The Greek Olympics

The Ancient Greeks loved games and competition. The original goal of all athletic games was to produce physical strength, stamina, and skill much needed in daily life and when at war. The Greeks put a high value on health, strength, and physical beauty. Because of this, Greek men and boys went to “work out” at the local gymnasium. Here they practiced wrestling, throwing the javelin and discus, running, jumping, and boxing. Exercising the mind was also considered important, so males discussed ideas, gave advice, and watched other athletes train. The gymnasium was a kind of men’s club in which males of any social class could join. Women were excluded.

Originally, individual gymnasiums would conduct competitions in certain athletic events. Around 776 B.C. the Greeks began to hold organized games at the polis of Olympia. These games were held every four years and open to the finest athletes from all over the Greek world. During the games all fighting would cease so that the athletes could train and compete. These first “Olympics” were more than just a sporting contest. The games were held in honor of Zeus because the Greeks believed that the gods were pleased with mortals’ application of hard work and personal achievement.

The first Olympics lasted only one day but gradually grew to a full week of competition. As the festival grew in importance, each polis sent athletes who had excelled in their gymnasiums. No points were recorded to gauge how each city-state measured against another. All that mattered was that individual winners came from Sparta, Athens, Phoenicia, or Corinth. Originally, only adult males competed. But by 632 B.C. sporting events for boys ages 17–20 were introduced. Records indicate that no females competed at the Olympics—they had to be satisfied with being spectators. To the Greeks, the human body, clothed or not, was a temple to build and admire, and well-toned athletes were examples of the perfect male body. Therefore, it was not unusual for women and children to be in the audience as athletes competed in the nude.

The Olympic games attracted a cross-section of spectators from around the Greek world. Since there was no cost for attending the games, Greeks from every social class and occupation journeyed to Olympia for the great festival to Zeus. Between sporting events, other exciting attractions entertained the crowds. Tents and booths were set up around the stadium in a carnival-like fashion. Peddlers sold products and services, while orators, philosophers, artists, acrobats, magicians, writers, and even pickpockets circulated through the masses. There were other problems and great inconveniences, such as no drinking water, no toilets, millions of flies, and a hot August sun, but these did not deter people from coming to enjoy the games.
Most athletes arrived in Olympia at least one month prior to the competitions. During this time they trained physically and were prepared by priests to become pure in thought and deed. Finally, the games would begin.

**Day One:** The first day of the Olympic Games was spent in religious observance and worship. Each athlete vowed to compete in true sportsmanship. Then animal sacrifices were offered to Zeus near his grand temple.

**Day Two:** The second day began with chariot races—two-wheeled carts drawn by four horses—followed by an 800-meter bareback horse race. There were a number of footraces, some wrestling and boxing, and horse racing. On this day the boys also competed.

**Day Three:** This day was devoted to the pentathlon, a grueling test of stamina and skill that had contestants competing in five different events in one day—a 200-meter run, wrestling, long jump, discus throw, and javelin toss. All events except for wrestling were held in the stadium.

**Day Four:** This final day of competition started with a 200-meter dash. The rest of the day was then devoted to such popular contact sports as wrestling and boxing. Wrestling contests took place in mud and dust. The dust made it easier to get a hold on one’s opponent, while the mud made it more difficult. To win, an athlete had to pin his opponent’s shoulders to the ground three times, the method still used today. In boxing, athletes wore bronze caps to protect their heads from their opponent’s fists, which were armed with leather thongs studded with metal. The final contact event, the pankration, was a combination of wrestling, boxing, and judo. In this bloody event the athletes could punch, kick, and even strangle their opponents until they surrendered. To complete the Olympic Games, athletes wearing full armor competed in a 400-meter race.

**Day Five:** Usually scheduled to coincide with the full moon, this last day was for celebration and religious observances, culminating in more sacrifices to Zeus. The victors’ names would be read aloud before the altar of Zeus. These victors would receive a wreath of olive leaves to wear on their heads. Many won prizes such as olive oil, fine horses, or privileges such as being exempt from paying taxes or being excused from military service. These men returned to their cities as honored heroes.

For nearly a thousand years the Greeks enjoyed the Olympic Games. But in A.D. 394 a Roman emperor believed that the games had no place in the Christian world and banned them. For the next 1500 years there were no organized athletic events held on the scale of those in Olympia. They were not revived until 1896, when the first “modern” Olympics were held in Athens. Since then, every four years (with only three exceptions) athletes and spectators from around the world have looked forward to, trained for, and enjoyed the Olympic Games.