

The First Olympics

Do you ever dream of being an Olympic athlete? Imagine yourself standing proudly in the center of an arena listening to your country's national anthem. A gold medal dangles from a ribbon around your neck. The song ends, and the crowd cheers wildly. Suddenly the scene changes. Now you are standing in an open field near a huge shrine. Your gold medal is gone, and a wreath made from an olive branch is on your head. You're still an Olympic hero, but now you're back where the Olympics all started.

Word Origins

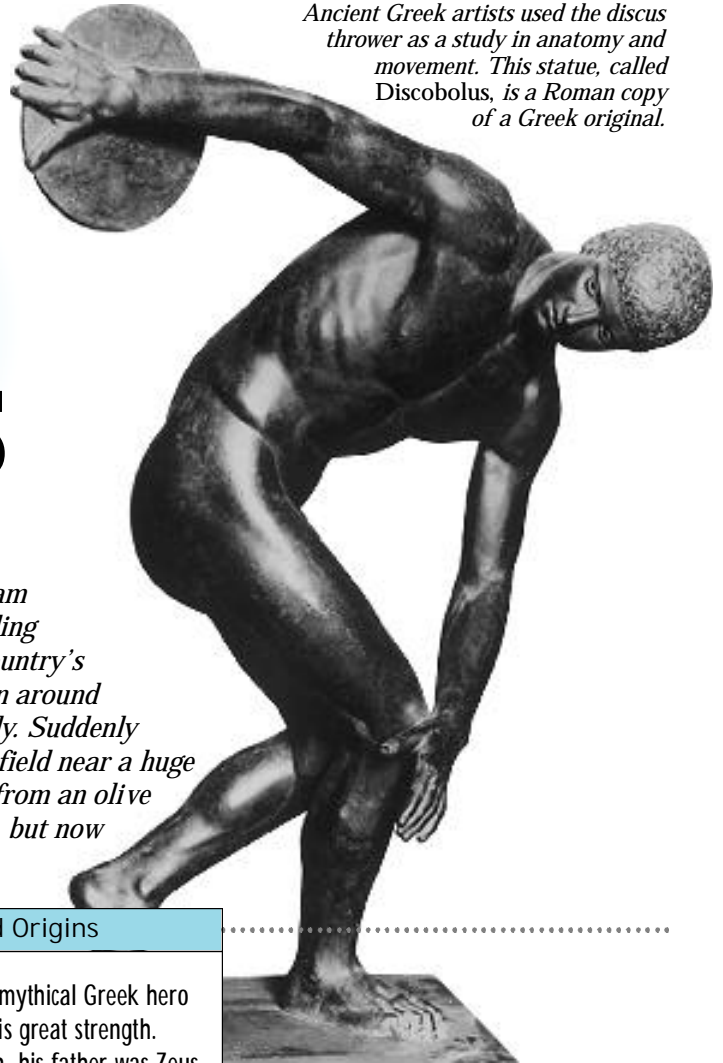
Hercules was a mythical Greek hero known for his great strength. According to myth, his father was Zeus, the king of the gods. Especially difficult tasks are sometimes said to require herculean effort.

How Did the Olympics Begin?

The Olympic Games began many, many years ago in ancient Greece. No one knows for sure just when the first Olympic games took place, but scholars do have evidence that an Olympic festival was held in 776 B.C. What was the evidence the scholars found? It was the name of the winner of a race. Coroebus of Elis, a cook, was the hero of the Olympics in 776 B.C. Coroebus's prize was an olive wreath, which he wore as a crown, and he basked in the glory of being declared the victor.

The early Olympic games were held every four years. They did not originate as a celebration of athletic skill, but to honor the Greek gods of war. During the games all wars were called off. The games were held at Olympia, the site of the temple of the greatest Greek god of them all, Zeus. Olympia, of course, is the place that gave the Olympics its name.

Ancient Greek artists used the discus thrower as a study in anatomy and movement. This statue, called Discobolus, is a Roman copy of a Greek original.



What Were the Ancient Olympics Like?

The early Olympians used festivals, music, and banquets to honor their gods. The first Olympic festival that we know of was really just one event, a quick foot race. The length of the race was two hundred yards, not quite as long as two football fields laid end to end. According to legend, that length was chosen because Hercules could run that far on one breath.

Through the years, as the games went on, more events were added. Soon there were many different kinds of races, including chariot racing. There were also such events as wrestling, jumping, spear throwing, and discus throwing.

The ancient Olympians were strong, brave, and full of high ideals. The feats of a great athlete were thought to be an expression of the divine powers of the gods. Following Greek tradition, athletic contests were sometimes brutal tests of the athlete's courage and determination to win even in the face of pain. Some of the contests even left the contestants injured and scarred. In fact, at least one event was often fought to the death. This event, the *pancratium*, was a fight without rules. It ended only when one of the contestants raised his hand to signal that he had had enough or when one of the contestants died.

One year, an Olympic champion named Arrachnion (ar RACK nee un) was defending his title. The fight was even more violent than usual. Arrachnion's foe was trying to choke him. To break the stranglehold, Arrachnion twisted the other man's foot. In pain, the opponent raised his hand to surrender. But at that same moment, Arrachnion, still in the stranglehold, died. In spite of having died, Arrachnion was crowned the winner!



Why Did the Ancient Olympics End?

The ancient Olympics took place regularly for more than 1,000 years. They changed over time, though. A big change came during the second century B.C., when Roman conquerors took over Greece. Fear of the Romans forced Olympians to give up some of their high ideals. The low point was the Olympics of A.D. 66. That year the Roman emperor Nero visited the Olympics with his 5,000 bodyguards. Even though Nero was not a great athlete, he decided to compete in every event. Nero was known as an evil ruler—and he liked to win. Because the Greeks were terrified of Nero, they gave up their goal of excellence and let Nero win event after event.

For instance, the chariot race turned out to be a bizarre event, and an example of what the Greeks were willing to do to protect themselves. During the race, Nero fell out of his chariot. The other racers stopped in their tracks and they waited for their emperor to climb back into his vehicle. Then they finished the race, being careful not to pass the emperor before he reached the finish line.

Prefixes

- To **compete** means to “vie” or “strive together.”
 - A **committee** is a “group of people working together.”
- Both words have the prefix **com-**, which means “together” or “joined.”

The games continued for three hundred more years even though both the Greek spirit and the Olympic spirit had been broken. Finally, in A.D. 394, Emperor Theodosius of Rome ended the games because they went against his Christian beliefs. By then Christianity had spread throughout the Roman empire. Theodosius considered the Olympics a backward, pagan festival that did not fit in with his ideas of Christianity.

With the end of the games came the end of Olympia, too. The magnificent temple, along with other Olympian monuments, was robbed and burned. The buildings and gardens fell into ruin. Nature completed the ruin with a flood and an earthquake. The glorious Olympic games were truly over. At least that's how it seemed.

Statue of Charioteer, Delphi Museum



Why Do We Have the Modern Olympics?

In 1894, a French nobleman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, decided to try to bring back Olympic ideals. He thought a new Olympic competition would bring world peace and good will. He was able to talk nine countries into starting up the games again. The countries formed a committee to plan the first Olympic games of modern times.

In 1896, the first modern games were held in Athens, Greece. They began as a summer Olympics only, and top athletes from all over the world were invited to be participants. Since that time the summer and winter Olympics have been held all over the world.

Did you know?

Baron de Coubertin not only gave the world the Olympics. He also gave the world the modern Olympic creed: "The most important thing at the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not to triumph but to struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."

Part of the crowd at the 1896 games, the first held since ancient times

In some ways, the modern Olympics are like the ancient games and in some ways they are different. Now there are both Summer and Winter Games held in different years. Yet the motto of the modern Olympics shows that today's Olympic athletes have the same high ideals that were so important to the ancient Greek Olympians. That motto, *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, is Latin for "Swifter, Higher, Stronger."



Keeping Sharp

Mark each word that can be a noun with **N**. Mark each word that can be an adjective with **A**. Keep in mind that some words can be both. If so, mark them **NA**.

___conqueror

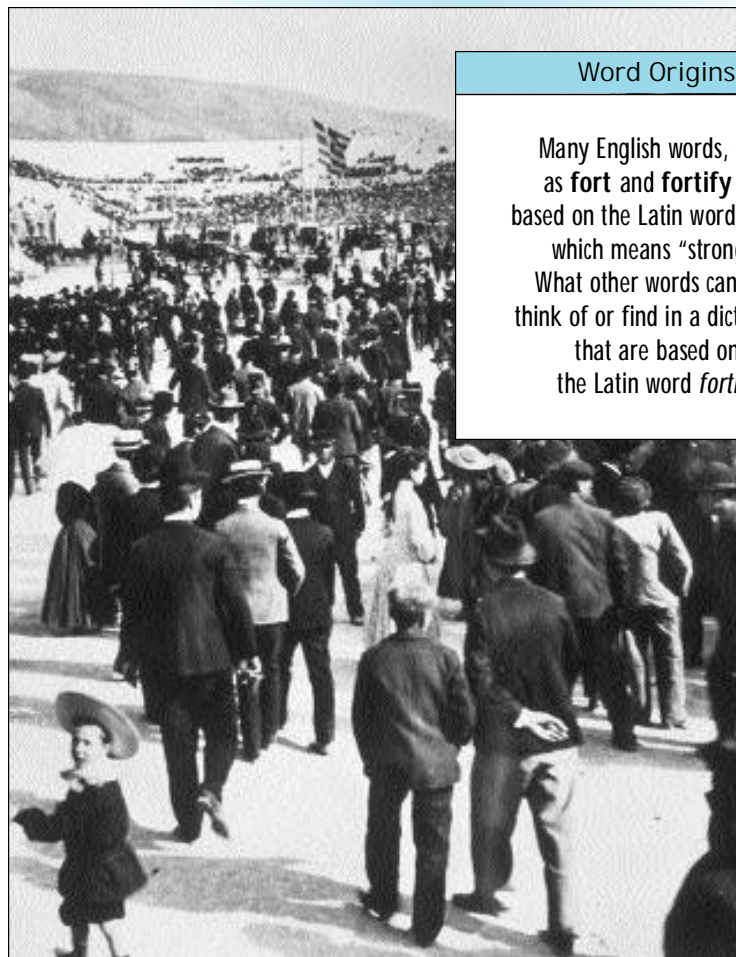
___foe

___pagan

___ideal

Word Origins

Many English words, such as **fort** and **fortify** are based on the Latin word, *fortis*, which means "strong." What other words can you think of or find in a dictionary that are based on the Latin word *fortis*?



Step 3 Refining and Extending Knowledge

Self-Assessment

Part A: Look at each word listed below. If you don't know the word or if you aren't sure about it, write 1 on the line to the left of it. These are the words you need to study.

Part B: On the line to the right of each word, write the letter of the category to which you think it belongs.

- A person or people
- B places

Note: Some words may not fit in any category.

_____	arena	_____
_____	athlete	_____
_____	conqueror	_____
_____	contestant	_____
_____	foe	_____
_____	ideal	_____
_____	motto	_____
_____	pagan	_____
_____	participant	_____
_____	shrine	_____
_____	site	_____
_____	victor	_____

Other Interesting Words

Add any other words from the article you think you need to study or would like to know.

Definitions

For each definition below, write a word from the article that fits the definition and has the same number of letters as spaces provided. When you are finished, a secret word will appear in the parentheses. The first one is done for you.

- a statement that expresses a goal or ideal
- an enemy or opponent
- a worthy principle or aim
- a place where sports are played
- a person who participates in sports

- _____ (M) _ O _ T _ I _ O
- _____ ()
- _____ () _____
- _____ () _____
- _____ () _____

Context Clues

Sometimes you can figure out the meaning of a new word by looking at the information that surrounds it in a sentence or a paragraph. Read the paragraph below and fill in the blanks to complete the sentences that follow.

A Herculean Feat

Legend postulates that Hercules could traverse a race course in one breath. The race course consisted of the length of two football fields laid end to end. Perhaps other athletes have tried to match the record, but there is no one known to have accomplished such a herculean feat.

- Postulates means _____
_____ .
states a theory / makes something up
- Traverse means _____ .
measure / cross
- Herculean means _____ .
very strong / ordinary

Step 4 · Applying What I've Learned

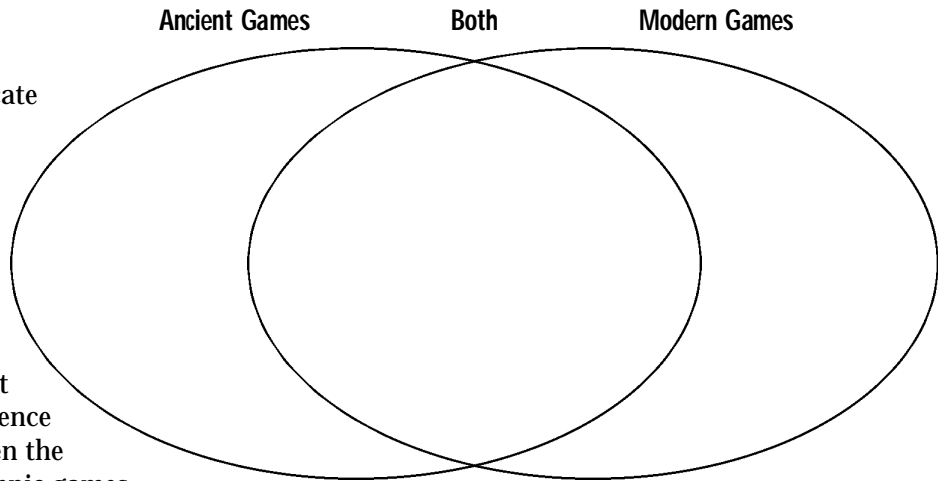


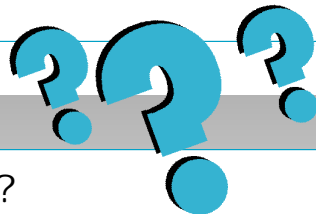
Comprehension: Compare and Contrast

Complete the diagram using words and phrases from the article that indicate aspects of the Olympics that apply to the ancient games, the modern games, and both.

When you have finished your diagram, use it to create three sentences that explain at least one difference and one similarity between the ancient and modern Olympic games. Write your sentences on the lines below.

Venn Diagram—Comparing and Contrasting Two Things





Questions, Anyone?

- Flex those muscles! Explore *A.D.A.M.: the Inside Story*, a CD-ROM from A.D.A.M. Software.
- For more information on Olympic events, write the United States Olympic Committee. Their address is: One Olympic Plaza, Colorado Springs, CO 80809