

Flash-Backs on the history of the ancient Olympic Games

BY DR. FERENC MEZZÒ

Member of the I. O. C. for Hungary.

Evolution of the ancient Olympic programme.

<i>Olympiad</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Tabulations</i>
I.	776 B. C.	Stadion race	Distance = 192.27 m.
XIV.	724 »	Double stadion race	Diaulos. Distance = 384.54 m.
XV.	720 »	Long distance	Dolichos = 24 stadia.
XVIII.	708 »	Pentathlon	
XVIII.	708 »	Wrestling	
XXIII.	688 »	Boxing	
XXV.	680 »	Four horses' chariot race	Distance 48 stad. = 9228.68 m. First abolished in 68 B. C.
XXXIII.	648 »	Horse race	Distance 6 stad. = 1153.62 m.
XXXIII.	648 »	Pankration	
XXXVII.	632 »	Foot race for boys	Distance 1 stad. = 192.27 m.
XXXVII.	632 »	Wrestling for boys	
XXXVIII.	628 »	Pentathlon	Arranged only once !
XLI.	616 »	Boxing	
LXV.	520 »	Race in armour	Distance 2 stad. = 384.54 m.
LXXI.	496 »	Two mules' chariot race	Distance unknown. Abolished in 444 B. C.
LXXI.	496 »	Riding mares' race	Distance 24 stad. = 4614.48 m.
LXXXIV.	444 »	Art contests	
XCIII.	408 »	Two horses' chariot race	Distance 32 stad. = 6152.64 m.
XCVI.	396 »	Heralds' contest	
XCVI.	396 »	Trumpeters' contest	
IC.	384 »	Four colts' chariot race	Distance 32 stad. = 6152.64 m.
CXXIX.	264 »	Two colts' chariot race	Distance 12 stad. = 2307.24 m.
CXXXI.	256 »	Colt race	Distance unknown.
CXLV.	200 »	Pankration for boys	

Olympia was the Mecca of all sport festivities in the time of the ancient Greeks.

The Games, according to tradition, date back to the dark ages and emerge from this period of mist of the unknown world when they are first recorded in history in the year 776 B. C.

At first, (See tabulation above) only one event appeared : the footrace competition. The first of these races was won by a cook named Koroibos of Elis. As far as we can trust our ancient informer Pausanias, this programme of meagre resources was in

force till the XIVth Olympic Games when the Greeks began to add new events on the Programme though it contained only track events covering a period of 68 years.

The other events appeared until 648 B. C. They were in light athletics running, jumping, javelin, pentathlon, while in heavy athleticism they were wrestling, boxing, pankration, discus and equestrian sports (The latter were called the competitions of the wealthy). After this date, the Programme was increased by holding junior competitions (stadio- race,

wrestling, boxing, pentathlon and pankration with an age limit of 20 years) destined to heralds and trumpeters. Altogether no less than 8 equestrian events figured on the Olympic Programmes (this represents 1/8th of the whole programme!).

Gardiner, the late eminent sports' historian at Oxford, believed that these equestrian competitions served the purpose of horse breeding for the benefit of the aristocracy of Elis.

Between 520-200, the programme was increased only by adding equestrian contests, art contests and the heralds and trumpeters' competitions.

Only one pentathlon race for boys was provided because in 632 B. C. the Elisians realized that these races overtaxed the strength of the young athletes. The ten colts' chariot race which was organized by Nero's command, took place only in 64 A. D. He drove alone on the track and crowned after the performance.

One can also see attempts of cutting down the programme. The riding events reserved to mares as well as the chariot race for mules were definitively cancelled in 444 B. C. The breeding of mules was viewed in bad light by the Elisians as it was anathematized by them.

The fact that this race is mentioned as appearing only on the Olympic Programmes, in spite of the curse by which it is stigmatizes, shows the noble spirit of the Elisians! We only know 4 of the winners of these races and they all came from the Island of Sicily.

The otherwise rather expensive equestrian races were often discontinued in 68 B. C. for a period of 64 years, chiefly on account of the general impoverishment due to the Roman invasion.

These equestrian events were restored in 4 B. C. This process of alteration took place at least three times.

Women were not allowed to enter the Olympic Stadium either as competitors or spectators. This interdiction was not based on sporting reason, it only came from sheer superstition because the ancient believed that the presence of women meant harm to the competitors. At the beginning, the Olympic Festival lasted only one day and this prevailed till 476 B. C. In that year so many competitors entered in the Games that the events of pentathlon, pankration and equestrian sports could take place only late in the evening. From that date the Olympic Games lasted for five days.

The Olympic Games were always held in Olympia though, as it happened on one occasion, in 80 B. C. only the Stadion race for boys was run there, Sulla, the Roman dictator, evidently for the sake of publicity ordered the Games to be transferred to Rome,

gathering the remaining competitors and also the umpires and arranging the Games there.

One could have feared that he wanted to transfer the Zeus Festivals to Rome for evermore!

When the Olympic Programme was completed in 200 A. D. it included 21 events and lasted generally for a period of 5 days, so that 5 events were to be concluded daily. The first day was allocated to the Olympic oath, and the adjudicating of the preliminary heats and for the preparations. On the same day the competitions of the heralds and the trumpeters took place. By this process the 19 remaining events were spread over the left period of 4 days.

The Helsinki's Programme included 149 events (9.31 events per day) compared with the average of 4.75 in ancient times.). When one considers that the number of people participating is higher than that at Olympia, one realizes that the organizing of our modern Games encounters greater difficulties inasmuch that in ancient times, there was no time limit in the wrestling, boxing or pankration events as is the case today. There were no Olympic Regulations whatsoever concerning their weight and no rounds existed in boxing matches.

The juniors formed a separate class of their own. Sometimes it happened that the boys showed such striking physical strength that the umpires were agreeable to allow them to compete in the contests reserved to adults. The same applied in the case of the equestrian sports also.

Art competitions formed also a part of the Olympic Programme though they were not ruled by fixed terms or conditions. Artists and men of spirit always found a ready audience in the Sacred Grove, these performances always took place on the opisthodomos (Back terrace) of the temple of Zeus. The most popular artists amongst the writers, philosophers, etc, roused the keen interest and praises of the people, they were awarded statues too. Herodotos was the first man to be honoured and acclaimed at Olympia, he read a fragment of his « Historias » recalling the fact the Athens as the stronghold of Hellas, was praised by him because of her courage and brave behaviour during the Persian wars. That incident happened, it is strange to relate in the very Olympia where the mares' riding and the mules' chariot race were cancelled.

Sophocles, the great Greek playwright once said that the composition of three of his poems took him three full days

To evolve 26 events of the Olympic Games took a period of 576 years but both, this splendid institution as well as its creator became immortal.



LE STADE DE DELPHES ET SES GRADINS DE PIERRE GRISE.