

The Guy Who Ate a Cow And Other Olympic Stars

Kuntz, Tom. [New York Times](#). (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: [Jul 14, 1996](#). pg. 4.18, 1 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

The manner in which the ancient Greeks conducted their Olympic games is discussed. Contrary to popular belief, the games of antiquity were not the hallowed celebrations of amateur athletics we are often led to believe.

Copyright New York Times Company Jul 14, 1996

A HURRICANE missed Atlanta last week, but of course figuratively the wind will blow hot and heavy this week as the Summer Olympics finally get under way amid what seems an interminable media drum roll. Hype enough for you?

In the face of this, it is tempting to hark wistfully back to an ancient Olympic time of simple, unadulterated sportsmanship. But alas, to peruse the sober scholarship of Greek antiquity is to quickly realize that in practice the original Games were often to the lofty ideal what the shadows on the cave were to Plato's Forms.

"The games of antiquity were not the hallowed celebrations of amateur athletics which we are often led to believe," notes David Gilman Romano, curator of the Mediterranean collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, in a new video lecture, "The Ancient Olympics: Athletes, Games and Heroes." In fact, he adds, "the ancient Olympic Games were in many ways much like the modern Olympic Games: they were intrinsically political, nationalistic and commercial."

For more than 1,000 years, beginning around 776 B.C., famous athletes, princes and statesmen gathered every four years at Olympia in western Greece to compete for olive crowns in honor of Zeus. These contests provided the model for the modern Olympics begun 100 years ago in Athens.

And what a model they were. Of course, human foibles always accompany the quest for excellence. Consider:

The original Olympics were nude. It's a mystery exactly why Greek athletes doffed their trunks, providing inspiration for much of the world's great sculpture, but in his survey of art history, "The Creators," Daniel J. Boorstin recounts the irreverent legends.

"Perhaps the new fashion was set when Orsippus of Megara, at the Olympics in 720 B.C., lost his shorts in the middle of his race," he speculates. "He won anyway, and others followed his example of nudity." Or, Mr. Boorstin adds, it could have been that at one of the races the leading runner's shorts slipped down and tripped him. "To prevent such accidents in the future, an edict required contestants to be naked," Mr. Boorstin writes.

So Vain

But he and other scholars add that the Greeks might have just been proud of their full frontal huntnitude, especially when their bods were compared with those of "barbarians" who covered themselves up.

The Games, meant as a symbol of peace, weren't so peaceful. The much-vaunted, monthlong Olympic truce was necessary to protect travelers to the Games because the Greek city-states were continually at each other's throats. (Marathon was a battle site back then, not a race.) For centuries the neighboring city-states of Elis and Pisa battled for control of the Games, Mr. Romano notes, and in the fourth century B.C. a battle involving thousands of troops took place at Olympia in the middle of the sanctuary of Zeus -- during the pentathlon.

In addition, the Games themselves were militaristic. Such events as the long jump, javelin throw and a clumsy foot race in body armor tested one's fitness for battle.

Smite and Gouge

The Games were frequently brutal. Particularly violent events were boxing and the pankration (pronounced pan-KRAT-ee-ahn), a combination of wrestling and bare-knuckled boxing.

Depictions of boxing on ancient pottery suggest that you might really give a Thracian a thrashin', since it was O.K. to smite your opponent when he was down, writes Judith Swaddling, an antiquities expert at the British Museum, in "The Ancient Olympic Games." Boxers protected their fists with wraps of oxhide thongs capable of inflicting nasty welts. Also, Mr. Romano notes, gouging was permitted, with all fingers except thumbs.

Tripping was allowed in wrestling, as were kicks and strangleholds in the pankration. A common opening move in the pankration was breaking one of your opponent's fingers to gain an early submission. Sostratos, a pankratiast from Sikyon, was famous for this, Ms. Swaddling writes, and "became known as 'Mr. Finger Tips.' "

Cheating was not uncommon. Athletes rubbed themselves up with olive oil as a protection against dirt and the summer sun, but wrestlers were supposed to dust themselves with a powder. Some cheated, sneakily rubbing an oily hand over some part of the body to make it too slippery for an opponent to grab.

Cheaters could be punished by whipping or fines (even a false start in a footrace could earn you a flogging). Pausanias, writing in the second century B.C., reported that the athletes' path to the stadium was lined with statues of Zeus financed with fines paid by cheating athletes. Each statue's inscription told the cautionary tale of the offense. One boxer who bribed three others was socked with a fine so heavy it paid for six statues.

The distinction between "amateur" and "professional" was blurred. Sound familiar? Olympic competitors were typically men of wealth who could afford to pay their way to the Games. But other citizen-athletes expected to be paid for the glory they brought to their hometowns and, in a foreshadowing of modern free agency, were sometimes bribed to switch allegiances. The quest for lucre may have inspired the world's first sports salary cap when, Mr. Boorstin notes, Athens adopted a limit of 500 drachmas on Olympic victory grants (five years' earnings for a workingman). That didn't include perks like free meals for life at city hall.

Women were largely excluded. There were separate games for (clothed) girls at Olympia in honor of the goddess Hera, but any married woman caught at the Olympics, even as a spectator, was to be "pitched headlong" from Mount Typaeum, Pausanias wrote.

Losers really were losers. While athletes were expected to show respect for the gods and fellow men, there was no premium placed on being a "good loser," Mr. Boorstin writes. There was no prize for second place, and a defeated athlete never congratulated the victor. Because boxing matches ended with either a knockout or an admission of defeat, Spartans did not box at the Games. The Olympic poet Pindar wrote that losers returned home in shame: "By back ways they slink away, sore smitten by misfortune."

Victors, on the other hand, were like gods. Life-size statues were typically erected to honor victors, both at Olympia and back home. Mr. Boorstin writes of Eubatus, a self-confident runner from Cyrene who arrived at the Games in 408 A.D. with his own statue in tow.

Even more godlike, albeit in the fallible Grecian sense, was the champion wrestler Milo, also a legendary apres-competition reveler. At Olympia, he is said to have eaten an entire cow, and on a bet at a festival, he downed three choai (some nine liters) of wine. But Milo went for the gusto once too often, Ms. Swaddling says:

"While out in the forest one day he came upon a newly cut tree trunk with the wedges in place ready for it to be split open. He decided to use his own strength to force it apart. The wedges flew out, but his hands were trapped, and by night he was eaten by wild animals."

So much for the gods of sport. The Games were abolished under Roman rule in the late fourth or early fifth century. But the tradition lives on today, in Atlanta.

The long jump, circa 560 B.C., as depicted on a vase. By one theory, jumpers carried weights for momentum. (Associated Press)

