

# Ancient games: an Olympic factfile from the Nicholson Museum

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As London prepares to host the 30th modern edition of the Olympic Games, Dr Craig Barker from the University's Nicholson Museum and Michelle Kiss, a Year 10 work experience student from William Carey Christian School, evoke the ancient Olympic spirit with a look at the origins of the world's oldest sporting festival that may provide parallels for the next three weeks of competition in London.

- The first [Olympic Games](#) took place in 776 BC at Olympia in Greece, a sanctuary site devoted to the Greek god Zeus. The ancient Olympics were held every four years, a tradition that remains today. However, whereas cities around the world compete to host the modern games, ancient-world athletes always competed in Olympia.
- Olympia boomed as the games increased in importance - a statue of Zeus was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world - before the games were eventually abolished by the Roman emperor Theodosius I in 394 AD, supposedly because they were reminiscent of paganism. While there is much talk of the legacy of London 2012, Olympia and its athletic stadium is an important historical and archaeological site.
- In 2012, news surfaced that Australia's men's basketball team travelled to London in business class while their female equivalents languished in economy. However, during the first ancient games, gender equality in sport was even worse: women couldn't compete. Competitors were split into two groups, boys (12-18 years) and men (18+ years). Horses were also split into

colts and fully grown age groups.

- While the composition of the crowds of spectators is less well understood, it's likely that only males and young girls were allowed to watch.
- In antiquity, a lit flame was tended throughout the celebration of the Olympics, and the idea of the fire was reintroduced in 1928 in Amsterdam. Every four years the Olympic flame is lit in front of the Temple of Hera then carried by torch to the host city. The torch relay was not an ancient practice and was introduced at the controversial 1936 Berlin Olympics.
- Judges were handpicked from people living in Elis, the area surrounding Olympia. The 'Elean Judges' enforced strict rules on the competitors: fines were issued for failing to arrive on time for the training period, cheating and for cowardice.
- Events in the ancient Olympics included foot races, discus, jump, javelin, boxing, pentathlon, pankration (a blend of boxing and wrestling) and chariot races. Most events, including the races, discus and javelin, took place in the Stadium of Olympia with other events taking place in the surrounding area.
- Before the start of any Olympic Games a truce would be announced, proclaiming that all wars, disputes and death penalties be put on hold until the end of the games. This truce also guaranteed athletes a safe journey to Olympia in the month leading up to the games. The truce was written on a bronze discus and placed in Olympia. The modern International Olympic Committee has revived the tradition of the truce, and all 193 United Nations member states have, for the first time, united to co-sponsor the Olympic Truce Resolution for the 2012 [London](#) Olympics.
- Sporting controversies are not new! Famous athletes of antiquity included:
  - the sixth-century BC wrestler Milo of Croton, who was said to have died when he was wedged against a tree

during a display of strength gone wrong and subsequently devoured by wolves

- Astylos, also of Croton, who competed at Olympic Games between 488 and 480 BC, but was expelled from his home city when he agreed to compete for Syracuse, and so can lay claim to being the first free-agent in sporting history
- Roman emperor Nero, who despite being thrown from his chariot in the 10-horse race at the 67 AD games, was still proclaimed the winner on the grounds that he would have won had he been able to complete the race.

Provided by University of Sydney

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