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Ancient Greek Ritual: Olympics

The famous wrestler Milo was said to train by carrying a calf every day. As the calf grew heavier, his muscles got stronger.

The Olympic Games began over 2,700 years ago in Olympia, in southwest Greece. The Games were part of a religious festival. The Greek Olympics, thought to have begun in 776 BC, inspired the modern Olympic Games (begun in 1896). The Games were held in honour of Zeus, king of the gods, and were staged every four years at Olympia, a valley near a city called Elis. People from all over the Greek world came to watch and take part.

Visitors to Olympia stared in wonder as they entered the great Temple of Zeus. Inside was a huge statue of the king of the gods, sitting on a throne. People called it one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The statue was covered in gold and ivory, and was six times bigger than a man. It was built about 435 BC, and no one who made the trip to Olympia missed seeing it.

The city-states of Greece were often at war. This made travel between them dangerous. So messengers sent out from Elis announced a 'sacred truce' (peace) lasting one month before the Games began. This meant people could travel to Olympia in safety. The Olympic Games were more important than wars because they were a religious festival.

At the first one-day Olympic Games, the only event was a short sprint from one end of the stadium to the other. Gradually more events were added to make four days of competitions. They included wrestling, boxing, long jump, throwing the javelin and discus, and chariot racing. In the pentathlon, there were five events: running, wrestling, javelin, discus and long jump. One of the toughest events was the race for hoplites, men wearing armour and carrying shields. Winners were given a wreath of leaves, and a hero's welcome back home. Winners might marry rich women, enjoy free meals, invitations to parties, and the best seats in the theatre. The running track was much wider than a modern one. Twenty people could run at once.

About 50,000 people could sit in the stadium. Away from the arena, most spectators had to find somewhere to pitch their tents or sleep rough, but important visitors and athletes had hotel rooms. It was hot and overcrowded, and the water supply was poor, at first not even a proper drinking fountain. This didn't stop people coming though!

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The Games ended with a feast. Lots of oxen were sacrificed to please Zeus. Traders came to do business, entertainers such as jugglers and acrobats performed, and politicians made speeches to the crowds.

Probably the pankration or all-in wrestling was the nastiest event. There were hardly any rules. Biting and poking people's eyes were officially banned, but some competitors did both! While it does not seem very sporting to us, all-in wrestling was very popular. Boxing was tough too. The fighters wore leather gloves and a boxer was allowed to go on hitting his opponent even after he'd knocked him to the ground! However, cheating was punished. Anyone caught cheating, trying to bribe an athlete for instance, had to pay for a bronze statue of Zeus, as a punishment.

Only men, boys and unmarried girls were allowed to attend the Olympic Games. Married women were not allowed into the Olympic Games. Any women caught sneaking in were punished! Women could own horses in the chariot race though. Unmarried women had their own festival at Olympia every four years. This was the Heraia, held in honour of Hera, wife of Zeus. Women could compete in running races, though only unmarried girls took part. Winners were awarded crowns of sacred olive branches, the same as men. As a rule Greek women did not go in for sport, unless they were Spartans.



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Checking for Understanding

Who are the hoplites?

What was the trophy for the athletes who won the Olympics?

What is the pankration? What was the penalty for cheating?

What was the Heraia? Who took part in it?

Critical Thinking

Why do you think the Ancient Greeks began the sacred truce during the Olympics? What does this say about how the Ancient Greeks' belief of Zeus? What else demonstrates how the Ancient Greeks felt about Zeus? *(full sentence answers please!)*
