

# **The Olympic Games: Origin, Evolution, Revolution**

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Literature and archaeology suggest a humble origin for the first Olympic Games of 776 BC. The program may have consisted of only a 200 meter run as indicated by the Greek writer Pausanias (5.8.6), and not the fuller program that E.N. Gardiner proposed. In the next hundred years, additional footraces, boxing and wrestling, the pentathlon, and equestrian events entered the program. Wells discovered at Olympia in the area of the stadium indicate an increase in the popularity of the Games around 700 BC. The four-horse chariot race, introduced in 680 BC, endowed the Games with special prestige and glamor. So successful did these Games become that other panhellenic shrines -- Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea -- in the first half of the sixth century created sacred Games in their festivals on the model of Olympia.

Over the centuries, the Olympic festival expanded to five-days. One crucial change in the athletic part of the program occurred after the Olympics of 472 BC: the equestrian events and the pentathlon were moved to the day before the sacrifice.

Participation in the Olympic Games did not, however, extend to women, although Greek girls did play sports and even competed at Olympia itself in the festival called the Heraia. In contrast, the other panhellenic sites later included competition for women.

After a period of decline during the first century BC, the Olympics reached the apex of its popularity in the second century AD, arguably the true "Golden Age" of Greek athletics, with support from imperial Rome, whose alleged antipathy to Greek athletics must be qualified. Two centuries later, however, with instability in the Empire and the establishment of Christianity, the Games came to an end.

Given the later prestige of the Olympics, we may be tempted to underestimate the revolutionary nature of the early Games. Other societies also engaged in sports and the Greeks themselves did so long before 776. We should not underestimate the appeal

of a panhellenic victory in an era when previously there had been nothing like it. Nor ought we to assume that the prestige which the Games later enjoyed was there when they first began.

Greek physical education must also be viewed in the context of a complex, evolving Olympic history. It was not killed by professionalism, as scholars so astute as C. Forbes and H.I. Marrou have claimed. Like the panhellenic games, it was thriving in the second century AD. The great imperial thermae can be viewed not as symbols of Roman decadence but proof of the pervasive influence of Greek athletics in later antiquity.