

## THE STORY OF THE ANCIENT OLYMPIC GAMES

**THE PLACE: OLYMPIA, GREECE**

**THE YEAR: 212 B.C.**

**THE EVENT: A CHAMPIONSHIP BOXING MATCH**

**T**he Greek boxer was annoyed. The large crowd of spectators was rooting for his opponent, an Egyptian. Why, he wondered, should Greeks watching an Olympic contest cheer for a foreigner? Yet it was true. Each time the Egyptian, Aristonicus (ar-ih-STON-ih-cuss), landed a punch, there was a burst of applause. The crowd would shout, "Keep up your courage, Aristonicus!" They wanted him to win because he was the underdog against Clitomachus (klee-TOE-mack-us), who was a champion. Finally the Greek boxer, Clitomachus, turned to the spectators and spoke.

*"Have I committed a foul or broken the rules?" he asked. "Do you not know that I am fighting for the glory of Greece? Aristonicus fights for the glory of King Ptolemy (TAHL-eh-mee) of Egypt. Would you prefer an Egyptian to carry off the Olympic championship by beating Greeks?"*

*These words swayed the spectators. They began to root for Clitomachus, who went on to win the fight. An ancient historian wrote about this boxing match. He said that the Egyptian was beaten "more by the temper of the crowd than by Clitomachus."*

When this boxing match took place, the Olympic Games were already more than five centuries old. Modern historians say that the Olympics began in 776 B.C. That was the year the first official list of winners was kept. But the Olympic Games were held even before that. They lasted well over 1000 years, until A.D. 394. At that time, the Roman emperor, Theodosius (thee-oh-DIE-shuss), put an end to the Games. He said they went against the spirit of Christianity. (Earlier in the century, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.)

*continued...*



# OLYMPIC HANDOUT #5

The Olympic Games were a pagan festival for those who worshipped more than one god. Olympia, the town where they were held, was devoted to the worship of Zeus, the most powerful of the Greek gods. The temple of Zeus at Olympia was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It contained a gold and ivory statue of the god that was more than 40 feet high.

The first Olympics consisted of no more than one foot race. But as time went on, the Games became more and more popular, and other events were added. Held every four years, they attracted tens of thousands of people. The contestants were required to arrive at least one month in advance to train. Along with them came spectators, peddlers, gamblers, singers, dancers and orators. They were granted safe passage through any of the city-states that happened to be at war.

## A TYPICAL OLYMPICS

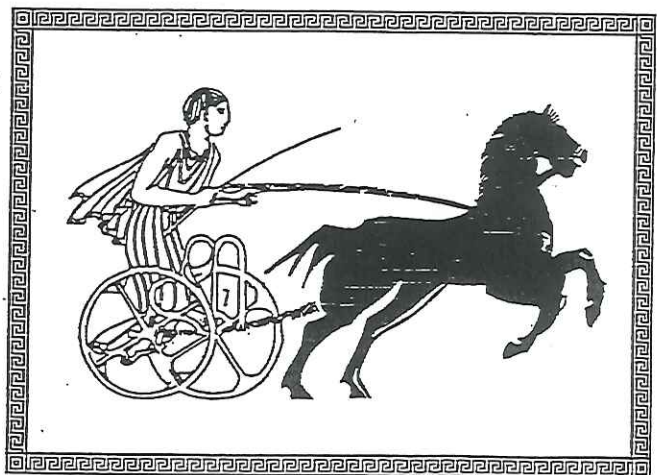
**B**y the sixth century B.C., there were 13 Olympic events, and the contests lasted several days. The first day was devoted to worship and preparation. Both the officials and the athletes took solemn oaths. The officials vowed to judge the contests fairly. The athletes pledged that they would obey all the rules of competition.

On the second day the contests began. They started with a chariot race. This was the most spectacular of all the events. It was held in an open area called the Hippodrome (HIP-uh-drome). There was only a post at each end, and the chariots had to turn around it. The distance between the posts was about 440 yards. The chariots made 12 turns around the posts for a distance of about five and a half miles.

Chariot races were very dangerous and required very skillful drivers. Each chariot was drawn by four horses abreast. Collisions on the narrow, crowded course were common. It was not unusual for only one chariot to complete the race.

When a chariot won, its owner was presented with an olive wreath, the symbol of victory at the Olympic Games. The spectators cheered and showered him with flowers. Oddly, the chariot drivers on whom everything depended received little praise.

Horse racing followed right after the chariot race. The owners of the horses were usually good riders, but at Olympia, jockeys rode for them. Olympic horse racing wasn't fun. There were no saddles and no stirrups to hold the rider's feet. Racing bareback over a course torn up by the chariots was painful, or worse. A Greek physician in the second century A.D. wrote that "riders have often been pitched from their seats and instantly killed."



*continued...*



# OLYMPIC HANDOUT #5

In the afternoon, the Games switched to the Stadium. Like the Hippodrome, this was simply a flat area with earth embankments for the spectators to stand on. The afternoon was taken up entirely by the pentathlon (PEN-tath-lon), a contest in which each athlete had to compete in five different events. They were the discus throw, the javelin throw, the long jump, a foot race and wrestling. The first athlete to win three events was declared the winner.



Day three of the Olympics began with religious rites. A parade of judges, priests, athletes and trainers marched to the sacred altar of Zeus. There 100 oxen were sacrificed to the god. Their thighs were burned and the ashes added to those that had piled up over the centuries. The rest of the animals' flesh was eaten at a banquet after the games.

The afternoon was devoted to boys' events, which attracted athletes 12-17 years old from all over the Greek world. There were no birth certificates in those days, so the judges could not be sure of any boy's true age. They had to rely on their eyes and common sense. Besides wrestling, boys competed in the 200-meter (about 200 yards) sprint and boxing.

## THE LAST DAY OF THE OLYMPICS

The last day of the Olympics began with three running events. These were the 200 meters, the 400 meters and the long distance race of 4800 meters (about three miles). The big problem with foot races was the tendency of runners to start before the signal was given. (It is still a problem today.) Runners who "jumped the gun" at the Olympic Games could be flogged. But even this punishment did not prevent false starts. Finally a mechanical starting gate was developed to deal with the problem.

The afternoon was devoted to rough body-contact sports. These were wrestling, boxing and the pankration (pan-KRAT-tee-on). The last was a combination of wrestling, judo and boxing. All the contact sports were very popular, and all of them were brutal to some extent. Greek wrestlers, as shown in paintings and statues, were big, muscular men with thick necks.

Boxing was the roughest event of all. There were few rules of fair play. Instead of gloves, boxers had leather thongs wrapped tightly around their wrists and hands. Only the fingers were left free. There were no rounds in Olympic boxing matches and no rest. The contestants fought continuously until one of them was knocked out or held his hands up in defeat. But winning was everything at the Olympics. Losing brought only shame. It was no wonder that the athletes prayed for "the wreath or death."

Did women take part in the Olympic Games? No, they were strictly kept out, even as spectators. In Ancient Greece, women were supposed to stay at home. They did not leave their houses even to buy food. There was also the question of modesty. Starting in the sixth century B.C., all contestants

*continued...*



# OLYMPIC HANDOUT #5

competed naked and barefoot. Greeks did not approve of women athletes competing in the nude.

For centuries, however, Greek school girls wearing tunics competed in sports contests. By the beginning of the Christian era, races for girls were permitted at some major sports festivals. At Olympia, however, women's contests were held at a different time from the men's. Their festival honored the goddess Hera, wife of Zeus.

## GAMES GO PROFESSIONAL

The early Olympic Games were dominated by young men of wealth. Only they could afford to hire the best coaches and spend so much time in training. But later, as athletic contests became more and more popular, there was a change. Many sports festivals vied for the best athletes. Before long, they were offering big prizes to winners. The Games were no longer an amusement for wealthy young men. They became an entertainment for spectators provided by professional athletes. The cash rewards made it possible for boys from the lower classes to make sports a full-time career.

Among the major sports festivals, only the Olympic Games did not offer cash prizes. However, the glory of winning at Olympia had many great rewards. Winners were celebrated in song and story. Poets wrote heroic odes to the champions. Artists painted them or made statues in their honor. The cities from which they came held victory parades for them. There were financial rewards, too, given by the cities and their rulers, and by wealthy men who enjoyed the company of athletes. When Olympic champions retired, they could count on pensions to support them comfortably for the rest of their lives.



## QUICK CHECK

1. When did the Olympic Games begin? Why were they discontinued? When? Who stopped them?
2. In a typical Olympics in the sixth century B.C., how many events were held? How many days did the Games last?
3. List three events and describe their special features and differences from similar events today.
4. Why were women not allowed to participate or attend the Games? What were the events for boys under 18?
5. How did the rewards of athletic competition change over the years? How did the rewards change who could compete? What kinds of honors did Olympic winners receive? ■