

*The Birth of the Ancient Games*  
**Map: Ancient Greece**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Class \_\_\_\_\_

Locate and label the physical and political locations identified by your teacher.



## The Ancient Games

**Olympics Past and Present.** Reporting today's Olympic Games is a technological masterpiece. It encompasses everything from world wide television relayed by space satellites to electronic high-speed computers, tallying the results of each event and delivering them around the globe [even as] athletes ... [participate in] their competition.

Electric timers measure performance and scoreboards flash instantaneous results to the assembled fans, who gather every four years to watch this celebration of sport.

Each event is carefully recorded with a sense of history by the organizers of the modern Olympics. But there was no such concern for records or history when the Games began in ancient Greece. If there had been, the recording of winners would have been much easier for the ancient Greeks than it is for the organizers of today's brief Olympic festivals, despite our advanced technology.

The reason? Simple. From all that historians can determine, there was only one event in the earliest meet at Olympia and it lasted no longer, perhaps, than 30 seconds!

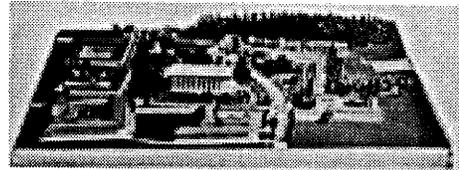
The first recorded champion at Olympia was a sprinter, Coroebus, a cook from the nearby Greek city of Elis. Running ... on a sandy course, he sped across the finish line under the gaze of thousand of Greeks to win a foot race that was approximately 630 feet long - or one *stade* - from which the word stadium was derived. His feat won him a wreath of olive leaves.

That was in 776 B. C. The year became important for later Greek historians. Starting in about 300 B.C. they dated everything by the *Olympiad*—the periods of 4 years between Games—that began with that first record foot race.

**The Perfect Man.** As far back as we can trace the civilization of ancient Greece, there was a reverence of the athlete. The Greeks believed that the body of man has a glory, as well as his mind; that both mind and body need discipline, and that by such discipline men best honored Zeus. From time to time they held great ceremonies of Games, named for the area in which they took place—Pythian, Isthmian, Nemean, and above all, Olympian. The Olympian Games go back to the time of the first people to live in the valley of the Alpheus River. There, at Elis in the western Peloponnesus, was Olympia, “the fairest spot of Greece.” In the spacious and charming valley from which snow-covered distant mountains can be seen, was one of the most famous sanctuaries of ancient Greece. The religious role of the sanctuary began thousands of years ago, long before the Games held there every four years to honor Zeus.

**Olympia.** As it happens we know a good deal about Olympia. It was brought to light, beginning in 1875, by German archeologists. The most important of the ruins they uncovered are those of a temple of Zeus that was in use about 2,500 years ago, and a temple of his wife, Hera, that is even older—about 2,900 years. The world-famous statue of Hermes by the sculptor Praxiteles, now in the nearby museum, was found in the Temple of Hera. The Temple of Zeus contained one of the Seven Wonders of the World -- a statue, larger than a two-story house, of Zeus on his throne, made by Phidias of ivory and gold.

The great desire of the cities near the temple of Zeus was to win the favor of the gods by their show of reverence. So, by 500 B.C., Sparta, Elis, Athens, and Syracuse rivaled each other in the magnificence of their offerings to the temple.



An architectural model of Olympia (c. 150 A.D.) shows the columned Temple of Zeus in the center of the sacred grove, the Temple of Hera (center, rear) the ceremonial reception hall (left front), the house of priests (left, center), and the palaestra (left, rear).

**Intense Training.** Whatever the earliest religious ritual at Olympia may have been, over the years it evolved into a festival of the state. To it, to enter themselves in the festival Games, went candidates from all parts of Greece. They were tested in the gymnasium at Elis before they were allowed to compete at Olympia. The ten-month training at Elis was considered the most valuable preparation athletes could undergo. They lived in the *gymnasium* (from the word for naked) and practiced all day, every day, under the eyes of professional trainers. Officials of Elis decided who could compete and, later, who should get the prizes.

Athletes from Elis won the first 13 Olympic races. Only the Doric peoples of the Peloponnesus participated originally. Other Greek tribes joined in later; then came the peoples from Crete, Rhodes, Sicily, Egypt, and Asia Minor. The Games served as a common link in the Hellenic world.

**Ekecheiria—The Sacred Truce.** Nothing was more important to the Greeks than the Games, and nothing was permitted to interfere with them—not even wars. During the month of the festival of religious rites and sporting events called the Hieromenia, trade ceased and a truce was declared in the constant bickering that existed between the Greek city-states. This Olympic peace was called the *Ekecheiria*. For as long as the Games lasted, no one under arms could enter Olympia. It was sacred ground.

Just how much the Games meant to the ancient Greeks can be gathered from one event. In 480 B.C. the festival of the Games was in process when a Spartan army had to defend Themopylae, and with it all Greece, against Persian King Xerxes and his invaders. Although the very fate of their country was at stake, thousands of Greeks showed up at the stadium at Olympia to watching the championship round of the boxing competition.

**Beginnings.** Where and when did this business begin? The fables of ancient Greece offer many explanations. Greek poets told of a great duel between Zeus and his father, Kronos, one of the the Titans, for mastery of the world. Zeus won, and to honor him, a temple was raised in the valley of the sacred river Alpheus, below the mountain—the Kronion—where the titanic duel was fought.

Or there is the tale of Pelops and his duel of wits with King Oenomaus of Pisatis, the son of Ares, God of War. Oenomaus had a beautiful daughter named Hippodameia. The king had offered her hand in marriage to any suitor who could take the girl from her home by chariot and then outspeed Oenomaus when he pursued them.

Winning the race was vital because it was the custom of Oenomaus to execute the losers to prevent the fulfillment of an oracle's prophecy that he would die at the hands of his son-in-law. Thirteen suitors raced off with Hippodameia and each lost his life because the king had the fastest steeds.

Pelops studied the tactics of the losers and decided he needed help. So he made Myrtilos, the king's charioteer, an offer he couldn't refuse—half the kingdom if his master was defeated.

When the chase began, Oenomaus was confident that Pelops would end on a spear like all the other suitors. However, what he didn't know was the Myrtilos had damaged an axle on the regal chariot. As the king closed in on Pelops, the axle gave way and Oenomaus broke his royal neck in the crash, fulfilling the prophesy. So proud was Pelops of his cunning victory over Oenomaus that he instituted the contests as a memorial, and held them near Olympia in the fertile valley when he and others had chased for the hand of his bride, Hippodameia.

**The First Olympics.** While its origins are shrouded in myth and mystery, the festival at which Coroebus won his wreath in 776 B.C. was repeated at 4-year intervals for the next 1,200 years.

The first contestants at Olympia, who gathered in the autumn, were sprinters. The lone race was run on a straight track. Twenty athletes could take positions at the starting line, marked by grooved limestone blocks. A bugle blast was their signal to start.

**Added Events.** As Olympiad followed Olympiad, the contests increased in number and variety. The first expansion of the Games occurred in the XLV Olympiad, when a race covering two lengths of the stadium was added. Four years later a race of about three miles became part of the program. In 708 B.C. the five-event Pentathlon was introduced. It was designed to provide the ultimate in well-coordinated athletes. Contestants first competed in a jumping event, with the best finishers advancing to the spear (javelin) throw. The four best in that competition then advanced to the sprint race, where another athlete was eliminated. That left three for the discus. The two best of them wrestled for the Pentathlon championship.

The discus was a Greek favorite. The man who could throw it farthest was regarded as a greatest athlete. It was on a bronze discus, which Aristotle saw in the Temple of Hera, that the traditional laws governing the festival at Olympia was inscribed.

By 688 B.C. there were boxing contests in which the competition at first tied leather straps around their fists. Later they would fit metal rings on the straps and then metal knuckles.

Four-horse chariot races, first run in 60 B.C. were open to men rich enough to afford chariots and horses. From the beginning they were a spectacular and popular event very different from the older contests, which were mainly athletic or military in nature. Horse races were part of the festival in 648 B.C. They were run in a separate hippodrome next to the stadium. These horse races were the only events in which bondsmen or slaves were permitted to participate. A winning owner received the olive wreath, while his victorious servant was given a cotton headband.

**Pancration—The Brutal Contest.** It was in 648 B.C., too, that the contest called pancration (from the Greek words for “all strength”) was introduced. It was a cruel combination of wrestling and boxing, and no holds were barred. Each match went to the finish with no rest periods. Only when one contestant lay unconscious or raised his hand as a sign of defeat did the event end.

The victory of Arrachion of Phigalia gives us an idea of the character of the pancration. Arrachion, it is said, was being strangled by his opponent, a perfectly legal maneuver according to the rules. As he was losing consciousness, Arrachion in desperation twisted his foe’s leg. He inflicted such pain that the opponent lifted his hand to signal defeat. But as the judges declared Arrachion the winner, he lay dead before them, ultimate loser in the pancration.

**Cultural Celebrations.** Over and above these exercises of physical strength and agility, the celebrations included contests in music, poetry, and eloquence. The festivals gave musicians, poets, and authors the best possible chance to present their work to the public. The fame of those whose efforts were rewarded with the olive wreath spread far and wide.



**Olympic Heroes.** Winners of Olympic events were revered as heroes; their exertion and sacrifice could result in rich rewards. Their triumphs became part of the record kept in the *altis*, or sacred grove. Three-time winners had statues erected in their likeness and received various gifts and honors, including exemption from taxation.



Often a winner would return to his home and be escorted through an opening in the wall surrounding his city—an opening created by the citizens to show the world that a city with an Olympic champion need fear no enemy. Among the legendary heroes of the ancient Games were Milo of Croton, who won six wrestling competitions during the sixth century B.C., and Polydamas of Thessaly, victor in the pancration in the XCIII Olympiad (408 B.C.).

Milo supposedly developed his brute strength by carrying a calf on his shoulders every day of his life until it was a full grown bull. Polydamas is said to have killed a lion with his bare hands and stopped a chariot by grabbing the back of it with one hand.

Theagenes of Thasos possessed several skills. He competed in boxing, sprinting, and the pancration, winning the wreath no fewer than 1,400 times.

**The Golden Age of the Olympics.** By the fifth century B.C., Olympia was the holiest place of ancient Greece and its ceremonial Games were at their height. They lasted five days; religious rituals occupied much of the time. At the opening of the Games a pig was sacrificed to Zeus and a black ram to Pelops. When an athlete won an event he was supposed to give public thanks to the deities.

Set above the multitude by their championships, Olympic victors expected esteem. Occasionally, Olympic champions returning home did not receive the welcome they felt they deserved. Thus, when Oebotas returned to Achaia following a victory and was virtually ignored, he put a curse on his city. During the next 74 Olympiads, no citizen of Achaia won an event. The Oracle at Delphi told the people of Achaia to honor the memory of Oebotas with a statue. When they did Sostratas of Achaia won the foot race for boys in the next Olympiad.

**No Women in the Olympic Games.** Women were barred from the early Games, both as spectators and competitors, because the Olympics was regarded as primarily religious ceremonies. Those women who let curiosity get the better of them were put to death if they were caught.

However, in 396 B.C., a woman from Rhodes escaped that fate. Kallipateira dressed in men's clothes so she could watch her son compete in boxing in the XCVI Olympiad. When he won, Kallipateira ran to shower him with kisses, and so gave herself away. Because her father was Diagoras the boxing champion of the LXXIX Olympiad in 464 B.C., and one of the most celebrated of all ancient athletes, the penalty of death was waived.

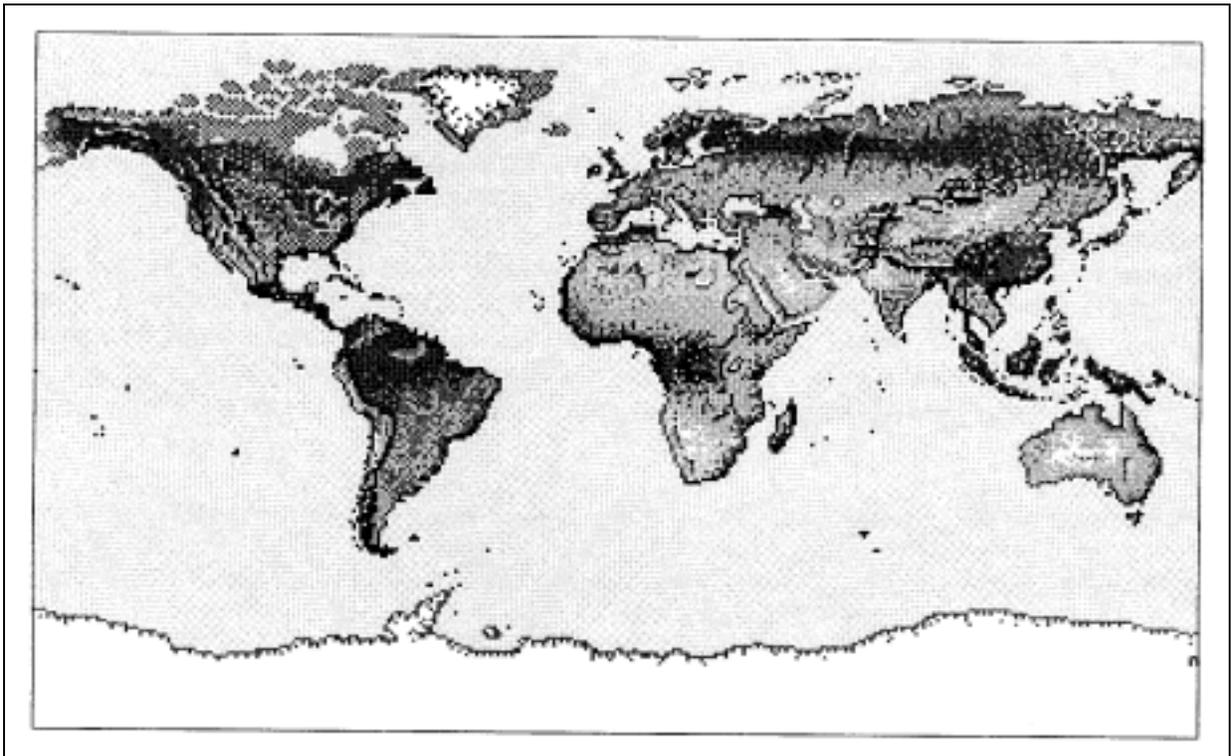
**Rome Brought the Decline of the Games.** The ancient Games reached their zenith in the so-called Golden Age of Greece. With the emergence of the mighty Roman Empire, the sun began to dim. Contests among amateur sportsmen gradually changed. The high ideals of the earlier years were lost sight of. Interest in striving to be perfect, just for the satisfaction of doing one's best, gave way to emphasis on the rewards. Winning became the only concern. Foreign athletes of known prowess were given Greek citizenship so they could enter the Games. Rich men who could not themselves hope to compete began to hire professionals so that they might be sure of winning the bets wagered on the contests.

**The Dismal Low of Nero.** Perhaps the low point was reached in 67 A.D., when Nero appeared at the CCXI Olympiad with a retinue of 5,000, whose primary function was to applaud him. No opponent dared face Nero in the chariot race. When he fell from his chariot, fawning officials put him back, but he could not finish the race. Yet the jury declared him champion. It had been ordered to do so.

As the original purpose of the Games was forgotten, Olympia itself began to decline, even though Romans, who had conquered Greece, continued the Games and added to the riches of the temple of Xhosa.

**The End of the Ancient Games.** The Games continued for some three centuries after Nero's sham, but the days of splendor had passed. The long list of ancient Olympic champions ends with the boxer Varazdetes or Varastad, an Armenian. In 393 A.D., Roman Emperor Theodosius I, a convert to Christianity who considered the Games pagan, ordered them to be abolished because they had become a public nuisance. The immense statue of Zeus was taken from the temple and carried away to Constantinople, where it was lost in a huge fire. A few years later, in the reign of Theodosius II, the marvelous temples of Zeus and Hera were dismantled. Successive earthquakes and floods ruined the site and gradually Olympia was completely buried. So it would remain, lost from sight and half-forgotten, through century after century, until 1875.

Taken from *Pursuit of Excellence: The Olympic Story*, by The Associated Press and Grolier, Grolier Enterprises Inc., Danbury, Connecticut, 1979, James E. Churchill, Jr., Jeff Hacker, Edward Humphrey, editors; Hal Bock, Will Grimsley, Charles Morey, Barney Nagler, Mike Pathet, Contributing Writers.



# The Ancient Games Study Sheet

Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper.

1. In what ways did the original Olympic Games fulfill the Greek ideal of perfection?
2. Discuss the role of religion in fostering this belief.
3. How did attitudes about the value of the body foster and encourage better physical fitness among Greek citizens?
4. What role did the city of Olympia play in the founding of the Olympic Games?
5. Describe the training ancient Olympic athletes went through to prepare for the Games.
6. What is meant by the word, *Ekecheiria*? How did the Olympics promote that sacred trust during the playing of the games?
7. Summarize in your own words one of the legends of the traditional beginnings of the Olympic Games.
8. When were the first Olympic Games recorded? Who was the first winner? In what sport was he the winner?
9. Describe the game of *Pancretion*. Why is that game no longer an Olympic Sport?
10. What role did cultural celebrations play in the tradition of the Olympic Games?
11. Who were some of the first Olympic heroes of the Ancient Games?
12. Why weren't women allowed to participate in the ancient games?
13. How did the Roman conquest of Greece lead to the decline of the Ancient Olympic Games?
14. Analyze the reasons for which the Ancient Olympic Games finally ended.
15. What are the differences between competition, violence, and war?

