



THE ANCIENT OLYMPIC GAMES: MYTHIC WORSHIP OF GODS AND ATHLETES

For almost a thousand years, games were held to honour the Olympian god Zeus and his family. How are today's Olympic and Paralympic Games different from the days of yore?

WHY THE GAMES WERE FOUNDED: HUMANS CHALLENGE ONE ANOTHER, AND THE GODS.



One myth names Hercules as the founder of the games. The Theban poet Pindar (c.522 – c.446BC) writes of Hercules dedicating the Games to his father Zeus in gratitude for help defeating King Augeus of Elis. Hercules measured the race length (600 feet) and taught men to wrestle. In that first Olympic Games Hercules and Zeus wrestled each other to a draw.

Another myth claims the first Games were held in c. 460 BC by King Oinomaos whose daughter, Hippodamia, attracted many suitors

Oinomaos challenged each suitor to a chariot race, proclaiming that if the suitor could beat him he would win his daughter's hand, but would lose his head if he lost the race. The prince Pelops secretly replaced the linchpins in the king's chariot with wax pins. During the race the wax pins melted and the king was thrown to his death. Pelops married Hippodamia and it is claimed that he either held the first Olympic Games to celebrate his victory, or a funeral in the king's memory.

HONOURING ZEUS THROUGH ATHLETIC COMPETITION

The most likely inception of the Games, however, is as a religious festival. In ancient Greece people believed that powerful, immortal deities lived in a magical world on Mount Olympus. These deities had special powers with which they could control and would use to manipulate people's lives.



The most powerful of these gods was Zeus – often depicted holding a thunderbolt – who ruled the heavens. Religious celebrations in his honour were held in the Greek town Olympia in a special area called the Sanctuary of Zeus. Male athletes from every state in ancient Greece, which included modern day Turkey and Spain, came to race against each other. The festival was held every four years and was so important that the ancient Greek calendar was set by it.



While the first recorded evidence of an Olympic festival is from 776BC, archaeologists suspect the Games have a much longer history. The only recorded event from 776 BC was a *stadion* race, when Koroibos was named greatest competitor, but by 650 BC, the games included chariot races, wrestling, boxing and a pentathlon consisting of running, wrestling, jumping, discus and javelin throwing.

“The **stadion** (or stade) was an ancient foot race, part of the Olympic Games and the other Panhellenic Games. This was one of the five major Pentathlon events. The stadion was named after the building in which it took place, also called the stadion. This word became stadium in Latin, which became the English word stadium. There were other types of foot races, but the stadion was the most prestigious; the winner was often considered to be the winner of an entire Games. Though a separate event, the stadion was also part of the ancient Pentathlon.”

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stadion_\(ancient_sports\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stadion_(ancient_sports))

CITIZENS, WOMEN AND THE GAMES

Ancient Greek athletic competition was open to all citizens, but the definition of “citizen” was narrow and harsh. Foreigners, slaves, children and women were not considered citizens and were not allowed to compete. Athletes competed in the nude. Our word “gymnasium” comes from the Greek “gymnos” meaning naked.

Married women were barred from the Olympics altogether because the nakedness of the athletes was thought to be too provocative for wives, but single women were encouraged to attend to view potential husbands.

Discussion Starter Contributor: Veronica Roth

Women had their own religious celebration at Olympic Games time which was dedicated to Hera, the wife of Zeus. The Heraea Games consisted of only one competition; a foot race 25 feet shorter than the Olympic stadion race.

Today, visitors to Olympia will see only the ruined remains of the Temple of Zeus, the gymnasium, the stadium and other reminders of the glory of the ancient games. The current Games are not a religious festival and chariot races are definitely a thing of the past. Athletes do not compete in the nude and many more events are held. But the general spirit of sportsmanship and friendly competition which began so long ago in ancient Greece is the legacy we have inherited and we cultivate today.

START THE DISCUSSION:

1. Do you think the Games of today reflect the historic roots of the Olympic Games? Why or why not?
2. What are the similarities and difference you see between the modern Olympic Games, and the Games of ancient times? How do you feel these might have declined? What are some improvements?



FIND OUT MORE

The Perseus Project (2009)

www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/index.html

The Ancient Olympic Museum: www.olympia-greece.org/museum.html

Video on the Ancient Olympic Games at the Museum of Olympia Greece. www.olympia-greece.org/video.html

For more discussion starters and 2010-2012 Games learning resources, please visit www.elegacies.ca/2010

