

CHAPTER 18

66 BACCHYLIDES,
ATHENAEUS, AND
PAUSANIAS

“FREED FROM THE CLASH OF ARMS” THE OLYMPIC GAMES

66 Bacchylides, *Ode*, early fifth
century BCE

Strum
And craft for us . . . well-woven songs
For Argeius, the junior boxer,
Victor at the Isthmian games.

When the poet Bacchylides wrote this poem asking the Muses to sing about an athlete, he was putting into words what many of his fellow Greeks felt about sports. For the Greeks, the games held at Olympia, Nemea, and other sites were among the most important parts of their lives.

People use different events from their history as the starting point when they count years. The Year One of the Muslim calendar (corresponding to 622 CE), for instance, is set by the journey of the Prophet Mohammed to Medina. The Jewish calendar starts at what some Jews believe to be the creation of the world in 3761 BCE. The ancient Romans counted from the founding of their city, which they thought had taken place in 753 BCE. For a time, France used a calendar that began with the French Revolution in the 18th century.

The establishment of a religion, the creation of the world, a new civilization, a revolution—these are all such important events that it's easy to see why a society would think of them as a turning point in its history. So what important, earth-shattering, crucial event did the ancient Greeks choose as *their* start?

The crouching stance of a discus thrower was ideal for the artist who painted this plate, as it made it easier to fit a human form into the circular shape.



They chose the first Olympic Games, in 776 BCE.

Games? Why were games, of all things, so important?

The Greek *poleis* were highly competitive with each other. They had very different ways of life: different governments, customs, favorite gods, and ways of worshiping them. But at Olympia, where games were held to honor Zeus, they could rediscover and celebrate what they had in common. Only Greeks could participate in the ancient Olympics and only men could compete. So the Games were a celebration of the strong, healthy Greek male.

Also, although different gods were important in different city-states, most Greeks believed in the same group of gods and acknowledged that Zeus was their king and leader. So by worshiping Zeus at the Games in his holy city of Olympia, the contestants and spectators were honoring all the gods together.

But that’s where the togetherness ended. The athletes fought hard to beat each other. There were no second- or third-place medals. Either you won or you lost, and these fierce competitors hated to lose. The Spartans wouldn’t even participate in some events for fear of being disgraced by defeat.

Most of the events were track and field, with a sprint called the *stadion* being one of the most important. Only the

NO WOMEN ALLOWED

Some historians think that single women were allowed to watch the Olympic Games. There was a rumor that a married woman caught sneaking a peek at men in competition was thrown off a cliff head-first, but some Greeks doubted this. After a while, women were allowed one race, the Heraea, in honor of the goddess Hera.



The competitors ran through this entry to the stadium at Olympia to be greeted by the cheers of thousands of spectators.



“ Athenaues, *The Gastronomers*, about 200 CE

best athletes attempted the pentathlon, which combined the *stadion*, the long jump, the javelin throw, the discus throw, and wrestling. And you had to be not only skilled but brave to participate in the *pankration*, a combination of wrestling and boxing where just about the only rules were that you couldn't bite your opponent or attempt to gouge out his eyes with your thumbs (fingers were allowed). The athlete would wrap his fists in hard oxhide so that when he hit his opponent, he would really injure him.

Some writers admired the athletes so much that they made claims for them that couldn't possibly be true. Athenaeus, who wrote about food and eating, says admiringly in *The Gastronomers* that an athlete named Milo of Kroton

used to eat twenty pounds of meat and twenty of bread and wash it down with eight quarts of wine. At Olympia he lifted a four-year-old bull onto his shoulders and carried it around the stadium, and then butchered it and ate it in one day with no help from anyone.

A pankratist named Polydamas was constantly trying to prove that he was as tough as the hero Herakles, and according to what the travel writer Pausanias says in his *Description of Greece*, to test his strength he once

“ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, second century CE

went into a herd of cattle and grabbed the biggest, fiercest bull by one of its hind legs, holding the hoof tightly in his hand. The bull struggled frantically to escape, leaping all around. It finally managed to get away—but had to leave its hoof in Polydamas's hand!

Most ancient bronze statues were melted down centuries ago—bronze is a valuable metal, used in later ages to make armor, cannons, and other weapons—so this statue is especially precious. It shows a young man who has just won a chariot race, still holding his reins. You might think that the horses would do all the work, but the sweat has plastered his hair down to his head, with only a few curls poking out under his headband. His mouth is slightly open as though he is panting from the effort of controlling the racing animals.



A boxer named Melankomas supposedly held his arms up in the air for two straight days to strengthen them. Try that for an hour and you'll see how hard it is!

The people who reported these superhuman feats weren't the only ones who were crazy about the games held at Olympia and other sites. In fact, the competitions were so popular that they continued long after the Greek states had been incorporated into larger units, first into Macedonian monarchies and then into the Roman Empire. In 394 CE, the Christian Roman Emperor Theodosius declared that they had to stop, since the Games were in honor of pagan deities and included prayers and sacrifices.

Although the Games were popular, they had problems, too. Sometimes the athletes found ways to cheat. Wrestlers would secretly oil their bodies so that they could slip out of their opponents' grasps. People eager to win a bet sometimes bribed an athlete to lose.

The officials wanted to make sure that the outcomes of the competitions were as honest as possible, so they declared that anyone caught cheating would be punished. Sometimes cheaters were whipped and sometimes they had to pay a fine. The sides of the stadium were lined with statues bought with their fines.

The athletes at Olympia were not paid to compete. In some other competitions, however, prizes were so valuable that they might as well have been salaries. When the judges at the Isthmian Games, for example, awarded a winner a huge jar of olive oil that was too large to carry home, surely the officials knew that the athlete would divide it up into smaller jars and sell it at a great price. Some winners would be awarded free meals at their home cities' expense for the rest of their lives. Occasionally, an athlete would play for a polis other than his hometown to get a better deal. Others would receive a cash prize that would pay a laborer's salary for five years. Some didn't make out as well. The winner at the Nemean Games received only a crown of celery.

All the Greek states were supposed to declare a truce during the month that the games were going on, and they took the oath: "May the world be delivered from crime and

Oh, Lighten Up— It's Only a Game!

Not everybody was crazy about sports and athletes. The playwright Euripides got especially cranky about it. He must have been one of those kids who was always chosen last for a team, because he said in a fragment of a lost play:

“Of the thousands of evils which exist in Greece there is no greater evil than the race of athletes. In the first place, they are incapable of living, or of learning to live, properly. . . . They glisten and gleam like statues of the polis itself when they are in their prime, but when bitter old age comes upon them they are like tattered and threadbare old rugs. For this I blame the custom of the Greeks who assemble to watch athletes and thus honor useless pleasures in order to have an excuse for a feast. What man has ever defended the city or his fathers by winning a crown for wrestling well or running fast or throwing a discus far or planting an uppercut on the jaw of an opponent?”

THE OLYMPICS LIVE ON

The first of the modern Olympics took place in Athens. About 300 athletes from 13 countries participated. At first, athletes had to pay their own way to the Games, but soon countries were funding their contestants' efforts.

Imagine an ancient Greek athlete, naked, sweating, competing in sports designed to show raw strength and speed. Now imagine him (cleaned up and dressed) sitting in the stands in Athens in 2004. What would he think of the bright modern uniforms, of sports such as gymnastics and synchronized swimming, and of women competing?

Perhaps he would be shocked. But it's equally possible that he would be thrilled, recognizing that under all the changes, the spirit of competition and the joy of performing well are still there.

killing and freed from the clash of arms." But this peace was broken several times. Once an army even ran through the stadium during a wrestling match.

But still, the idea of athletes competing in difficult events for the pure love of it was appealing to people in more recent times. It matched many people's image of what the ancient Greeks were like. In 1894, a Greek man named Dimitrios Vikelas and a French aristocrat, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, formed a committee to revive the Olympic Games. They hoped that the glorious competition among amateur athletes would rekindle the spirit of ancient Greece.



Athletes from 13 countries participate in the opening ceremony of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896. Fittingly, a Greek shepherd, Spiridon Louis, won the marathon, the most popular event at that time. More than a century later, the 2004 Olympics were once again held in Athens. The spectacular opening ceremonies paid tribute not only to the athletes but to the Greeks' pride in their history.