit. Another factor is the traditional Greek view that the gods championed a winner, so by establishing a competition aimed at producing supreme winners, they were thereby asserting the power and influence on humans of the supreme god, Zeus.

For the first 13 Olympics there was only one event, the stadion race, which was a running race up one length of the stadium. How long this race was is a matter for conjecture, as the ancient stadium, 192 meters long, visible at Olympia now, did not exist then.

In 724 BC a longer, there-and-back race, the *diaulos*, was introduced, followed four years later by the long-distance race, the *dolichos*, a race of perhaps 12 laps. The emphasis on running in the early years of the Olympics may reflect the perceived basic requirements for a fit soldier.

Boxing, wrestling, and the *pancratation* (the 'all-power' race, combining all types of physical attack) soon followed, along with the pentathlon, and horse-and-chariot racing. A race while wearing armor was introduced in 520 BC, and even a mule race (in 500 BC, but it was not generally popular). So the changing shape of the modern Olympic program is not without precedent, though the ancient Greeks would perhaps have balked at the sight of some of our modern 'sports'.

Religion and politics

Religion pervaded the ancient Olympics. Zeus was thought to look down on the competitors, favoring some and denying victory to others. 'You could spur on a man with natural talent to strive towards great glory with the help of the gods', says Pindar in a victory-ode. If an athlete was fined for cheating or bribery (human nature stays much the same over a few millennia), the money exacted was used to make a cult statue of Zeus.

A grand sacrifice of 100 oxen was made to Zeus during the Games, and Zeus the *apomuios*, or 'averted of flies', was invoked to keep the sacrificial meat fly-free. Olympia was home to one of Greece's great oracles, an oracle to Zeus, with an altar to him consisting of the bonfire-heap created by burnt sacrificial offerings. As the offerings were burnt, they were examined by a priest, who pronounced an oracle - an enigmatic and often ambiguous prediction of the future - according to his interpretation of what he saw. Athletes consulted the oracle to learn what their chances in the Games were.

The Greeks tried to keep some aspects of politics out of the Olympics, but their efforts met then, as such efforts do now, with limited success. The Olympic truce was meant to lead to a cessation of hostilities throughout Greece, to allow competitors to travel and participate safely, but it was not always observed.

The great historian of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides, tells how in 420 BC the Spartans violated the truce by attacking a fort and dispatching hoplites, and they were therefore banned from the Games. But Lichas, a prominent Spartan, thought of a way round the ban - he entered the chariot race as a Boeotian. When his true nationality was discovered, however, he was given a public flogging at Olympia.

A victorious athlete brought great honor to his home city. The sixth-century Athenian statesman Solon promoted athletics by rewarding Athenian victors at the Games financially - an Olympic victor would receive 500 drachmae (for comparison, a sheep was worth one drachma).

Nakedness and women

'Sow naked, plough naked, harvest naked', the poet Hesiod (a contemporary of Homer) advises. He might have added 'compete in the Games naked', for that is usually understood to be the standard practice among the ancient Greeks. Some dispute this, for although the visual evidence for it - the painted decorations on vases - generally shows athletes performing naked, all sorts of other people (e.g.

soldiers departing for war, which they would presumably have done clothed) are also shown unclad.

Also, some vases do show runners and boxers wearing loin-cloths, and Thucydides says that athletes stopped wearing such garments only shortly before his time. Another argument is that it must have been impractical to compete naked. On balance, however, it is generally thought probable that male athletes were naked when competing at the Games.

Women did not participate at the main Olympic festival. They had their own Games, in honor of Hera, where the sole event was a run of five-sixths of the length of the stadium - which would have preserved in male opinion the inferior status of women. Whether women could even watch the festival is disputed.

Unmarried virgins, maintaining the religious purity of the occasion, probably could. Festivals (and, for example, funerals) were among the limited occasions when women, especially virgins, or *parthenoi*, had a public role. At the Games unmarried girls, besides helping with the running of the festival, may have taken the opportunity to find a fit future husband.

Great Olympians

Milo of Croton, in southern Italy, would come high on anyone's list of greats. He was Olympic champion in the men's wrestling six times in the sixth century, besides winning once in the Olympic boy's wrestling, and gaining seven victories in the Pythian Games. He is said to have carried his own statue, or even a bull, into the Olympic arena, and to have performed party tricks such as holding a pomegranate without squashing it and getting people to prize open his hand - nobody could.

Then there is Leonidas of Rhodes, who in the second century BC won all three running events at four consecutive Olympics. Another great Rhodian athlete was Diagoras, who in the fifth century BC won at all four of the major Games (Olympic, Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian). His three sons and two of his grandsons were also Olympic champions.

Superhuman heavyweights were regarded with special awe. Cleomedes, a fifth-century Olympic boxing champion, killed an opponent at the Olympics, was disqualified, went mad and smashed up a school. Not a recipe for special reverence, you might think. But the Greeks regularly explained abnormal feats and states of mind by saying that something divine, or a god, had entered whoever was

affected in this way, and Cleomedes ended up receiving semi-divine honors as a hero.

Athletics fans and haters

Not all Greeks admired athletes. 'It isn't right to judge strength as better than good wisdom', writes Xenophanes (sixth to fifth century BC). Just because someone has won an Olympic victory, he says, they won't improve the city.

The tragedian Euripides expressed similar sentiments in his play *Autolycus*, now only surviving in fragments. In it he describes how athletes are slaves to their stomachs, but they can't look after themselves, and although they glisten like statues when in their prime, become like tattered old carpets in old age. Galen, physician and polymath of the first century AD, also attacked athletics as unnatural and excessive. He thought that athletes eat too much, sleep too much and put their bodies through too much.

But in the end the detractors of athletics lost out to the sympathizers. The person who most idealized the Olympics was Pindar, from Thebes, midway between Delphi and Athens. Pindar composed odes for victors at the Olympic and other Games in the fifth century BC, comparing their achievements to those of the great heroes of the past - such as Heracles or Achilles - thus raising them to an almost divine level.

Galen, physician of the first century AD, also attacked athletics as unnatural and excessive. He thought that, though mortals, their superhuman feats of strength had temporarily elevated them to another realm and given them a taste of incomparable bliss. 'For the rest of his life the victor enjoys a honey-sweet calm' he writes.

For Pindar, the Olympics stood out among the Games –

'Water is best; gold like fire that is burning during the night is conspicuous outshining great wealth; but if, my heart, you desire song to celebrate the Games, look no further than the sun for another radiant star hotter in the empty day-time sky, nor let us proclaim a contest better than Olympia.'

Contrived poetry - let's hope he continues to be right