

Ancient Olympic Programme

The first event was *the foot race* (or races), the oneway race or stadion was run by athletes who only raced from one end of the stadium to the other, a distance of 192,27 m.

The double race was twice the length of the stadion, the long distance race consisted of running twelve times round the stadion (twelve stadias). The running track was covered by a thick layer of fine sand where the foot sank and which made running very hard going.

These footraces were succeeded by *Wrestling*. The technique of the two wrestlers, whose body was well oiled and entirely naked, consisted of knocking each other down by seizing each other round the waist, using all means to this end, for instance, stretching the legs out, catching the opponent's foot, clinching him by springing on his shoulders from behind. The wrestler in order to be proclaimed victorious had to knock down his opponent by making him touch the ground with his shoulders.

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The *ceste* event which followed was a type of boxing event. The boxers had their fists covered with thin straps of leather edged with sharp lead blades, they fought till one or the other admitted defeat; they often came out of the fight completely disfigured, swollen ears, bruised noses and with broken teeth and the face torn to pieces. The finesse and aim of the contest were more in the parrying of the blows than in hitting, as the most sought after winner was the boxer who although he never hit his opponent once, managed to tire him out till the latter admitted defeat.

The *pancrace*, which was contested at the end of the day, was wrestling and ceste combined. It called for great skill and unusual strength and was held in great favour as it was considered the event which brought the greatest fame to the athletes who won it. The next day, the Olympic Festival was transferred to the hippodrome (the horses racing field), it was four times longer than the stadion and was a run of 770 metres.

The equestrian events started with *chariots races*. First of all the 4 colts chariot race, the light two-wheeled chariots were drawn by 4 horses, two of them were placed in the shaft of the chariot and two in front, the

driver drove his horses standing. The chariots were placed in files behind a railing, a trumpet gave the starting signal when the chariots dashed forward, bumping into each other. When they reached the end of the track, they had to go round a stone wall, the boundary and come back. This was the crucial moment of the race when either the horses began to rear or the chariots broke to pieces. (A legend told us that the demon Taraxippos hid in that boundary stone wall and frightened the horses when they passed.)

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Then came the *horse riding races* which consisted in riding twelve times round the hippodrome. The horses were ridden, but it was the horse that counted, not its rider. One day a mare after having unsaddled her mount and thrown him to the ground, continued the race alone and finished first, her master got the prize but one erected a statue of the horse!

At these riding contests in the hippodrome neither the driver of the chariot, nor the rider of the horse got the prize, it was awarded to the owner of the horses. Only the aristocracy could afford to compete and it was considered a sign of great wealth to have been crowned in Olympia for winning chariot races.

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Once these races were over, the crowd returned to the Stadium to attend the last event in light athletics: *the pentathlon*. It was a combination of 5 events which were to be won before any competitor could be proclaimed the victor. The first was jumping a certain distance, this was followed by the javelin, the latter was a military exercise consisting in throwing the javelin by hand. The first four winners of the javelin event were eligible for the foot races, the first three winners of the footrace could compete in throwing the discus (this consisted in throwing as far as possible a heavy stone pallet). Lastly the wrestling event which placed the first two winners of the preceding event and decided who was the champion. Winning the pentathlon was the greatest honour of all and coveted by all competitors.

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The Games ended by *the race in armour*, the contestants dressed in heavy infantry man armour (hoplite) carried the shield in one hand while racing twice the length of the stadium.

The following day was the last day of the Olympic celebrations, when the distribution of the awards took place. The latter consisted of a simple wreath of olive and a palm branch, but this crown was sacred as

it was made of the sacred olive tree planted, it is said, by Hercules.

The distribution of these prizes was carried out in great ceremony. It took place before Zeus temple, the wreaths were placed on a table. A herald proclaimed in front of the crowd assembled there, the name and the country of the Olympic Champion, he came forward and the Hellanodices placed the crown on his head. It was a marked sign of glory to him and his native country.

On his return to his native town, the champion received a civic welcome. He was dressed in purple, rode in a chariot driven by four white horses and paraded thus through the streets where all the inhabitants of the town acclaimed him, he then laid the wreath in the temple; sometimes part of the town wall was demolished to let him make his triumphal entry. He led a privilege existence for the rest of his life, became sacred and was fed in the sanctuary of his town (the Prythanea). He was exempt of taxes, had a seat of honour in the theatre. At Sparta, he fought in the place of honour, next to the King. In remembrance of his Olympian victory, he caused a statue to be erected in the sacred precinct of Olympia and if he won the Olympic title three times he had the right to have a statue of himself erected.

It was the supreme honour and caused the greatest happiness to the Greeks to have been an Olympian (victor of the Olympics).

A certain man called Diagoras having seen his two sons crowned olympic champions on the same day was carried in triumph in front of the crowd, and the people shouted to him: 'Diagoras, there is only one thing for you to do now: to die, since you cannot be a god! And right enough, Diagoras died of joy!'