

The Ancient Greek Olympics

The Ancient Olympic games are thought to have begun in 776BC, but nobody is really sure because they weren't recorded at first. They continued for over 1000 years, into Roman times. They were only brought back again as the modern Olympics in 1896. Some Olympic traditions such as the torch and the rings are from the modern version of the games.

Like the modern games, the Ancient Olympics took place every 4 years. This was probably because of other athletic festivals taking place (**Nemean, Isthmian and Pythian** games). The Olympic games took place near the Greek city of Olympia.

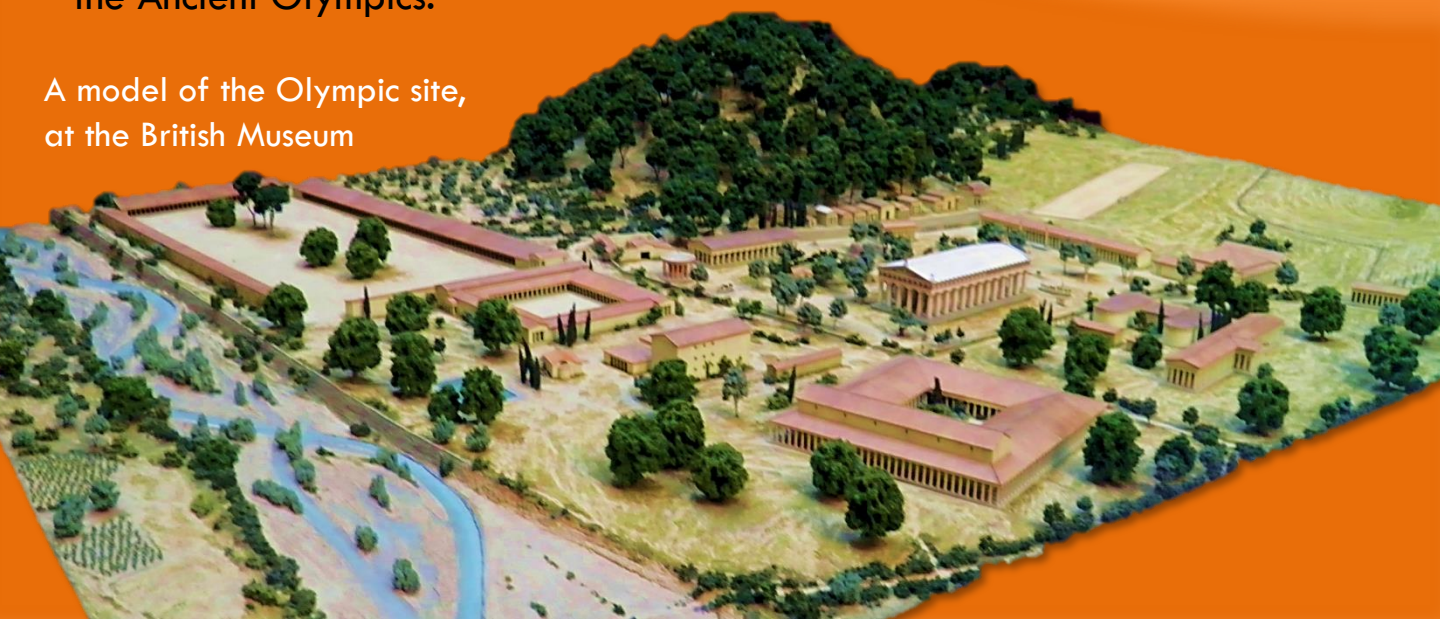
The Olympic games were really a religious festival to the God **Zeus**. The festival lasted 5 days but the first 2 ½ days were taken up by prayers, sacrifices and processions. Before the games began, 100 oxen were sacrificed.

A temple with a giant statue of Zeus once stood at the site. The statue was 40 feet tall and was one of the **Ancient Wonders of the World**. It was destroyed in the 5th Century AD. This image is a model of how it might have looked, at the Louvre museum in Paris. →



Read on to find out about some of the events at the Ancient Olympics.

A model of the Olympic site,
at the British Museum



Who could take part?



Only individuals – there were no teams, everyone was in it for themselves.



Only Greeks – other countries did not compete, just individuals from the different Greek city states. You had to prove you had Greek ancestors.



Only men – women were not allowed to compete or become trainers. To make sure of this, the competitors and trainers were naked! Married women were not even allowed to watch.

Events

For the first 13 festivals there was only one event – a 200m running race called the stadion. Then they began to add others until there were 20 different events. Here are some of the more famous ones:

Running

There were lots of running races. The two most popular were the stadion (1 length) and diaulos (2 lengths). Up to 20 men could run in one race. The runners were naked of course, except for competitors in the hoplitodromos. This was a race in war armour – a helmet, greaves (metal leg armour) and a shield, which all weighed around 6kg. The hoplitodromos acted as a good training exercise for soldiers.

Perhaps the greatest ever Olympic athlete was Leonidas of Rhodes. He won the stadion, diaulos and hoplitodromos at four consecutive Olympic Games, from 164BC to 152BC. He won 12 olive wreaths (the equivalent of a gold medal).



Runners wearing helmets and carrying shields.

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Long jump

Greek long jump was a bit different. You didn't take a long run up – you had to jump from a standing position (or possibly a very short run up). A musician would play a flute to help you concentrate. You held weights (up to 2kg each) in your hands and swung them to help move your body forwards. These weights were usually made from stone and called halters. Nobody properly recorded the distances jumped because it only mattered who jumped the furthest each time.

In 664BC, Chionis of Sparta was said to have jumped over 15 metres. This is about as long as 8 beds so it must have been exaggerated!



A jumping weight, or halter.

Chariot Racing

The 4-horse chariot race was an exciting event to watch. One horse is as strong as 10 men so you can imagine how powerful 4 horses would be! The sound must have been deafening.

Crashes and injuries were unavoidable. The horses raced 12 times around the track, covering 14,000m. Some winning horses had their own tombs as a special honour.



The first woman to win at the Olympics

The winner of the chariot race was not the driver, or even the horses – it was the owner. This meant it could be a woman! In 396 BC a Spartan princess called Kynisca entered her horses in the chariot race and won. She had a bronze statue in the Olympian temple of Zeus.

The inscription said:

I declare myself the only woman in all Hellas (Greece) to have won this crown.

Discus and javelin

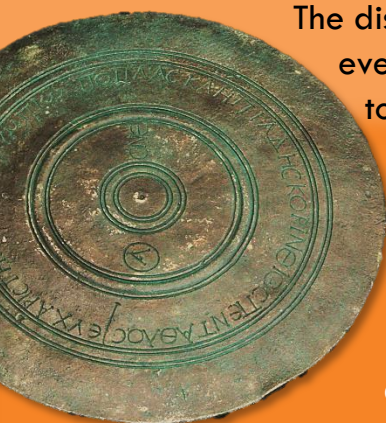
The javelin was a sharpened piece of wood, similar to a spear (one of the main weapons of a Greek warrior). The Greek javelin event was different to the modern version because a leather strap was used to help throw it further.



A group of athletes holding jumping weights, a discus and javelins.

The discus throwing was the only event that didn't seem to relate to warfare or life in some way.

Discuses were made from stone, iron, lead or bronze. Often, they would be decorated with a dedication to one of the Gods, pictures or poetry. In Greek mythology Perseus and Apollo both killed loved ones by accident with discuses.



Left: A discus dedicated to Zeus
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Combat Sports

The Ancient Olympics included boxing, wrestling and pankration.

Boxers wore soft leather straps on their hands. There were no weight categories so your opponent could be much heavier than you. If nobody was winning there would be a *klimax*. This meant the boxers took turns to hit each other without being blocked until one was knocked out.

Wrestling was very popular. There was *upright wrestling* where the winner was the man who threw his opponent to the floor 3 times and *ground wrestling* where the loser was the first to give in by raising their finger, or passing out.

Pankration was a brutal cross between boxing and wrestling. There were only two rules: No biting and no eye gouging.

Combat sports were done nude and covered in oil.



A pankration competitor biting his opponent



Pankration:
eye gouging

Dead Winner

There was no reward for 2nd or 3rd place so winning was important. Some competitors were willing to risk their lives to win. One year there was a competitor in the pankration called Arrhachion. He was being strangled but he managed to dislocate his opponent's toe. The other man gave in before Arrhachion died and so Arrhachion won! They even placed the olive crown on his dead body.