

THE small town of Olympia in the western Peloponnes set in a valley out of sight of the sea and shaded by woods of great pine trees, is the birth-place of the Olympic Games.

No nation ever ranked athletics higher than the ancient Greeks, who placed bodily perfection on a level with music and poetry as an essential part of balanced culture. We hear of competitive sports in Greece from the earliest times: private, local, municipal and Panhellenic. Homer refers to them frequently and in later centuries poets and dramatists never tired of praising the greatest of all Greek athletic meetings: the Olympic Games.

Founded by Hercules

The first recorded date of the Olympiads—and incidentally the first definite date in Greek history—is 776 B.C., they lasted until 394 A.D. But games were held since times immemorial and a legend relates that the site of Olympia was founded by Hercules, the God of Strength, on a return journey from one of his manifold labours.

The origin of the games like all ancient Greek festivals, was religious, though none can give the exact significance of the rites that led to them.

The valley of Olympia was sacred to Zeus, the King of the Gods, and here, every four years



An artist's impression of a wrestling competition at Olympia in the early days of the Games.

a high festival was held at his special shrine ornamented by a colossal gold and ivory statue made by Pheidias which ranked as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Demeter, the Goddess of Fertility also had her shrine at Olympia and the priestess of this temple was the only woman whose presence was tolerated at the Olympics.

By the sixth century B.C. the Olympic Games were drawing entries from all over Greece and the feast of Zeus became an international holiday. During the period of the games a truce was proclaimed to all internal Greek



Broken statuary litters Olympia now. Here, the Olympic Games were born.

This is the country where the Olympic Games began. They were held as a festival of all-round athletic skill, and to the honour of mighty gods. A "UNION JACK" Staff Writer, here tells the story of the steady burning of the

Olympic Flame

wars. Sacred ambassadors called "Theores" would set out in all directions to announce the opening date of the games and decree the "Sacred Truce." Heavy fines were levied upon any Greek state in whose territory a traveller to the games might be manhandled. Mighty King Philip of Macedon once paid a fine without complaint because some of his soldiers had robbed an Athenian on his way to Olympia.

The existing ruins of Olympia show that this athlete's paradise was built on a lavish scale as befitted a centre which would receive sportsmen and visitors from all over the immense Greek Empire. Apart from the temples there were gymnasiums and quarters for the competitors with extensive hotel accommodation for the numerous spectators.

Cosmopolitan Crowd

Pilgrims and athletes forgetting all worries of war and politics would start out from distant cities well ahead of time. A cosmopolitan and varied crowd would wend their way to Olympia: highly-strung and probably, nervous athletes: old faithfuls who had never missed an Olympiad; kings of the turf whose interest centred on horses and racing; princes from far-off lands; magnates from wealthy Syracuse; bankers, merchants, jugglers and conjurers to amuse the crowds. The arts were well represented too by famous orators, poets and philosophers, playwrights and musicians who

would declaim, sing and philosophise to the everyday tourist who just came along to have a jolly good time.

Olympia during the festival must have presented the aspect of a glorified fair-ground milling with hawkers, princes and sportsmen, but oddly devoid of feminine company. The ladies had their own Olympic Games held at a different time.

Rigorous Training

Only freeborn Greeks were allowed to compete in the Olympics. The athletes—from the word "athlos" meaning a contest—were selected by the local municipal elimination trials, after which they were submitted to 10 months rigorous training under professional supervision. The games were held in early autumn and would start with the full moon. A month before the opening date, competitors,

the most difficult being a commando-like affair in which the runners were dressed in full fighting uniform. Contrary to popular belief, there were no Marathon races in Greece.

The Marathon Race takes its name from the story of the heroic runner Pheidippides who, at the cost of his life, ran from the battle of Marathon to Athens bringing the news of the victory.

The spectators, numbering sometimes up to 45,000 people, would keep their places in the stadium all day long eagerly waiting for the most important event of all: the pentathlon, or five contests. Heat, flies, mosquitoes and thirst would not deter them, though the occasional sacrifice might be offered to Zeus, The Fly Chaser. A throb of excitement would seize the crowd as the time for this most highly-regarded test

to interfere with this sport in which throttling, kicking, and all but biting and eye-gouging was permitted. No one was considered beaten until he acknowledged defeat. With somewhat exaggerated athletic pride one wrestler hung on until he dropped dead at the very moment when his opponent surrendered. It is a consolation to think that he was posthumously awarded the crown.

Chariot Races

In the plain below the stadium a special hippodrome was built for horse races. Here the final sporting event would be held, the thrilling and extremely dangerous chariot races. Teams of four horses were harnessed abreast, and sometimes as many as 40 charioteers would be competing over the 12 double laps of the course with hairpin bends round the posts at either side. This most spectacular performance would be followed up by horse racing where, at the end of the race, the rider had to dismount and run with his horse holding its reins.

When the toils of the games were over the victors received their awards—a crown of wild olive or laurel leaves. This wreath was the only prize given at the Olympic Games, and was the most eagerly contested athletic distinction in Greece. All the same, the indirect rewards



This was one of the first sports—discus-throwing. The picture is of a reconstructed statue.

were more substantial. Many cities voted large sums to their victors; sometimes they were made generals; and the crowd, not unlike our present day sports fans, idolized the triumphant athletes so openly that jealous philosophers complained.

But the philosophers, artists and poets had their triumphs too at the Olympiads, celebrating the glory of the victors, drawing subtle parallels on the virtues of courage and fitness, carving the most beautiful statues of all times inspired by the grace and strength of the all-round athlete.

Ideal Manhood

The Classical Greek type which has remained to this day the ideal of perfect manhood, was created from the heroes of the battlefield of Marathon and the sports stadium of Olympia.

When in later years internal intrigue, over-accumulation of wealth, and soft-living heralded the impending downfall of Classical Greece, the satirical playwright Aristophanes gave these words of advice to the young men of his century:

"Nay, nay, you'll excell in the sports you love well, all blooming, athletic and fair; not learning to prate as those idlers debate in some argument ticklish and raw. Instead you will fare to the playing-fields where you may under the olives contend in a trial of speed, crowned by wreath of plain reed with your excellent rival and friend..."



Horse-races were a feature of the original games—but lack of horses now prevent competitions. Above, a detail from a frieze at the Parthenon.

together with horses, trainers and jockeys began to assemble at the nearby town of Elis where the final stages of training were carried out under the careful eye of umpires.

Arrived at Olympia the athletes were examined by officials, and took a solemn oath to observe all rules. To break this oath was a dishonour that would not be lived down easily.

The festival started with prolonged religious sacrifices and services to propitiate the Gods. These lasted about five days after which the games would follow. The athletes were led on the stadium with a herald announcing their names and the cities that had entered them. All the contestants, whatever their age or rank, were naked. The games would probably start with races,

of the all-round athlete would draw close.

Each entry in this event was required to compete in five contests and win three to secure a victory. The first was a broad jump with the athlete holding weights in both hands and leaping from a standing start. The second event was throwing the discus, a circular plate of metal or stone weighing about 12 pounds. The third was hurling the javelin or spear, with the aid of a leather thong attached to the centre of the shaft. The fourth and main event was the stadium sprint, and its starting point, toed by the runners, is all that remains today of the Olympia stadium.

The final event was the highly-popular all-in-wrestling, a test of endurance indeed. There were no Queensbury rules



Present-day Greek athletes include first-class runners. On the extreme left is Marathon Champion Kyriakiadis, who, at 38 is still a menace on the world's tracks.