The Ancient Games

Olympics Past and Present. Reporting today's Olympic Games is a technological masterpiece. It encompasses everything from world wide television relayed by space satellites to electronic high-speed computes, tallying the results of each event and delivering them around the globe [even as] athletes ... [participate in] their competition.

Electric timers measure performance and scoreboards flash instantaneous results to the assembled fans, who gather every four years to watch this celebration of sport.

Each event is carefully recorded with a sense of history by the organizers of the modern Olympics. But there was no such concern for records or history when the Games began in ancient Greece. If there had been, the recording of winners would have been much easier for the ancient Greeks than it is for the organizers of today's brief Olympic festivals, despite our advanced technology.

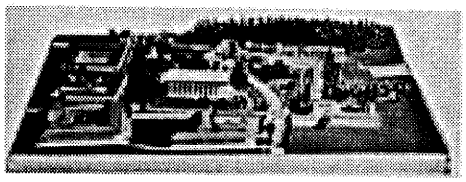
The reason? Simple. From all that historians can determine, there was only one event in the earliest meet at Olympia and it lasted no longer, perhaps, than 30 seconds!

The first recorded champion at Olympia was a sprinter, Coroebus, a cook from the nearby Greek city of Elis. Running ... on a sandy course, he sped across the finish line under the gaze of thousand of Greeks to win a foot race that was approximately 630 feet long - or one *stade* - from which the word stadium was derived. His feat won him a wreath of olive leaves.

That was in 776 B. C. The year became important for later Greek historians. Starting in about 300 B.C. they dated everything by the *Olympiad*—the periods of 4 years between Games—that began with that first record foot race.

The Perfect Man. As far back as we can trace the civilization of ancient Greece, there was a reverence of the athlete. The Greeks believed that the body of man has a glory, as well as his mind; that both mind and body need discipline, and that by such discipline men best honored Zeus. From time to time they held great ceremonies of Games, named for the area in which they took place—Pythian, Isthmian, Nemean, and above all, Olympian. The Olympian Games go back to the time of the first people to live in the valley of the Alpheus River. There, at Elis in the western Peloponnesus, was Olympia, "the fairest spot of Greece." In the spacious and charming valley from which snow-covered distant mountains can be seen, was one of the most famous sanctuaries of ancient Greece. The religious role of the sanctuary began thousands of years ago, long before the Games held there every four years to honor Zeus.

Olympia. As it happens we know a good deal about Olympia. It was brought to light, beginning in 1875, by German archeologists. The most important of the ruins they uncovered are those of a temple of Zeus that was in use about 2,500 years ago, and a temple of his wife, Hera, that is even older—about 2,900 years. The world-famous statue of Hermes by the sculptor Praxiteles, now in the nearby museum, was found in the Temple of Hera. The Temple of Zeus contained one of the Seven Wonders of the World -- a statue, larger than a two-story house, of Zeus on his throne, made by Phidias of ivory and gold.



An architectural model of Olympia (c. 150 A.D.) shows the columned Temple of Zeus in the center of the sacred grove, the Temple of Hera (center, rear) the ceremonial reception hall (left front), the house of priests (left, center), and the palaestra (left, rear).

The great desire of the cities near the temple of Zeus was to win the favor of the gods by their show of reverence. So, by 500 B.C., Sparta, Elis, Athens, and Syracuse rivaled each other in the magnificence of their offerings to the temple.

Intense Training. Whatever the earliest religious ritual at Olympia may have been, over the years it evolved into a festival of the state. To it, to enter themselves in the festival Games, went candidates from all parts of Greece. They were tested in the gymnasium at Elis before they were allowed to compete at Olympia. The ten-month training at Elis was considered the most valuable preparation athletes could undergo. They lived in the *gymnasium* (from the word for naked) and practiced all day, every day, under the eyes of professional trainers. Officials of Elis decided who could compete and, later, who should get the prizes.

Athletes from Elis won the first 13 Olympic races. Only the Doric peoples of the Peloponnesus participated originally. Other Greek tribes joined in later; then came the peoples from Crete, Rhodes, Sicily, Egypt, and Asia Minor. The Games served as a common link in the Hellenic world.

Ekecheiria—The Sacred Truce. Nothing was more important to the Greeks than the Games, and nothing was permitted to interfere with them—not even wars. During the month of the festival of religious rites and sporting events called the Hieromenia, trade ceased and a truce was declared in the constant bickering that existed between the Greek city-states. This Olympic peace was called the *Ekecheiria.* For as long as the Games lasted, no one under arms could enter Olympia. It was sacred ground.

Just how much the Games meant to the ancient Greeks can be gathered from one event. In 480 B.C. the festival of the Games was in process when a Spartan army had to defend Themopylae, and with it all Greece, against Persian King Xerxes and his invaders. Although the very fate of their country was at stake, thousands of Greeks showed up at the stadium at Olympia to watching the championship round of the boxing competition.

Beginnings. Where and when did this business begin? The fables of ancient Greece offer many explanations. Greek poets told of a great duel between Zeus and his father, Kronos, one of the the Titans, for mastery of the world. Zeus won, and to honor him, a temple was raised in the valley of the sacred river Alpheus, below the mountain—the Kronion—where the titanic duel was fought.

Or there is the tale of Pelops and his duel of wits with King Oenomaus of Pisatis, the son of Ares, God of War. Oenomaus had a beautiful daughter named Hippodameia. The king had offered her hand in marriage to any suitor who could take the girl from her home by chariot and then outspeed Oenomaus when he pursued them.

Winning the race was vital because it was the custom of Oenomaus to execute the losers to prevent the fulfillment of an oracle's prophecy that he would die at the hands of his son-in-law. Thirteen suitors raced off with Hippodameia and each lost his life because the king had the fastest steeds.

Pelops studied the tactics of the losers and decided he needed help. So he made Myrtilos, the king's charioteer, an offer he couldn't refuse—half the kingdom if his master was defeated.

When the chase began, Oenomaus was confident that Pelops would end on a spear like all the other suitors. However, what he didn't know was the Myrtilos had damaged an axle on the regal chariot. As the king closed in on Pelops, the axle gave way and Oenomaus broke his royal neck in the crash, fulfilling the prophesy. So proud was Pelops of his cunning victory over Oenomaus that he instituted the contests as a memorial, and held them near Olympia in the fertile valley when he and others had chased for the hand of his bride, Hippodameia.

The First Olympics. While its origins are shrouded in myth and mystery, the festival at which Coroebus won his wreath in 776 B.C. was repeated at 4-year intervals for the next 1,200 years.

The first contestants at Olympia, who gathered in the autumn, were sprinters. The lone race was run on a straight track. Twenty athletes could take positions at the starting line, marked by grooved limestone blocks. A bugle blast was their signal to start.

Added Events. As Olympiad followed Olympiad, the contests increased in number and variety. The first expansion of the Games occurred in the XLV Olympiad, when a race covering two lengths of the stadium was added. Four year later a race of about three miles became part of the program. In 708 B.C. the five-event Pentathalon was introduced. It was designed to provide the ultimate in well-coordinated athletes. Contestants first competed in a jumping event, with the best finishers advancing to the spear (javelin) throw. The four best in that competition then advanced to the sprint race, where another athlete was eliminated. That left three for the discus. The two best of them wrestled for the Pentathalon championship.

The discus was a Greek favorite. The man who could throw it farthest was regarded as a greatest athlete. It was on a bronze discus, which Aristotle saw in the Temple of Hera, that the traditional laws governing the festival at Olympia was inscribed.

By 688 B.C. there were boxing contests in which the competition at first tied leather straps around their fists. Later they would fit metal rings on the straps and then metal knuckles.

Four-horse chariot races, first run in 60 B.C. were open to men rich enough to afford chariots and horses. From the beginning they were a spectacular and poplar event very different from the older contests, which were mainly athletic or military in nature. Horse races were part of the festival in 648 B.C. They were run in a separate hippodrome next to the stadium. These horse races were the only events in which bondsmen or slaves were permitted to participate. A winning owner received the olive wreath, while his victorious servant was given a cotton headband.

Pancration—The Brutal Contest. It was in 648 B.C., too, that the contest called pancration (from the Greek words for “all strength”) was introduced. It was a cruel combination of wrestling and boxing, and no holds were barred. Each match went to the finish with no rest periods. Only when one contestant lay unconscious or raised his hand as a sign of defeat did the event end.

The victory of Arrachion of Phigalia gives us an idea of the character of the pancration. Arrachion, it is said, was being strangled by his opponent, a perfectly legal maneuver according to the rules. As he was losing consciousness, Arrachion in desperation twisted his foe’s leg. He inflicted such pain that the opponent lifted his hand to signal defeat. But as the judges declared Arrachion the winner, he lay dead before them, ultimate loser in the pancration.

Cultural Celebrations. Over and above these exercises of physical strength and agility, the celebrations included contests in music, poetry, and eloquence. The festivals gave musicians, poets, and authors the best possible chance to present their work to the public. The fame of those whose efforts were rewarded with the olive wreath spread far and wide.

Olympic Heroes. Winners of Olympic events were revered as heroes; their exertion and sacrifice could result in rich rewards. Their triumphs became part of the record kept in the *altis,* or sacred grove. Three-time winners had statues erected in their likeness and received various gifts and honors, including exemption from taxation.

Often a winner would return to his home and be escorted through an opening in the wall surrounding his city—an opening created by the citizens to show the world that a city with an Olympic champion need fear no enemy. Among the legendary heroes of the ancient Games were Milo of Croton, who won six wrestling competitions during the sixth century B.C., and Polydamas of Thessaly, victor in the pancration in the XCIII Olympiad (408 B.C.).

Milo supposedly developed his brute strength by carrying a calf on his shoulders every day of his life until it was a full grown bull. Polydamas is said to have killed a lion with his bare hands and stopped a chariot by grabbing the back of it with one hand.

Theagenes of Thasos possessed several skills. He competed in boxing, sprinting, and the pancration, winning the wreath no fewer than 1,400 times.

The Golden Age of the Olympics. By the fifth century B.C., Olympia was the holiest place of ancient Greece and its ceremonial Games were at their height. They lasted five days; religious rituals occupied much of the time. At the opening of the Games a pig was sacrificed to Zeus and a black ram to Pelops. When an athlete won an event he was supposed to give public thanks to the deities.

Set above the multitude by their championships, Olympic victors expected esteem. Occasionally, Olympic champions returning home did not receive the welcome they felt they deserved. Thus, when Oebotas returned to Achaia following a victory and was virtually ignored, he put a curse on his city. During the next 74 Olympiads, no citizen of Achaia won an event. The Oracle at Delphi told the people of Achaia to honor the memory of Oebotas with a statue. When they did Sostratas of Achaia won the foot race for boys in the next Olympiad.

No Women in the Olympic Games. Women were barred from the early Games, both as spectators and competitors, because the Olympics was regarded as primarily religious ceremonies. Those women who let curiosity get the better of them were put to death if they were caught.

However, in 396 B.C., a woman from Rhodes escaped that fate. Kallipateira dressed in men's clothes so she could watch her son compete in boxing in the XCVI Olympiad. When he won, Kallipateira ran to shower him with kisses, and so gave herself away. Because her father was Diagoras the boxing champion of the LXXIX Olympiad in 464 B.C., and one of the most celebrated of all ancient athletes, the penalty of death was waived.

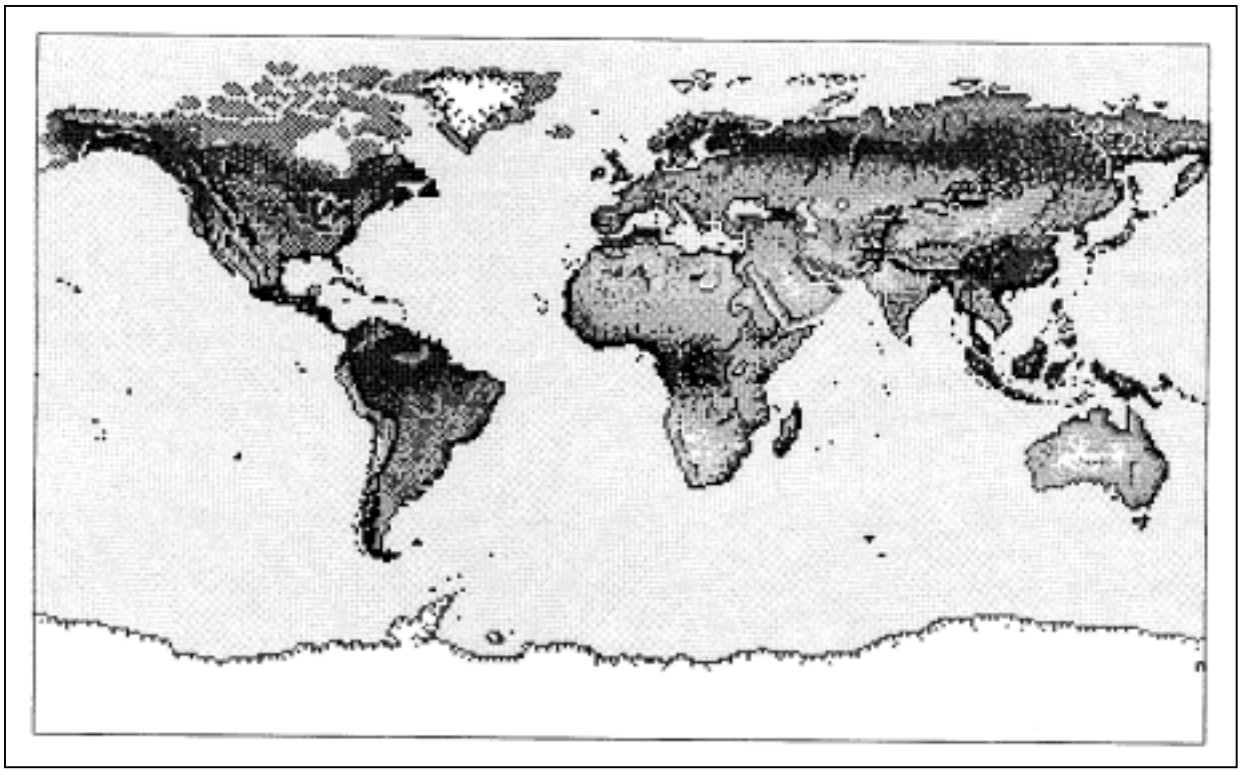
Rome Brought the Decline of the Games. The ancient Games reached their zenith in the so-called Golden Age of Greece. With the emergence of the mighty Roman Empire, the sun began to dim. Contests among amateur sportsmen gradually changed. The high ideals of the earlier years were lost sight of. Interest in striving to be perfect, just for the satisfaction of doing one's best, gave way to emphasis on the rewards. Winning became the only concern. Foreign athletes of known prowess were given Greek citizenship so they could enter the Games. Rich men who could not themselves hope to compete began to hire professionals so that they might be sure of wining the bets wagered on the contests.

The Dismal Low of Nero. Perhaps the low point was reached in 67 A.D., when Nero appeared at the CCXI Olympiad with a retinue of 5,000, whose primary function was to applaud him. No opponent dared face Nero in the chariot race. When he fell from his chariot, fawning officials put him back, but he could not finish the race. Yet the jury declared him champion. It had been ordered to do so.

As the original purpose of the Games was forgotten, Olympia itself began to decline, even though Romans, who had conquered Greece, continued the Games and added to the riches of the temple of Xhosa.

The End of the Ancient Games. The Games continued for some three centuries after Nero's sham, but the days of splendor had passed. The long list of ancient Olympic champions ends with the boxer Varazdetes or Varastad, an Armenian. In 393 A.D., Roman Emperor Theodosius I, a convert to Christianity who considered the Games pagan, ordered them to be abolished because they had become a public nuisance. The immense statue of Zeus was taken from the temple and carried away to Constantinople, where it was lost in a huge fire. A few years later, in the reign of Theodosius II, the marvelous temples of Zeus and Hera were dismantled. Successive earthquakes and floods ruined the site and gradually Olympia was completely buried. So it would remain, lost from sight and half-forgotten, through century after century, until 1875.

Taken from *Pursuit of Excellence:* The Olympic Story, by The Associated Press and Grolier, Grolier Enterprises Inc., Danbury, Connecticut, 1979, James E. Churchill, Jr., Jeff Hacker, Edward Humphrey, editors; Hal Bock, Will Grimsley, Charles Morey, Barney Nagler, Mike Pathet, Contributing Writers.



The Games Revived

Baron Pierre de Coubertin. For 15 Centuries the world went along without the Olympic Games. And it probably would have continued to do without them except for an energetic Frenchman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Coubertin is credited with almost single-handedly bringing about the revival of the Olympic festival. He was born on January 1, 1863, in Paris into a family without wealth and aristocratic position.

His older brother was enrolled at St. Cyr, the traditional training school for military career officers. Pierre considered following suit, but at barely 5' 3", he hardly possessed a commanding stature. He turned his attention first to political science, and then to the field of public education. It was in the latter area that he found fulfillment.

Sports and Education. He traveled widely, studying the education offered in Europe and the United States. Everywhere he went Coubertin was fascinated by the way education seemed to be intertwined with sports. Everywhere, that is, except in his native France, where tradition kept the two separated. He went to work to change that practice.

Greek Revival. About this same time, a team of German archaeologists were engaged in digging up and restoring the ruins of ancient Olympia. News of their work attracted visitors to Greece from around the world, Baron de Coubertin among them. As he toured the site where once Coroebus had raced and Milo had wrestled, Coubertin was enthralled.

What great good might not accrue, he wondered, if the Games that celebrated perfection in amateur sports could be reintroduced into a world that already was blighted by an international trend toward commercialism in sports. Just *how* commercial they had become and how restricted the definition of amateur had grown he had learned when he tried to send French rowers to compete at Henley [England]. The money prize that was given winning rowers in France made their recipients professionals in the eyes of the Henley officials.

Efforts to Revive the Ancient Games. Now a man with a mission, Coubertin set out to achieve the goal of an Olympic revivals. He worked slowly, attracting widespread attention through the publication of dozens of books (published at his own expense) that dealt with educational theory and his efforts to modernize the French system of studies. Tirelessly, he gave dinners, wrote articles, gathered meetings to publicize and gain support for his ideas. In 1888, he helped to found the Athletic Sports Union, an organization which sought to increase physical education in French schools and universities.

A year later, he began to publish a monthly newspaper designed to stimulate an interest in sports through France. That same year the French government commissioned him to study physical culture on a worldwide scale.

A Proposal. By 1892, he had a proposal to make. Using a November 25 meeting of the Athletic Sports Union in Paris for his forum, he called for an international gathering of athletes in all sports for the purpose of friendship, fellowship, athletics, and most importantly, peace:

> Let us export oarsmen, runners, fencers; there is the free trade of the futuxe--and on that day when it shall take place among the customs of Europe the cause of peace will have received a new and powerful support.

A Slow Beginning. The first reactions to the proposal were less than enthusiastic: de Coubertin was a dreamer. But he persisted, pressing the idea with athletic organizations throughout the world.

One year after he first approached the Olympic idea, Coubertin was host to an international gathering of sportsmen, together with the Athletic Sports Union, at the Sorbonne [France]. That meeting greatly encouraged him.

Acceptance. On June 16, 1894, he assembled another athletic congress with delegates from nine nations, including Russia and the United States, to study the questions of amateurism. Seven items were on the published agenda but on his own de Coubertin added an eighth—the possibility of reviving the Olympic Games.

It was his moment. He spoke with such conviction that when he finished he had won the support of all delegates. On June 23, 1894, the congress unanimously voted to revive the Olympics and, to Coubertin's surprise, decided to speed up by four years his own timetable for the first games of the moern Olympiad.

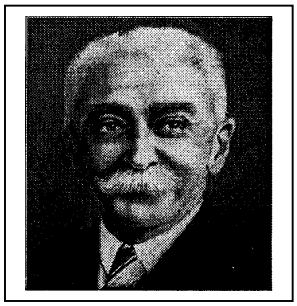
Coubertin originally hoped to have the renewal of the Games coincide with the Paris International Exposition of 1900 and the start of the Twentieth Century. But the enthusiasm of the delegates could not be denied; they voted to hold the revived Games in 1896 in Athens, Greece.

Early Stuggles. It was a charming idea, returning the Olympics to the land of their ancient origin, but problems began to spring up like mushrooms. The most troubling was the lack of a suitable stadium in which to hold the Games. The Greek government, facing serious economic difficulties even before the Games were dropped in its lap, nevertheless embarked on an ambitious fund-raising campaign to generate income. Their efforts included the issuance of commemorative stamps, a device still in use today.

George Averoff's Generosity. Despite public contributions and income raised from the sale of stamps, there was an enormous shortage until an approach was made to George Averoff, a wealthy Greek merchant living in Alexandria. Averoff was fascinated by the idea of an Olympic revival and agreed to pay the entire cost of restoring Athens' once magnificent stadium of Herodes Atticus. It had originally been constructed in 143 B.C. by Tiberius Cladius Herodes Atticus, an administrator of the Emperor Hadrian. Averoff's extraordinary philanthropy made it possible to hold the Games on schedule.

The Father of the Modern Olympics. The first Modern Olympic Games were Just the beginning of Coubertin's connection with the Games. For a period of years, during which sports became more generally practiced and physical education more firmly integrated in public education systems, Coubertin did not enjoy a proportionate renown, as might have been expected. However, after the very successful Stockholm Games in 1912, he was generally recognized as the driving force behind the Games' revival.

The Tradition Begins. De Coubertin managed personally to preside over the International Olympic Committee until 1925, assuming the greatest part of the financial and administrative duties by himself. He created the Olympic Charter and Protocol and the Athlete's Oath, as well as the format of the opening and closing ceremonies. He fought off all attempts to immobilize the Games in some permanent location (Switzerland and Sweden were often suggested), and he successfully persisted in opening the Games to any qualified amateur, without regard to social class.



Death of a Visionary. In 1918, he moved permanently from France to Switzerland. For the remainder of his life he continued to devote his energies and his dwindling funds to his great idea, but with less and less effect. As his control and personal influence diminished, he became embittered and angry. When he died, in Geneva on September 2, 1937, he had been left behind by the International Olympic Committee. Except for his heart, he was buried in Lausanne. His heart was taken to Olympia, to be buried in the sacred grove there.

Of the Games that had been so great a part of his life's work, he wrote:

My friends and I have not worked to bring back the Olympic Games in order that they may be turned into a museum or cinema piece, or so that they may be exploited by commercial or political powers. Our desire has been in reviving an institution which goes back 25 centuries, that you may once again become followers of the. sport as it was conceived by our glorious ancestors. In this modem world, full of great possibilities but which is at the same time threatened by a perilously decadent trend, the Olympic Movement can become a school not only of physical endurance arid energy, but also of moral nobility and purity. This, however, can only be achieved if you strive continually to raise your standards of honor and your conception of impartial sport to the same height as that of your physical achievement. The future lies in your hands.

Peace would be furthered by the Olympic Games, but peace could be the product only of a better world; a better world could be brought about only by individuals; and better individuals could be developed only by the give and take, the buffeting and battering, the stress and strain of fierce competition.

First of all, it is necessary to maintain in sport the noble and chivalrous character which distinguished it in the past, so that it shall continue to be part of the education of present day peoples in the same way that sport sewed so wonderfully in the times of ancient Greece. The public has a tendency to transform the Olympic athlete into the paid gladiator. These two attitudes are not compatible.

Taken from *Pursuit of Excellence: The Olympic Story,* by The Associated Press and Grolier, Grolier Enterprises Inc., Danbury, Connecticut, 1979, James E. Churchill, Jr., Jeff Hacker, Edward Humphrey, editors; Hal Bock, Will Grimsley, Charles Morey, Barney Nagler, Mike Rathet, Contributing Writers.

Compare and Contrast