Boycotts, Bribes and Fines

The Ancient Olympic Games

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The modern Olympic Games are now one of the most widely publicized events in the world. In 1994, it was estimated that between two and three billion people from all corners of the globe watched them on television at least a part of the 23rd Olympic Games held in Los Angeles; hundreds of thousands more watched first-hand the various events as they took place in many areas of southern California.

Quadratically we are reminded that the modern Olympics are based in large measure on the concept of the ancient Olympic Games: an athletic festival held once every four years in late summer whose athletes from different parts of the world came together to compete for the honor of victory. During the 1984 Olympics, we heard over and over again from announcers, critics, commentators and even athletes that they expected the Games to be commercial, so nationalist, so political. Their assumption was that the ancient Olympic Games were different, that ancient Greek athletes were pure in mind and body, that they trained and competed for no other reason than the love of physical exercise, fair competition and to honor their gods. The commentators asked, Where have we of the modern day gone wrong? What is it about our society that has produced an athletic festival that has so corrupted the ancient ideal? Is there hope for the modern Olympic Games?

Comparatively speaking, we are foot race 600 feet long. According to some literary traditions, this was the only athletic event that the games for the first 13 Olympic festivals or until 724 B.C. Contrary evidence, both literary and archaeological, suggests that the games may have existed at Olympia much earlier than this date, perhaps as early as the 10th or 9th century B.C. A series of bronze tripods have been found at Olympia, some of which may date to the 9th century B.C. (Fig. 3), and it has been suggested that these tripods may in fact be prizes for some of the early events at Olympia.

From 776 B.C., the Games were held in Olympia every four years for almost 12 centuries apparently without interruption but not without certain difficulties. Additional athletic events were gradually added until, by the 5th century B.C., the religious festival consisted of a five-day program. The athletic events included three foot races, stadion, diáulos and dolichos, as well as the pentathlon, pugna, pala, pankration, and the hoplodon (see Glossary). Separate events for boys were initiated in the 7th century B.C. and included the stadion, pole, and pugna. The boys' pentathlon was introduced in 625 B.C., but was immediately discontinued. Equestrian events, held in the hippodromos, were an important part of the athletic program of the ancient Olympic Games and by the 5th century B.C. included the tethrippon and the koles. Additional events, both equestrian and for humans, were added throughout the course of the history of the Olympic Games.

"politics, nationalism, commercialism and athletics were intimately related."

Whereas one of the important sources of the current controversy surrounding the modern Olympic Games is the question of amateurism (and professionalism) of athletes, this was not a concern of the Greeks since ancient athletes regularly received prizes worth substantial amounts of money. In fact, the word athlete is an ancient Greek word that means "one who competes for a prize" and was related to other Greek words, athlos meaning "contest" and athlos meaning "prize."

Our first glimpse of organized Greek athletics is in the 23rd book of Homer's Iliad, where Achilles organizes funeral games for his friend Patroklos who was killed during the Trojan War. In each of the eight events contested on the plains of Troy (see Fig. 4), material prizes are offered to each competitor, including tripods, cauldrons, valuable metal, oxen, and women. Most modern scholars now believe that the Iliad was written down to the year 700 B.C. and that much of the description of the story has more to do with the 5th century B.C. than it does with the late 13th century, the commonly accepted date of the Trojan War. During the 8th, 7th, and 6th centuries B.C., all over the Greek world, dozens of athletic events were established in part to foster festivals honoring heroes, gods, or even victorious battles. At most of

1. Zeus, Olympeos of silver tetradrachm, minted by Philip II of Macedon ca. 229 B.C., to commemorate his victory in the horse race at Olympia. (Reverse of same coin is Fig. 15.) University Museum #29-139-56.

The athlete festival sites, material awards were routinely given as prizes, e.g., bronze tripod at Lykaion, shields at Argos, wooden cloaks at Pelene, amphorae filled with olive oil at Athens. However, at the most prestigious of all the athletic festivals of ancient Greece, the Pan-Hellenic Festivals, the only prizes given were wreaths of olive, olive at Olympia, laurel at Delphi, pine at Isthmia, and parsley at Nemea. We hear from Pheidias, a Roman author of the 2nd century A.D., that it was in 752 B.C., on the advice of the Oracle at Delphi, that the worth of olive leaves was instituted as the prize for victors at Olympia.

Athletes who won at any of these Pan-Hellenic games could be assured of great wealth when they returned home. According to the Roman author Plutarch (Soc. 23), an Olympic victor who was a citizen of Athens could expect to receive in the year 600 B.C. a cash award of 300 drachmai, a modest fortune. An Athenian victor would receive 100 drachmai. From an Athenian inscription of the 5th century B.C. (IG I: 77), we learn that Athenian Olympic victors received a free meal in the City Hall every day for the rest of their lives, a kind of early pension plan. Later, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, pensions for athletes became more formalized and could actually be bought and sold. This evidence suggests that there were no amateur athletes in ancient Greece. But there were no professional athletes either, for there was no distinction between the two categories, all were simply athletes. The concept of "amateur athletes," formulated in the 19th century A.D., would have been very foreign to the ancient Greeks since the winning of a valuable or prestigious prize was an important part of being an athlete.

Eligibility Requirements at Olympia

From an inscription set up at Olympia, concerning the foundation of the Augustan Games at Naples in the year A.D. 2, we have a good idea of some of the eligibility requirements at Olympia as well. The Augustan Games were classified as Ismipic, which meant "equal to the Olympic Games"; therefore, the rules set up for Naples may have been the existing regulations at Olympia as well.

Each of the athletes must be registered according to his official name, either in his father's name or in some other way established by law; if not let him be fined by the supervisors drachmai. If he does not pay the fine, let him be flogged. If anyone arrives later than the appointed time let him announce to the supervisor the reason for his tardiness. Valid excuses are illness, shipwreck or pirates. Let anyone who wishes inform against him, and if he is convicted, let him be barred from the contest by the supervisors.

Olympia Inscription 56

It is interesting to note that the same inscription also mentions the fact that athletes were to receive a daily subsidy, presumably for training purposes, of one drachma per day beginning 30 days before the festival which was increased to three drachmai per day 15 days before the festival. This may have been true at Olympia as well where athletes underwent 30 days of mandatory training in nearby Elis.

Pausanias, a 2nd century A.D. Greek traveler, gives us more specific information about the oath that was sworn by athletes, officials, trainers and the athletes' brothers and fathers who had accompanied them. Pausanias (5, 24, 9) tells us that the oath was sworn in the basement at Olympia, the official administrative center of the sanctuary (Fig. 6). Athletes and their retainers stood before a bronze image of Zeus, known as "Zeus the Oath Giver," who stood holding a thunderbolt in each hand. The athletes swore in the presence of Zeus and on strips of freshly cut boxwood flesh that they would compete fairly in the contests, that they would not cheat or bribe or take a bribe, and that they had strictly followed training regulations for 10 consecutive months.

The bouleuterion is located in the shadow of the "Temple of Zeus," the largest religious monument of the Sanctuary of Zeus. The temple was known for its rich sculptural decoration and particularly for its pedimental sculpture on the east and west ends. Because of its location above the entrance to the building,
the east pediment (Fig. 7) would have been seen by every visitor to the sanctuary who wished to walk inside the temple to view the colossal gold and ivory cult statue of Zeus, made by Phidias in the 5th century B.C., one of the seven wonders of the ancient world (Fig. 8).

Mythological Origin of The Olympic Games

The scene on the east pediment depicted what was perhaps the best known of the myths that accounted for the origin of the Olympic Games in antiquity. The myth had to do with Onomaoas, a rich king living in the area of Olympia, his daughter Hippodomaiea, and Pelops, a young man from either Lydia or Phrygia. According to Pindar (Olympian 1), Pelops came to the region of Elis as a suitor for the hand of Hippodameia. The king challenged each of her suitors to a chariot race and had killed all thirteen of those who had defeated Pelops. Pelops was fully aware of the situation when he came to compete against King Onomaoas and, as a precaution, Pelops bribed Myrtillus, the charioteer of Onomaoas, who removed the bronze latch pin from the king's chariot and replaced it with one made of wax. Onomaoas, who drove the chariot himself was killed during the race. Pelops founded the Olympic Games to commemorate his victory over King Onomaoas and his marriage with Hippodameia. The scene depicted in the east pediment is the moment before the chariot race, when Zeus as arbiter stands between Pelops on the left and Onomaoas on the right. This is not perhaps the idealistic story of the origin of the Olympic Games that one might expect, but one should remember that, to the Greeks, gods and heroes had many mortal characteristics, including their shortcomings.

Pelops was honored in the Sanctuary of Zeus at a shrine that was established between the Temple of Zeus and the Temple of Hera (Fig. 9). In addition, the area of southern Greece where Olympia is located was named in antiquity Peloponnesus, meaning “Pelops' Island” (Fig. 2), which it continues to be called in the present day.

The Political Importance of The Olympic Games

The celebration of the Olympic Games was one of the occasions when citizens of Greek city-states would assemble together. As a result of their joint having come together at Olympia the ancient Greeks often discussed important political issues, celebrated their military victories and even formed political and military alliances. But the Olympic Games were not only a forum in which to discuss political events; they were also the cause of political conflict.

Glossary of Ancient Greek Words

- abaze—wax
- ablate—horse race
- ablate—ceremonial horse race
- ablate—race for horses
- ablate—race of war
- ablate—equal to the Olympic Games
- ablate—horse race
- ablate—goddess of victory
- ablate—place of wrestling
- ablate—women's dress
- ablate—court circuit of victory
- ablate—military victory
- ablate—building of victory
- ablate—long distance equal to 600 feet, a foot race 600 feet long, place of athletic contests, literally “the standing place”
- ablate—two-horse chariot
- ablate—king chariot
- ablate—absolute ruler
- ablate—statue of Zeus

As early as the 7th century B.C., we hear of dissension over the control of the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia between the city of Elis (30 miles to the north) and the small neighboring town of Pisa. Control of the Sanctuary and games brought with it prestige, as well as possible economic advantages and most importantly political influence. According to Pausanias (6, 22, 2) probably in the year 609 B.C. Pheidon, a powerful tyrannos (tyrant) of Argos, was asked by the town of Pisa to help capture the Sanctuary of Zeus from the city-state of Elis. Pheidon, with his army of well-trained hoplites (armed soldiers), marched across the Peloponnnesus and helped secure the Sanctuary for the town of Pisa. Herodotus (6, 127) tells us that Pheidon himself presided over the conduct of the games. But Pisa's control of the Sanctuary was briefly overthrown again in 564 B.C. Elis had regained control.

The Olympic Truce instituted by the city-state of Elis was designed to protect against military incursions of this kind. Every four years, in preparation for the approaching games, special heralds from Elis were sent out to all corners of the Greek world, with news of the approaching Olympic festival and games. Part of the announcement included the declaration of the Olympic Truce which originally was one month in duration but which was probably extended to three months by the 5th century B.C. and which was established specifically to protect athletes, visitors, spectators and official embassies coming to the festival from becoming involved in local conflicts. Any violation of the Olympic Truce was punishable by a substantial fine to Olympic Zeus. The 5th century historian Thucydides, in his account of the Peloponnesian War (4, 40-56), gives no details of such an instance. In the year 420 B.C., the Spartans engaged in a military
Nationalism and Commercialism

We owe a great wealth of information about specific athletes, athletic events, and the history of the ancient Olympic Games to Pausanias, who visited Olympia in the course of his travels in Greece and wrote a kind of guidebook for tourists of his day. From the descriptions of Pausanias (as well as from other sources), we learn that there existed fierce rivalries between the competing Greek city-states. As a result, certain political leaders had an interest in attempting to buy superior athletes from other city-states.

Pausanias tells us a good deal about the rich and influential city-state of Syracuse in Sicily. Sicily was ruled for centuries by the family of Deinomenes, tyrants who took a special interest in athletics and especially in the equestrian events of the great Pan-Hellenic festivals. We know, for instance, that the tyrant Hiero of Syracuse won the horse races at the Pythian Games at Delphi in 456 B.C. and 452 B.C.; he also won the horse races at Olympia in 476 B.C. On all three occasions he rode the same horse, Pherecrates, which means literally “bringer of victory.”

The nationalistic tendencies of the citizens of Syracuse are well documented by the fact that in 484 and 480 B.C. the city-state of Argos entered a rival racehorse, respectively, in the equestrian contests of the Olympic Games. It may well be that the racehorse was not entered in the name of an individual but rather in the name of the city-state, a clear example of nationalism. Incidentally, the entry from Argos won in both cases. The sources suggest that the baton-bearer of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. were clearly interested in celebrating the victories won by their athletes. Poetry was often employed to celebrate these victories with odes, and sculptors were employed to commemorate the image of the victorious athlete. In addition, coins were struck to commemorate equestrian victories.


12 Telegiphan, four-horse chariot; obverse of silver stater struck from Syracuse, by the artist Eumenes, early 6th century B.C. Winged Nike flies above to crown the victorious chariot team. Below are shield, greaves, carrousel, and helmet. University Museum 29.230-41.

13 Stone statue base from Olympia showing footprints of bronze victor statue. Inscription reads: "Aristion won of Thespian of Epidaurus, Polycleitus made (the statue)." Pausanias tells us that Aristion won the boxing at Olympia in 452 B.C. (Photo courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens.)
Pausanias gives us detailed information about many of the statues that he saw in the altis, the sacred precinct of the Sanctuary of Zeus. It will become apparent that the Syracuseans had a variety of interests in the Olympic Games, and not always honorable ones.

The statue of Astylos of Kroton is the work of Pythagoras. The athlete won three successive victories (486, 484, 480 B.C.) at Olympia in the stadium race and in the discus. But because on the later occasions he proclaimed himself to be a Syracusean, in order to please Hieron, son of Deinoum, the people of Kroton for this condemned his boast to be a prince, and pulled down his statue set up by the Temple of Lacinus Hera. (6, 13, 1)

By the statue of Thrasyllos stands the Temple of Elis, winner of the stadium races for boys, and Antipater of Miletus, son of Kleonax, winner of the boys boxing (399 B.C.). Men of Syracuse who were bringing a sacrifice from Dodona to Olympia tried to bribe the father of Antipater to have his son proclaimed as a Syracusean. But Antipater, thinking little of the tyrants' gains, proclaimed himself a Miletian and wrote upon his statue that he was of Milesian descent and the first Miletian to dedicate his statue at Olympia. (8, 2, 4)

Dikos, the son of Kallikrates, won five foot races at Delphi, three at Isthmion, four at Nemea and one at Olympia in the race for boys besides two in the men's race. Statues of him have been set up in Olympia equal in number to the races he won. When he was a boy he was proclaimed a native of Carystus, as in fact he was. But afterwards he was bribed to proclaim himself a Syracusean. (6, 5, 3)

Some statues set up in the sacred altis of Olympia were not to celebrate the victory of an athlete in the Olympic Games. Some have been set up as political or military dedications, commemorating, for example, the victory of the Greeks over the Per- sians or of one Greek city-state over another. One example of the latter is the famous Nike by the sculptor Polyclitus, a winged victory which was set up at Olympia to celebrate the military victory during the Peloponnesian War, and their allies over the Spartans in about 420 B.C. This statue was set on a 30-foot tall triangular pedestal adjacent to the Temple of Zeus (Fig. 6).

There were also statues set up in the Altis to commemorate athletes who had been caught cheating or bribing at the Olympic Games. These monuments were set up on the roadways leading from the heart of the altis to the vault that leads to the stadium, not coincidentally the very path that athletes walked to enter the place of athletic competition (Figs. 10, 14). One of the athletes who is commemorated here was the cause of a boycott of the Olympic Games by the city of Athens in 332 B.C. According to Pausanias (5, 21, 3), Kallippos of Athens, a competitor in the pentathlon in that year, was caught while attempting to "tie" the match by bribing his opponents. The Olympic officials fined him very severely, although we don't know the exact amount. The patron city of the athlete, Athens, was embarrassed by the charges and refused to pay the substantial fine. The charges were so important to the Athenians that they commissioned the well-known sculptor Heliodorus to persuade the Eleusis to dismiss their charges. In addition, Athens announced that they would boycott the Olympic Games unless officials at Olympia dropped their charges against Kalippos. The Olympic officials refused to do so. Only as a result of a decision by the Oracle at Delphi, the ultimate arbiter of disputes, was the situation resolved. The Oracle sided with the officials at Olympia and told the Athenians that they would receive no further oracle advice until they paid their fine to Olympia. The Athenians had no choice and paid the fine which was then used to erect the six bronze statues of Zeus. Pausanias mentions that there were inscriptions included on the stone bases of the six statues that told the story of the offense, the individuals involved, as well as a moral to would-be offenders.

President Jimmy Carter was not the first politician to sanction alter- nate games for a nation boycotting the Olympic Games. (The Liberty Bell Track and Field Classic, the alternate games sponsored by the United States before the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, were held in Franklin Field, University of Pennsylvania, July 16–17, 1980.) There were examples of ancient alternate games as well. For instance, according to the Roman author Athenaeus (222), there were games at Athens at the Panathenaia in the 1st century A.D. (Fig. 17). Nero arranged for all four of the Pan-Hel-
to watch the men’s and boys’ contests of the festival of Zeus. Married women, on the other hand, were not allowed to participate in the athletic contests of the Hera festival and were barred on penalty of death from the sanctuary of Zeus on the days of the athletic competition for boys and men. We don’t know how the Hera festival and games are, although their foundation myth is associated with Hippodameia, Peleus’s bride. Nor do we know whether or not the women allowed the men to watch the girls allowed!

**Conclusions**

The Ancient Olympic Games continued, apparently without interruption, for almost 1200 years. In 393 A.D. the Roman Emperor Theodosius I (Fig. 20) banned all pagan festivals. In his exposition of Christianity, he sought to eliminate the most publically attractive, and thereby competitive component of pagan religions, athletic festivals such as at Olympia. Later, Theodosius II called for the destruction of all pagan temples.

It should be apparent that the ancient Olympic Games were not the ballyhooed celebration of amateur athletes that we are so often led to believe. Despite their foundation as a religious celebration the ancient Olympic Games were, in many ways, very much like the modern Olympic Games; they were intrinsically political, nationalistic, and commercial. The modern Games present even greater challenges: athletes, coaches, managers and spectators come from over 150 nations, speaking different languages, with different cultural values, worshipping different gods, and believing in different political ideologies. Should there be any surprise that these games are political? An improvement that we could easily make would be to drop the “amateur” regulation from the games. Perhaps all of the competitors “athletes” and let them openly receive the prize money that many already take when they return home. This would be more realistic with respect to the modern situation and totally in keeping with the traditions and ideals of the ancient Olympic Games.

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**Selected Bibliography**


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**Bronze statue of a girl runner, probably from Sparta, ca. 500 B.C. H. 11.4 cm. (British Museum bronze 298, photo courtesy of The British Museum.)

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**Theodorus I. obverse of gold statobol. A.D. 393–395. (Photo courtesy Thanes and Harman, J. P. C. Kent, Roman Coins.)

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**Flora of the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia in the Roman period, 1st to 3rd century A.D. (after H. V. Herrensorn, Olympia, Hethausen and Wettkampfstätte, fig. 121).**