

The Games through Antiquity

THE OLYMPIC GAMES which were celebrated every fourth year at Olympia were dedicated to Zeus. They were the most ancient and the most popular of all the Games since they attracted the Greeks coming from the wealthy cities of Sicily, Italy and Asia-Minor.

THE PYTHIC GAMES were held at Delphi near Apollo's temple. They were also held in this cycle of every four years and date back from the VIth century. At first, only one event appeared: musical competitions when contestants sang a paeon (hymn) accompanied by the zither or the guitare,

this hymn was dedicated to Apollo. Later on, equestrian and wrestling events were added to the programme. The winners' reward was a crown or wreath of Apollo sacred laurel.

THE ISTHMIC GAMES were dedicated to Poseidon and were held on the isthmus of Corinth every other Summer. They consisted in races, wrestling and boxing events. The winners of these Games received a crown of ivy or pine leaves.

THE NEMEAN GAMES were held every two years, in the Summer months in a solitary valley covered with forests, near a small town of Argolide. They were consecrated to the hero Archemore (a young child killed by a snake) and consisted of wrestling, boxing events, races and musical competitions. The winners received a wreath of ivy leaves.

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PROFESSIONALISM CAUSED THE DECADENCE OF GREEK ATHLETICS

In his *Illiad*, Homer tells us that the contestants at sport festivals were strongly attracted by prizes in kind (money did not exist in those days). On the other hand, Olympia was renowned for her principles of integrity, when the winners of the Games there contented themselves with a crown of laurel leaves. However, in addition to this symbolical reward, the olympian laureates benefitted from numerous material advantages bestowed on them by their native country. Originally, only wealthy families could afford to give their sons the necessary training. However, various cities took it upon themselves to subsidize the athletes by paying for their training when they considered them to be likely champions in the future. This enthusiasm for sport and love of perfection soon became the source of several abuses. This came about fairly slowly owing to the religious character of these sport Festivals, when violating rules was looked upon as a sacrilege... In spite of this fact, the Games became more and more the concern of the specialists whose main object in life was the practice of sport. Towns and cities bereft of champions began to import them from elsewhere; the elite soon began to object to this and strongly disapproved the lucrative and materialistic kind of existence led by these professionals; it ceased to look upon sport with the same respect as it did in the days when athletes were content to be rewarded by a simple laurel olympic wreath and when they frequented the gymnasium and the palaestrae which were the sport and intellectual centres in those days, like any other citizen.

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The Romans conquered Greece (146 B.C.) when they were sufficiently interested in the Games to cause their very strict ruling to

be altered with regard to eligibility of the competitors. The Games were then open to non-hellenic competitors and the first Roman contestant Tiberius (42-37 A.D.) won a prize in one of the chariots races. Nero (37-68 of our era) coveted so ardently the winning of a similar prize that he bridged the judges in order to do so. Nevertheless, athleticism in itself did not really appeal to the conquerors. The gladiators fights held sway in Rome over a period of three centuries, when the public craved for violent emotions and performances where there was blood shed, it clamoured for wild beasts exhibitions, wholesale massacres of men and spectacles set on a most lavish scale. While Rome was enslaving the Greek nation, the arena superseded the stadium.

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Up to the year 393 A.D., the Olympic Games seemed to be staged at regular intervals. They were abolished in that year by decree of the Emperor Theodosius I. Thirty-three years later, Theodosius II ordered the destruction of the Olympic temple and in the following century, Justinian renewed the interdict decreed by Theodosius the First. Despite all the persecutions, the Olympic spark still shone and it happened only very slowly that the gods of Olympia disappeared superseded by the newly born Christian faith. Cataclysms and disasters of all kind descended upon the once prosperous city of Olympia, the worst catastrophe was the ruthless looting caused when the Goths of Alaric invaded the country in 395. Theodosius II, edict in 426, ordered the burning of all the pagan temples of the Eastern Empire, this hit a deathly blow to Antiquity and caused its downfall. All the temples of Olympia were destroyed, only a few columns and debris of Zeus temple survived; what man's hand could not destroy or cause to disappear, one or two earthquakes achieved the rest. A landslide consisting of a bank of sand 4 to 6 m. thick came down from the surrounding hills and covered up the whole plain.

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HELLENIC TRADITION

Ancient Greece did not only give the Occidental world the basis of her civilization. Greek concepts of humanism demanded a perfect equilibrium of the body and the mind, an education when intelligence and physical strength run in a parallel direction. It must be said to the glory of the Greece of old, that it was she who created the cult for sport which offers such a scope to nations who meet in international contests held in an atmosphere of peace perfect integrity and mutual understanding.

Never before has there been such a great need for the revival of the Hellenic tradition

which sets the human value above petty, selfish or aggressive rivalries of man who, according to the poetical description of Pindar, is carried by the wings of his own strength imbued of love for perfection when he strives to fulfil his ambitious course.