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The Olympics

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The Olympics

The near approach of the Olympic Games at Tokyo reminds one, inevitably, of the ancient Greek Olympics. What would the Greeks of the Golden Age have thought of Olympic contestants including almost every race and color of a world larger than any Greek savant ever dreamed, contestants who would be predominantly "barbarians"—that is, people who could not speak Greek? For there is perhaps no single institution more indicative of the spiritual unity among the Hellenic people, so culturally close-knit but so nationally disunited, than the Olympic games.

The Greek games were held every fourth year, and assumed such importance that the Greeks themselves reckoned time by Olympiads and dated events by the names of Olympic victors. They were already old and rich in tradition when Pericles was born. Religious in origin and as nearly nationalistic as anything ancient Greece ever produced, they enjoyed the favor even of churlish Sparta, and in time of war were respected by declarations of truce that enabled Hellenes from all over the Mediterranean world to attend. So profound an influence upon the visual arts and so familiarly sung in verse and prose were the Olympics that it is not difficult today to recapture the spirit in which the games were undertaken and to picture the great athletes themselves.

Thucydides as a child was inspired at the Olympics upon hearing the older historian Herodotus; these festivals attracted the talents of the greatest poets and musicians of the times, not as competitors—except on one degenerate occasion when the Emperor Nero decided to win a poetry contest—but as praisers of the victors, of the institution, and of Greece. It may be that Thucydides attended the games of the 82nd Olympiad—at which time he was twelve—when the popular poet Pindar, who had been praising athletes in odes for over a quarter of a century and who was, indeed, to continue until his hundredth year, read an ode dedicated to Psauimis of Camarina, conqueror in the chariot race. Whatever games that famous child attended, however, we may be certain that his father or mentor took him open-mouthed and awed around the sacred enclosure of the Altis, and showed him the magnificent statues of past champions in exciting poses, and the staggering statue by Phidias of the great god Zeus, to whom the games were dedicated. Certainly, too, young Thucydides must have heard tales of athletic heroes that were grander than the less imaginative versions reconstructed by modern archaeologists. Perhaps he thrilled to the feats of the great wrestler Milo of Kroton, as we can even today.

Milo won a long series of victories in the wrestling matches between 536 and 516 B.C., beginning when he was young enough to

enter the boys' contests and ending when his athletic prowess was so dimmed that he had to overcome his opponent by the simple means of falling upon him with his crushing bulk. Milo was in the habit of eating seven pounds of meat and drinking five quarts of wine as a good square meal, and once sacrificed to Zeus a four-year-old heifer which he first carried around the arena on his shoulders. On another occasion he carried his own victor statue into the arena before the contest had even begun. So powerful he could break a cord tied round his head by pressing his lips together and holding his breath until the veins in his forehead swelled out, he had a grip so firm that when he held a pomegranate in his hand, no one could either remove it or cause him to squeeze it. No one, that is, except his mistress.

Those who attended the Olympic games found themselves in one of the most beautiful vales in all of Greece, a land too often characterized by an unfriendly aridity. Verdant rolling hills well forested with shadowy plane trees enclosed the little valley of the Alpheius River and lent to the games a refreshing interplay of sunshine and shade which would be a welcome relief in the broiling dusty stadiums of the modern world. Rising gently beyond the delicate Doric columns of the covered race-course (for practice on rainy days) was the green form of that paticular hill on which, so legend had it, Zeus defeated Kronos in a wrestling match and which had ever since borne the loser's name.

Although the athletes' quarters of ancient Olympia far outshone any in use today in their splendor and appointments (they had separate hot and cold, steam and vapor baths, drying rooms and rest rooms), they were merely a harmonious part of a larger architectural whole composed of great and small temples dedicated to an entire pantheon of gods. The Greek aesthetic, like that of the Far East and in contrast to the vigorous isolated cathedrals of the Christian West, demanded building schemes that fitted theoretically and actually into that bigger environment of which it was a part. Thus the stadium itself snuggled conveniently into the friendly hills on three sides, and even the facaded extremities of a more ancient pre-Olympic structure had swept up to the neighboring hillock. Thus, too, the Greeks conceived of their games as part of a bigger whole of man's development which did not know the gap between our century's cathedrals and ball parks.

The games themselves were begun in the Olympic stadium, which accomodated 45,000 and whose straightaway of 585 feet, the *stadion*, by which the races were calculated, has come down to us as the 200-yard dash. By the fifth century B.C. the foot races had been divided into three specialized forms—the *dolikos*, roughly equivalent to our mile, the *dromos*, a 200-yard dash, and the *hoplon*, a sort of

hundred-yard dash by runners under arms. Archaeological remains furnish us today with proof of the close attention our ancient Hellenic athletes paid to running form: the long steady stride of the miler is clearly distinguishable on the painted sides of vases from the wild-swinging arms of the sprinters.

The wrestling events were held in a special building called the *palaestra*, and the most common form of the sport was the *triagmos* in which the victor must throw his opponent three times. Although the athletic games of Olympia were marked by generally higher standards of fair play than any of the lesser leagues throughout Greece, and made only a few prohibitions (inspired by accidental deaths), wrestling must have been a pretty free version in fifth-century Hellas. Along with boxing and a sport unknown to the modern boy, the *pankration*, wrestling brought under the spectator's gaze many moments of brutality in sharp contrast to the grace and delicacy of other aspects of the Olympic tradition. For really getting down to grips in their business, wrestlers sprinkled themselves with sand to offset the slipperiness that anointing had lent their bodies. Even as late as the time of Alexander we read how one of his generals was always followed on marches by camels loaded with a special sand from Egypt for this sportsmanlike purpose.

The boxers of Periclean times wore sets of thongs about their hands and wrapped around their wrists, not to be confused with the later stone or metal *caestes* of Roman times, being designed primarily to pad and protect the knuckles rather than to inflict damage. Nonetheless, since the boxing style was to carry the arms high and strike the head and shoulders, the damage done to the face was often cruel. Statues of boxing conquerors disclose mutilations and the heavy-browed, scarred physiognomy associated even today with that profession. A contestant could be so badly battered that a Greek poet could say to a boxer friend: "After twenty years Ulysses was recognized from his appearance returning to his home by his dog Argos; but thou, Stratophon, after boxing for four hours, hast been so altered that neither dogs nor any person in town could possibly recognize thee; and if thou lookest at thy face in a mirror, thou thyself wilt swear that thou art not Stratophon."

The *pankration* was a combination of boxing and wrestling in which the contenders, minus the *caestes* of boxers, fought by practically any means considered honorable until one of them signalled his defeat. It was this sport that was thought of most highly by the followers of the Olympic tradition since they felt it combined both strength and cunning.

Horse-racing took place on the fourth day of the Olympic festival, in a specially constructed hippodrome, and included not only

bareback racing with both horses and colts, but chariot races, in some of which mules rather than horses were used. The general rules required participants to enlist at least a month before the games and to undergo a strict period of supervised training and examination. In the chariot races, however, where the owner of the steeds was crowned rather than the driver, the ownership was not declared until after the victory—a custom which invited bribery, since it was possible for non-Greeks to enter horses and so win honors forbidden to those not of Greek citizenship and parentage. Just such a stratagem was employed by Cimon, the father of Miltiades, after his exile by Peisistratus, to win his way back to Athens; after conquering in the chariot races of 528 B.C., he designated that tyrant as the owner of the horses and so won his favor.

The final event in the classical Olympic meets was the pentathlon, consisting of javelin-throwing, discus-throwing, running, jumping and wrestling. There are, unfortunately, some details about the pentathlon which are lost to modern researchers; it is only possible to speculate, for instance, about the order of the five parts of the event, or exactly how the winner was chosen. Even with the fine vase paintings to show us the jumping events—in which weights were carried in the hands to give added momentum—we can only reconcile the recorded lengths of jumps with what is physically possible by assuming that there must have been something analogous to the modern hop-skip-and-jump to account for the great distances.

The earliest records of the Olympics refer to them as revivals of still more ancient games, and so their origin is pushed back into the mists of mythology. One favorite story, doubtless accepted as good history by fifth-century Olympic fans, told of evil King Oenomaus who subsisted off the wealth of suitors for his daughter's hand and who had a most effective means for assuring this source of revenue: his daughter, Hippodamia, was pledged to that man who could best the king in a chariot race. Not until the fourteenth contestant, Pelops, introduced into the contest that element of guile which was so frankly admired by Homer was Hippodamia married. By bribery he induced a servant to tinker with the royal axle so that during the race Oenomaus was hurled to his death by breaking his neck when a wheel flew off his chariot. Pelops then took his fair prize and declared himself king. It was supposedly he who revived the almost forgotten games at Olympia, and it was in 776 B.C., with the winning of the footrace by Coroebus of Elis, that the Olympiads began their unbroken chronology until Roman times.

Whatever the actual origin of the athletic events and their introduction into the local religious festivities of Olympia, its early history is confounded in the rival claims of Elis and Pisa as to the supervision of the games. The early friendliness of Elis to Sparta's Peloponne-

sian League guaranteed the eventual outcome of this rivalry, but it was not without bloodshed and even the actual violation of the sacred truce which always prevailed during the month of the games. Olympiadic chronology, as a matter of fact, is rendered inaccurate in at least two instances when the Eleans failed to count games held under the presidency of Pisans, and on one of these occasions spectators at Olympia were treated to the blasphemous spectacle of a bloody fight in the very stadium between armies of these contending parties.

It was thus with the military backing of Sparta that the Olympics came to be regularly held. This makes it all the more remarkable that the games became the panhellenic events they were, drawing from all over Hellas and her far-flung colonies competitors and spectators. There are instances in which powerful city-states were forced into cooperation or the payment of fines by the athletic officials at Olympia and the dire warnings of the Delphic oracle on the occasion of their failure to abide by the judges' decisions. Both Sparta and Athens were humbled in this manner, and we can explain it only by recourse to that basically religious foundation on which this cult of physical prowess was built.

It is this religious aspect which, by its absence, will constitute the major difference between the Olympic games of 1963 and their forerunners 2500 years ago. The modern contest will not be limited to a privileged class of citizens so finely educated as to consider the sound mind in the sound body a kind of religious expression. Unknown to the athletes of today would be the act of dedication by which the ancient participants presented themselves to Zeus before and after the victory. One might wonder how many of the spectators attending the games at Tokyo will see in the athletes competing there a living expression of the Greek belief that the divine is best glorified by human perfection in both flesh and spirit.

WILLIAM HENRY SCOTT

Errata in Dr. Abella's Article

We regret the intrusion of a number of serious misprints in the article entitled "The Bishops of Cáceres and Jaro", by Dr. Domingo Abella, which appeared in the last number of *Philippine Studies*, and we request our subscribers to make the appropriate corrections on their copies, as follows:

Page	Line	Correction
551	2	"promoted to the episcopal dignity" should read

551	19	"promoted to the See of Cáceres"
		"Antonio Manuel Campy" should read "Antonio Manuel Campoy"
553	7	"Pedro Matía" should read "Pedro Matías"
553	18	"Ysidro de Arévalo" should read "Ysidoro de Arévalo"
554	4	"14 December 1778" should read "14 December 1905"
554	10	"21 May 1939" should read "21 May 1938"
555	23	"Joé María Cuenco" should read "José María Cuenco"

THE EDITORS