

OLYMPIC GAMES

FROM LORD ABERDARE

(by courtesy of Mess. Hutchinsons)

It is generally agreed that the first Olympiad, a four-year period extending from the year in which Olympic Games were held, started in 776 B. C. It derived its name from Olympia, a sacred precinct in the westernmost Greek province of Elis, eleven miles distant from the Ionian Sea, where the river Cladeus flowing from the north joins the Alpheus from Central Arcadia.

There are many legends as to how Olympic Games started, one of them being about Hercules, either the well-known hero or the Idaean Dactyl, who challenged his four brothers to run in a race and, having won it, was crowned, as all victors were, with a wreath of wild olive leaves cut from a sacred olive tree. Thereafter every fifth year the contest was held because of the fact that five brothers competed in the race. Another legend and a more likely one, is that they owe their origin to funeral games held in honour of tribal chieftains and their restoration to Pelops, the grandson of Zeus, at whose tomb ancient tribes gathered in order to worship their hero in the form of funeral games.

At any rate it can be said that Games in Greece had a religious character and had been held as festivals of great importance, even dating back long before 776 B. C., and originating in the belief that the shades of the dead were gratified by such spectacles as had delighted them during their earthly life.

During the Homeric age these festivals were simply sacrifices followed by games at a tomb or before a funeral pyre. Gradually they grew into religious festivals observed by an entire community and celebrated near the shrine of the god in whose honour they were instituted. The idea then developed that the gods themselves were present but invisible, and delighted in the ceremonies and competitions.

The participants in such contests may not have had much practice for the Games but they were probably well developed and carefully trained in case of war upon neighbouring tribes, which was of very constant recurrence.

By 776 B. C. the Games of Olympia were held in such high esteem that all the tribes of Greece suspended their hostilities temporarily for this festival.

The Games usually took place during the month of August and lasted about seven days.

Only freemen of pure Hellenic blood were permitted to enter, barbarians and Greek slaves being only allowed to witness them.

Contestants had to be of exceptional fitness, mental, moral and physical, and to be sponsored by relatives who had to bear witness that they had committed neither crime nor sacrilege. It was universally agreed that it was necessary for each competitor to train for ten months prior to the Games and that the last month of training had to be done in the gymnasium of Olympia and under the guidance of the specially appointed judges.

This last month of training was the most difficult and the judges eliminated those they thought did not reach the requisite standard. The athletes had to swear that they had trained faithfully for ten months and that they would be fair and honest in their competition. Following this ceremony the names of those athletes who had qualified were broadcast and written upon a large white board. It was considered an exceptional honour even to be allowed to contest at all, while the winner received the very highest honour of his City and Nation. He was usually escorted to his home in a triumphal procession and allowed to enter his City by a specially made breach in the wall, and act to signify that a City with such a type of inhabitant required no ramparts. Also he was honoured by banquets at the public expense and often was exempted from taxes.

Before the Greeks built a stadium their racecourse consisted of a plot of level ground over which the contestants ran to a tree or rock, these objects marking their finishing line. For a longer race the competitors were required to run to or around a tree and back to the starting line. The first stadium built was of a rectangular shape with stone slabs and pillars marking the starting and finishing lines. It was laid out on land surrounded by sloping ground and stone seats were built for the convenience of spectators.

Running races were the only events contested during these early Olympiads. The length of the shortest race was 210 yards and was called the stadion or stade race. Another popular race was that of 420 yards and the longest was of approximately 3 miles. By degrees the following events were added to the programme :



A STOCKHOLM. — Dans les coulisses de la session, M. J. S. Edström s'entretient avec Lord Aberdare (Angleterre) et le Comte Bonacossa (Italie).

1. *Armour races.*
2. *Boxing.*
3. *Wrestling.*
4. *Chariot races.*
5. *Pentathlon (consisting of long jumping, running, throwing the discus, throwing the javelin and wrestling).*
6. *Pancration (consisting of wrestling and boxing, in which victory was not decided until one of the competitors was killed or lifted up a finger thus declaring he was unable to continue the contest).*
7. *Relay races.*
8. *Torch race (a race held at night, the winner being the one who reached the finishing line with his torch still alight).*

Competitors and spectators found their way to Olympia not only from Greece proper but from Magna Graecia, Asia Minor and the four corners of the Hellenic world.

Greece was in the ancient world what Great Britain has been in the new—their citizens were lovers of the sea and great colonizers. From every point on the horizon all eyes looked

to Olympia. The larger City States sent embassies and many foreign nations were represented.

The Olympic Games which at first were of a local character gradually became Pan-Hellenic, and of the four Games which attracted very wide attention those of Olympia consecrated to Olympian Zeus, father of all the gods, became far the most important.

All athletes stood before the statue of Olympian Zeus where they swore they would abide by the judges' decisions and where they offered up prayers for victory. They judges too took oaths that their decisions would be just. There followed a fanfare of trumpets and a procession of the competitors to the stadium, where orators from their native cities exhorted them to win. A trumpet blast sounded the event and the names of the contestants, their city and parentage were announced by heralds. At the conclusion of the event, the trumpet sounded for silence and the judges proclaimed their decision. A palm branch was placed in the hand of the winner and a wreath of wild olive from a sacred tree in the Altis, the sacred enclosure, on his brow.

Heralds announced his name and city and the honour of having his statue erected in the Altis was awarded him.

Wrestling was for a long time the favourite contest among the Greeks and later the Pentathlon, a combination of five contests designed to show an all-round proficiency. These consisted of a running long jump with dumb bells, a running race, throwing the four-pound discus, hurling the javelin (a spear believed to have been about 3 feet long and $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick) and lastly wrestling. The programme of the Pentathlon was completed in one day, the competitors being gradually eliminated, until only two remained for the final wrestling match.

In all contests of any description the athletes performed entirely naked. Women were not allowed to participate in or witness the Games. They were however allowed to enter chariots for the chariot races. Also they instituted an athletic festival for themselves, known as the Heraea, which was celebrated every four years shortly after the Olympic Games. These Games comprised running races only.

In the men's event boxing was an especially severe and brutal affair, as each contestant fought with a cestus, a series of ox-hide thongs bound together with lumps of hardened leather, nails and lead buckles, and each contest was a fight to the finish.

The Pancration ("all strength"), a combination of wrestling and boxing and the last word in all-round brutality, brought into play every muscle in the body. It was fought until one man yielded.

Horse races with bare-back riders were added later and likewise certain types of the above stadium events of a nature suitable for boys.

At the 25th Olympiad the four-horse chariot race was added as a compliment to the men of wealth from all parts of the Hellenic world.

To encourage the training of warriors for the army, the hoplitodromos was inaugurated. This race as the words imply was for the soldier who had to run with spear and shield and in full fighting order the entire length of the stadium—210 yards and back—and obviously required great endurance.

The Games concluded with the procession of the victors to the Temple of Zeus in the sacred Altis, where stood the famous ivory and gold statue of Olympian Zeus. It was sculpted by Phidias (c. 434 B.C.), stood 60 foot in height and was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Before this statue final sacrifices and the closing ceremonies were performed. A public banquet at which odes to the victors were spoken by the best Hellenic poets concluded the festival. Orators, musicians, historians, dramatists and philosophers were present and a certain cultural atmosphere arose as a result.

Such were the Olympic Games at their zenith. This was from the Age of Pericles down through the days of Alexander the Great, during the time when the Macedonian Empire was madly attacking the great military Republic in the West. Corinth fell in 146 B.C. and Greece became a Roman Province.

Greece became less and less conspicuous and her high standards of honour and sportsmanship declined. Professional athletes began to appear at the Games, travelling from one contest to another, prostituting the original idea of clean amateur sportsmanship and degrading it to a trade.

In 394 A. D. the Emperor Theodosius, the last great ruler of the Roman Empire, from his throne in Constantinople issued a decree suppressing Olympic Games.

Thus for over 1000 years from the first recorded Olympiad in 776 B. C. to 393 A. D., the year of the last ancient Olympiad, there had been an unbroken record every four years of 292 Olympiads.

What a testimony to their popularity and influence!

Every student of history knows that the year 476 A. D. marks the mile-post separating the Ancient World from the Middle Ages. It was in that year that Rome capitulated to the barbarians. Phidias' great statue of Olympian Zeus was carried off to Constantinople, where it perished in a fire; the Goths overran the Temple of Zeus at Olympia and as the result of an earthquake during the sixth century A. D. the Temple was finally demolished. Simultaneously a landslide and an extensive inundation of the River Alpheus covered the ruins of Olympia with a layer of sand and mud 15 to 20 feet deep. In this condition the sacred precinct lay for thirteen centuries, till Ernst Curtius of Berlin, with the financial assistance of the German Emperor, started to remove the overlying soil, a task he completed by 1881.

The modern Olympic Games.

The revival of the modern Olympic Games, the first of which was celebrated in Athens, capital city of Greece, in 1896, was due to the idealism and enterprise of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who forsook a political career to devote his young manhood to the introduction of Sport into the educational life of his young French countrymen. To this end he travelled widely in America and England to study the organisation of Sport and its importance in the lives of the people of those countries.

It was in 1892 that he first propounded his desire for a new era in International Sport. At a meeting of the Union des Sports Athletiques

in France he made his first public pronouncement as follows :

“ Let us export our oarsmen, our runners, our fencers into other lands. That is the true Free Trade of the future and the day it is introduced into Europe the cause of Peace will have received a new and strong ally. It inspires me to touch upon the further step I now propose and in it I shall ask that the help you have given me hitherto you will extend again, so that together we may attempt to realise upon a basis suitable to the conditions of our modern life the splendid and beneficent task of reviving the Olympic Games. ”

For a time there was no perceptible result but two years later a circular to all Athletic Associations pointing out “ the necessity to preserve in Sport those characteristics of nobility and chivalry which have distinguished it in the past, so that it may continue to play the same part in the education of the peoples of today as it played so admirably in the days of Ancient Greece ” brought together in June 1894 to the Amphitheatre of the Sorbonne enough delegates from various countries to found the International Olympic Committee. This Committee, though much enlarged still controls the Games and has remained self-appointed.

At the original meeting Baron de Coubertin proposed that the first Games of the new era should be celebrated at Athens, and this proposal met with unanimous approval. Thus started the serie of modern Olympiads of which in the summer of 1948 London is celebrating the XIVth—though it will only be the eleventh time the modern Olympic Games have actually taken place.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the Founder of the Modern Olympic Games, so excellently expressed his inmost feelings that I quote him once again : “ The main issue in life is not the victory but the fight ; the essential is not to have won but to have fought well. To spread these precepts is to pave the way for a more valiant humanity. ”

“ Joie des muscles, culte de la beauté, travail pour le service de la famille et de la société; ces trois éléments unis en un faisceau indissoluble. ” “ May joy and good fellowship reign and in this manner may the Olympic Torch pursue its way through the ages, increasing friendly understanding among nations for the good of a humanity always more enthusiastic, more courageous, more pure. ” These words were repeated across the globe and form the basis of a healthy and happy philosophy. The Olympic movement gives the world a great ideal.

Modern Olympiads. History.

1896. — Athens (Greece). The Marathon Race was run at these first Olympic Games to

commemorate the fate of Pheidippides who in 490 B. C. ran from Marathon to Athens with the news of the victory of the Greeks over the Persians under Darius.

1900. — Paris (France).

1904. — St. Louis (Mo. U. S. A.). This was held in connection with the St. Louis Exposition commemorating the purchase of the Louisiana territory. These Games were not as successful as they should have been as practically all the contestants were American, European athletes shunning the expense involved.

Two years later in 1906 Athens (Greece) held Games because the Olympic Games of 1904 had not been successful from an international point of view, but these were not recognised officially.

1908. — London (Great Britain). This Fourth Olympiad had been voted to Rome (Italy) but owing to certain difficulties unexpectedly arising, the International Olympic Committee turned to London in 1906 to save the situation and solve a very difficult problem. At these Games Swimming events and Shooting matches were added to the programme.

1912. — Stockholm (Sweden). The Games held here were most successful.

A STOCKHOLM. — Le Comte C. de Rosen (membre du C. I. O. pour la Suède depuis 1900) n'a-t-il pas l'air de donner des conseils à Lord Burghley, président du Comité d'organisation des Jeux de Londres, sous l'œil paternel... et quelque peu dubitatif du vice-président du C. I. O., M. Avery Brundage !



1916. — *The 6th Olympiad had been allotted to Berlin (Germany) — the Games to be staged in 1916, but the Games did not take place on account of the First World War (1914-1918).*

1920. — *Antwerp (Belgium). Modern Olympic Games were held for the sixth time.*

1924. — *In 1924 Paris (France). Paris was honoured with an Olympiad for the second time.*

In this Olympiad Winter Games were first organised and in the month of January were held at Chamonix (France).

1928. — *Amsterdam (Holland). At these Olympic Games Women's Track and Field events were instituted*

In the winter of 1928 the 2nd Olympic Winter Games had been held at St. Moritz (Switzerland).

1932. — *Los Angeles (U. S. A.). These Olympic Games were on a scale bigger than*

ever before and were most successful. This was the second time a city of the United States of America was privileged to hold Summer Games.

St. Placid (U. S. A.) had been the venue of the 3rd. Olympic Winter Games.

1936. — *Berlin (Germany). These Olympic Games had been voted by the International Olympic Committee in their annual session in 1931 and were staged on an even larger scale than those at Los Angeles.*

In the Winter of 1936 Garmisch-Partenkirchen held the 4th Olympic Winter Games.

1948. — *London (Great Britain). For the 10th Olympic Games of the 14th Olympiad London will for the second time be welcoming the athletes of the World.*

St. Moritz (Switzerland), for the second time has been chosen to celebrate the 5th Olympic Winter Games.

Lord Aberdare,
London, october 1947.