

*A Brief History  
of the Olympic  
Games*

David C. Young

 **Blackwell**  
Publishing



*A Brief History of the Olympic Games*

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Iphitos established the Olympic Games, since the citizens of Elis were very pious. Because of such things, these men prospered. While the other cities were always at war with one another, these people enjoyed a general peace, not only for themselves, but also for visitors, with a result that here, of all places, an especially great number of people assembled.

Strabo, *Geography* 8.3.33

For Juju



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# *Preface*

The Olympic Games. Few phrases immediately bring to mind so many images – grandeur, excellence, internationalism, history – maybe even a glimmer of peace. True, a few images are negative. But for many of us the positive images so outweigh them that even real flaws in the games seem almost negligible. A fan of the Olympics since boyhood, for more than twenty years I have spent much of my time doing research on the ancient Olympics and the early years of the modern revival. I therefore welcomed the chance to write this book.

In my *Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics* (1984) I argued that the ancient Greeks did not know or practice the concept of an amateur athlete. At that time most classicists, sport historians, and the media still believed that the ancient Olympics were “strictly amateur,” to use the phrase of Avery Brundage. Brundage, as president of the International Olympic Committee, cited the precedent of ancient Greece to justify his enforcing the strictest of amateur rules. Brundage’s departure, more than my book, hastened the disappearance of amateurism from the modern Olympic Games. But nowadays virtually no classicist or historian would attribute amateurism to the ancient Greeks. Amateurism, the bane of the modern Olympics for almost a hundred years, is now nothing but a relic of history in classical scholarship, as well.

This research led me to wonder about the origins of the modern Olympic Games. I had read a 1930 book, written in Greek, which

recounted a series of modern Greek Olympiads that began in 1859. Yet all other histories said that the earliest suggestion of holding modern Olympics was made in Paris in 1894 by Pierre de Coubertin, who then almost single-handedly produced the very first modern Olympics at Athens in 1896. On a tip from Stephen Miller, I found a wealth of information on those pre-1896 Athens Olympics in the papers of Stephanos Dragoumis, president of the Greek Olympic Committee in the late nineteenth century.

These papers, recently willed to an Athens library, contained not only information on these earlier Greek games, but also letters from Coubertin and from the Englishman W. P. Brookes. In 1987 I published an extraordinary letter written by Brookes which I found in the Dragoumis papers. Soon I received correspondence from two scholars in Köln, whose students had been researching the papers of Dr. Brookes in England. When I myself studied those papers, I soon realized that – when combined with the Dragoumis documents in Athens – they uncovered a wholly new and different story of how our own Olympics began.

The modern revival was a slow process wherein a few Greeks and Dr. Brookes advocated the idea of an Olympic revival for decades, but never fully succeeded. A sporadic series of modern revivals in each country attracted little interest or support. Yet after the aging Brookes told the young Frenchman of their efforts, Coubertin achieved what they had not.

With the indispensable cooperation of the gentlemen in Köln, Professors W. Decker and J. Rühl and their students, I wrote the story which these documents revealed. The result was my *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Revival* (1996).

Al Bertrand of Blackwell Publishing read my two Olympics books and invited me to write this *Brief History of the Olympic Games* for the new series, *Brief Histories of the Ancient World*. Since I am a classicist, my interest and studies in the ancient games never faltered while I was concentrating on the modern games. I accepted Mr. Bertrand's invitation, knowing that there was a great need for a book such as this. Bertrand also suggested that I end the book with a chapter summarizing my research on how the modern Olympics began. As I wrote, I had mainly in mind the interested general reader and college students in classes on the Olympics or ancient

sport. For these readers there has been no accessible and comprehensive work on this subject. Yet I hope sport historians and classical colleagues will find the book useful, as well.

For proper names that are generally familiar or frequent in Olympic histories I use the English versions as adapted from Latin: Thucydides, Aeschylus, and Plato, rather than the exact transliteration of the Greek (Thoukydides, Aischylos, Platon). Less familiar names appear spelled more like the original Greek: Akousilaos rather than Acusilaus, Ikkos rather than Iccus. Citations of the standard Greek authors, by universal custom, are given in Latin: Lucian rather than Loukianos.

For truly obscure sources, I sometimes cite a secondary source as well as, or instead of, the primary one. For example, when I quote Brookes' statement on rare plants (p. 187, below), I cite the passage where I reproduced it in my own 1996 book, not the elusive original article in an 1876 Shropshire newspaper. Such items as the series *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* are likely to be found in most major university libraries, but are not user-friendly for non-classicists. I therefore cite Harris' translation, as well as the original papyrus publication in Greek (p. 119, below). Sometimes, if the original source would be generally unavailable to most readers and what I say could not be controversial to classical scholars, I omit the source.

I thank Mihaela Lipetz-Penes of the Romanian Olympic Committee (and Olympic gold medalist, javelin, Tokyo, 1964) for taking me to examine and photograph Zappas' Romanian tomb. I thank Paul Zappas of Los Angeles for sending me photos of the Albanian tomb, which he took on a difficult journey to find it in the remote, tiny village of Labova.

To publish with the help of the staff at Blackwell has been an unusual pleasure. I start with Al Bertrand, who first suggested that I write this book, and provided his valuable judgment and suggestions along the way. I thank most of all Angela Cohen. She guided the book through all stages of writing and production, always quickly replying to any query, giving me needed technical judgments or information. Jack Messenger is every author's dream of a copy editor. He let me keep my sentences, without compelling me to publish his. I thank Ed Barton for preparing the index. My greatest debt is to Dr. Judy Ann Turner, an ancient historian and my wife.

Without her support and her tolerating my late nights, I could never have finished. And, as usual, as a critic of my writing and research, she was the closest thing to quality control that I could have.



## *Introduction*

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Rhodon: “Maybe he will really do it!” Tryphon: “No, he won’t. He can’t. Nobody could ever do that. Look how far behind he is. He is still way behind.” Rhodon: “Yes, but he’s gaining on him fast. Look, he’s getting ready to pass him. He *is* passing him! Unbelievable!” Tryphon: “You were right. Look at that finish kick! He *is* going to do it. I don’t believe it! He won! He really did it.” Rhodon: “Well, he always was the only one who thought he could. By Zeus, what a runner!” Tryphon: “There has never been another like him. Never, *in all these centuries!* He is the greatest runner ever, in all history.”

That conversation itself is imaginary; for it is set in the summer of 69 AD. But it is not groundless. Some very similar conversation indeed took place among the spectators at the stadium track at Olympia that August day. And all the characters are real. “He” is a young runner named Polites, from Caria, a place now in southwestern Turkey. “It” is to win the long distance race at the Olympic Games that day. That victory in itself is hardly remarkable. Someone had won that race every four years for centuries. These two spectators are so astonished at Polites’ victory because he had already won the shortest sprint, the *stade*, about 200 meters, earlier that same day.<sup>1</sup> Tryphon and Rhodon knew something about running. They were the winners of the *stade* in the previous and the following Olympiads, respectively. Polites won that shortest race *and* the longest race. That feat no one – in more than 800 years of

Olympic competition – had ever achieved before – nor did anyone after him. And no modern Olympic athlete has ever won both a long distance race and a short sprint, to say nothing of winning both on the same day.

In the Atlanta Olympics of 1996 Michael Johnson became the first person ever to win both the 200 meter race and the 400. He himself proudly proclaimed he had “made history,” and his unique double Olympic victory was celebrated as one of the greatest athletic accomplishments of all time (*Runners World*, November 1996). It had never been done before – at least not in the modern Olympics. In antiquity, at least a dozen athletes had combined those two victories before Polites, who himself had already performed that 200 and 400 double earlier the same day. But the 400 has never been classed as a distance race. It is barely a “middle distance” event.

To win both the shortest sprint and such a distance race more than two miles long at the same Olympiad is a nearly incredible achievement. No modern runner has ever been so versatile. The long and short distances require, our coaches believe, very different kinds of runners and training. The proper type of muscle fibers, breathing, training, and technique for the two styles of running are wholly different. Polites’ diversity at running seemed truly exceptional in antiquity, too. Pausanias (second century AD) calls it “a great marvel,” and adds that Polites could switch from the distance style to sprinting in a very brief time. His “finishing kick” in the distance race must have been something special to see.

Appreciation of Polites’ deed increases all the more if we put it in its full context, “all those centuries.” The ancient Olympics spanned more than a millennium, from about 776 BC to approximately 400 AD. They were eight centuries old before any Polites emerged, and they continued for several more centuries without ever seeing another like him. He is truly unique. But the nature of Greek record keeping combined with those 800 years almost compelled him, if he wished to achieve anything remarkable, to try to do what he did (see chapter 3). The failure of any modern Olympian so far to equal Polites’ unique double is understandable, almost even inevitable. Our modern games are scarcely more than a century old. Perhaps in seven hundred or so more years, a runner like Polites will dazzle some distant future generation.

It is not irrelevant or even badly anachronistic to compare ancient runners to our own. There are no others to compare them with. In all of the world's history our athletic system is the only one at all similar to the Greeks'. The modern world seems almost sports-mad, with large portions of the media entirely devoted to sport. In financial terms, it is one of our biggest industries. No other culture has ever had nearly so strong an interest in so widespread an athletic system as ours. Because of modern communication and globalization, even ancient Greece is barely comparable. But in its attention to athletics and in the cultural role they played, by far the closest to us was ancient Greece, from which our own system of sport has, in fact, borrowed most heavily.

Why was competitive sport in antiquity found in Greece, and not elsewhere? Early in the last century the noted scholar Jakob Burckhardt argued that there was something special in the Greek national character that drove them to a unique competitive spirit. It is true that Attic dramas, both tragedy and comedy, were parts of prize competitions. Musicians, too, often competed for prizes, sometimes in the same festivals as the athletes. Plato even calls musicians in such contexts "athletes"; for that word merely means "competitor for a prize" (*Laws* 764D).

For nearly a century Burckhardt's argument that the Greeks were uniquely competitive received wide acceptance (Gardiner 1930: 1–2). Recently, however, some of the best scholars have disagreed. They argue that the earlier cultures of the ancient Near East and Egypt had sport as well, and stress their strong and sweeping influence on Greece in other matters.

Yet depictions of wrestling bouts or other combative contests in these other cultures offer no proof that these activities were part of a larger or formal competition. And they do not tell us who the competitors were or why they are competing. They are merely pictures of men wrestling or fighting. In Egypt and elsewhere the rulers (or others in honor of the rulers) indeed hunted animals and engaged in other physical activities. But none of these things anywhere seems to have influenced or resembled the Greek athletic meeting. I join many others who think that Burckhardt's thesis still survives a thorough examination rather well (Golden 1998: 30–3; Poliakoff 1987: 104–11; Scanlon 2002: 9–10).

In speaking of Greek athletics we should avoid the word “sports.” Greek athletics have little or nothing to do with sport or games. While some of the events were sometimes practiced for recreation, the festivals, at least, were far from being a diversion. No word ever associated with them could translate as anything like “sport.” And there were no contests at all for teams, not even a relay race. The only events were for individuals. The Greeks had team games, even team ball games, but they played no part in athletic festivals such as the Olympics.

The term “Olympic Games” is itself a bad mistranslation of Greek *Olympiakoi agones*. That error results from the intervening Latin words, *ludus*, *ludi*, and *ludicrum*, which *do*, in fact, connote sport and games. Our word “ludicrous” comes from there.<sup>2</sup> The Romans did not take Greek athletics seriously. But the Greek word *agones* can never refer to “games.” Rather, it means “struggles” or “contests”; or even “pains.” Our word “agony” derives from it. The word “play,” as well, has no application at all to Greek athletics. The Greek word for “play,” *paizein*, comes from the word *pais*, “child.” It can be used when adults play music, board games and even ball games, but never for any event in Greek athletics.

Our own athletic sports, in the main, developed from children’s games, play, passed on to adults through the schools. Few people realize that athletics, as we know them, are a rather recent addition to our own culture. Even 150 years ago, other than some rowing and cricket contests restricted to England, there were practically no athletic sports anywhere in the world. By the middle of the nineteenth century, English schoolboys were developing some ball games and other contests. The schoolboys eventually took these activities with them into the colleges and universities, where more formal rules and procedures were established. The original nucleus and still the mainstay of our Olympics, the track and field sports (called simply “athletics” outside of America), arose mainly from a conscious imitation of ancient Greek practices. Some early Olympic revivals in Britain and modern Greece, as well as the activities of English students, contributed to this imitation and the promotion of these contests (see chapter 13). From England, track and field athletics and many other sports spread first to nineteenth-century America, then to Europe, and eventually to all corners of the world (Guttman 1978: 57).