

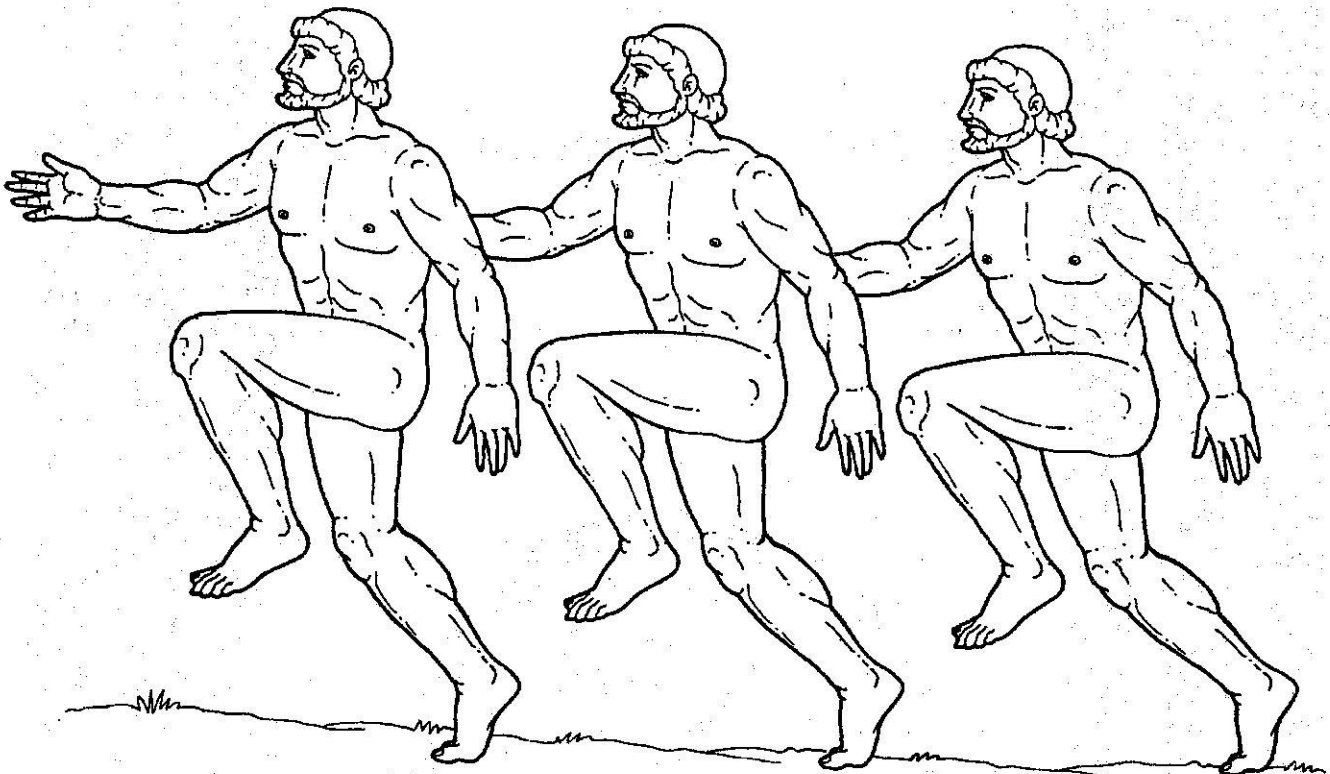
The Olympic Games in Ancient Greece

For many years the ancient Greeks gathered in the beautiful Valley of Olympia to offer sacrifices to their gods. In time, this practice came to include games and contests. These games and contests came to be known as the Olympic Games, with their first recorded date being 776 B.C. The Games were held every four years until 394 A.D. This means the ancient Olympic Games lasted more than 1000 years.

These Games, the world's oldest sports festival, became a highlight of Grecian life. All Greek male citizens were invited to participate. In time of war temporary truces were granted. Athletes and spectators from warring Greek cities were assured safe passage to the Valley of Olympia.

Athletes and judges went to Olympia for months of training before the Games opened. They trained hard and ate well. Over six pounds of meat was not an unusual dinner for an Olympian following a day's training.

The first 13 Olympic Games featured only one event—a foot race run one *stade*, the length of the stadium. This was approximately 200 meters (656 feet), the distance used to determine the basic length of future Olympic races, even in modern times.



The Olympic Games in Ancient Greece (cont.)

As time passed, additional events were added. Eventually the Olympic Games became a five-day festival. From the schedule, it is evident that the Games were deeply rooted in the religion of the people.

Day one was a day of preparation. Sacrifices were made to Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. The athletes took the Olympic oath, swearing to compete fairly. Judges also promised to be fair and just. Competitors were assigned to the events, and a contest was held for trumpeters.

Day two opened with more sacrifices to the gods. Then came the chariot race. The low, two-wheeled chariots were drawn by four horses. Two horses were harnessed to the chariot. The other two were tethered to these horses and, as the race started, ran out in front. This race of sometimes 50 chariots was the most dangerous Olympic event ever held. The racers had no lanes or barriers. There were often locked wheels, overturned chariots, even head-on collisions. A somewhat calmer bareback horse race completed the morning's program. The afternoon featured the pentathlon. Some historians believe this was an elimination contest. Those qualifying in the long jump event went on to throw a javelin, and the four best at this ran the one-stade race. The three top runners were left for the discus throw, and the final two wrestled to the finish. Others who have studied the ancient Olympic Games believe the winner was decided after the first three events, the others having already been eliminated.

Day three opened with more religious ceremonies. Food was eaten at a great banquet. In the afternoon boys competed in races, boxing, and upright wrestling where the object was to throw the opponent to the ground.

Day four featured the men's running events. They ran one-stade, two-stade, and 24-stade races, races similar to those run by boys. In the afternoon there was boxing, wrestling, and the pankration, a savage and sometimes deadly sport that combined wrestling, boxing, and judo. The rules forbade only biting and gouging the opponent's eyes. Breaking an opponent's finger was also condemned. Athletes often forgot their oaths of good sportsmanship in their eagerness to defeat an opponent. Yet, watchful judges had their rods ready to land vigorous taps on the athletes' heads to remind them of the rules. The final event was the *hoplite*. Here runners suited up in coats of armor to run a distance of two stades.

Day five included more sacrifices to the gods. Winners crowned with olive leaves were presented to the people. A herald would call out each person's name, the name of his proud father, and the place from which he came.

Women and girls were excluded from participating in the Olympic Games and were not allowed to watch, one reason being that the men competed nude. In time, separate races were set up for women and girls in a neighboring city. These games were known as the Herannic Games in honor of Hera, the wife of Zeus. They were held regularly, two years after each Olympic Games.

When the Roman Empire conquered Greece, the Olympic Games became less important. They ended in 394 A.D. by order of Emperor Theodosius. In time, earthquakes, floods, and landslides buried the site of the ancient festival.