

Introduction

Download the LearnEnglish Themes podcast. You'll find more information on this page:
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-themes.htm>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- The article that you can listen to in the podcast
- An optional comprehension activity based on the article
- Links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (Olympic Games).

Read the article

The Olympic Games: then and now

by Craig Duncan

In 2004 the Olympic Games returned to its home in Greece, where it began around 3000 years ago. The first recorded Olympic festival took place in 776 BC. Similar festivals had been organised for at least two or three centuries prior to this, but 776 BC saw the start of a regular festival which was to take place every Olympiad, or four year period.

In ancient Greece citizens of different city states could not always travel freely around the country, but during the Olympics the various rulers agreed truces so as that their citizens could attend the Olympics without problems. Sport was only one part of the festival; there were also ritual sacrifices, poetry readings, exhibitions of sculpture and trade fairs. It was a festival which celebrated on the one hand the Greek gods, and on the other hand the abilities of the Greek people.

The early athletic competitions were only running races, but later other sports such as boxing and wrestling came to be included. It was not simply a matter of professional athletes arriving and entering the competitions; for one thing, there were no professional athletes! All the competitors were ordinary Greek citizens who felt that they were among the best in their chosen sports. Anyone wishing to compete had to arrive four weeks early, and undergo a full month of training. It wasn't only physical training, either: would-be competitors had to prove that they were morally and spiritually suitable to compete. Even if someone was physically fit enough, they couldn't compete unless the judges thought they were of the right moral fibre. Curiously, all sportsmen competed nude – it was widely believed that wearing clothes slowed an athlete down!

At the start of the games, every competitor had to swear an oath that they were a free citizen of Greece who had committed no sacrilege against the gods. In today's Olympics, one athlete takes an oath on behalf of all the competitors, although of course it is a little different to the ancient Greek oath. Today, competitors promise that they shall abide by the rules of the games, will act in an honourable and sportsmanlike manner, and not use any performance-enhancing drugs. Cheating, though, is almost as old as the games itself: records of the ancient Greek games are riddled with tales of athletes paying off their competitors, and of boxers fixing the results of their fights. In ancient Greece, though, there weren't many ways an athlete could cheat in a race: maybe take a shortcut, or borrow a horse. By the time of the St Louis Olympics in 1904, more modern means were available. The original "winner" of the 1904 Olympic marathon, Fred Lorz, was disqualified after it was revealed that he had travelled half the distance in a car. The man later declared the official winner, Thomas Hicks, wasn't much better: he was carried across the finishing line by two of his trainers. Hicks's trainers had tried to enhance his running ability by feeding him a mix of egg whites, strychnine and brandy. This early attempt at a performance-enhancing drug was rather unsuccessful, as it left Hicks drunk and incapable. The trick of having two men carrying him, though, seems to have worked.

The motivation for cheating hasn't changed much at all. Today, athletes compete primarily for the honour of being awarded a gold medal, but also for the enormous amounts of lucrative corporate sponsorship bestowed upon top sportspeople. Similarly, while ancient Greek athletes were officially only competing for the honour of being

awarded a symbolic olive branch, winners were usually sponsored by their city state, receiving a large sum of money, or a new home, or a lengthy tax holiday.

As mentioned earlier, the connection between sport and business hasn't changed much. Even in the earliest Olympics, sporting competition went alongside trade fairs and business deals. This was acknowledged in 19th century Greece when the first modern attempts were made to revive the Olympics. The "Zappian Olympics", as they became known after wealthy organiser Evangelos Zappas, were the bridge between the ancient and modern Olympics, and took place in Greece between 1859 and 1875. It was the first real international sporting competition, but officially it was about far more than sport. Greek

politicians of the time felt that nations were no longer competing primarily in sport, but in agriculture and manufacturing. It was decided, then, that these new Olympics ought to be as much about competing in industry as in sport. The sports events were highly popular, but in terms of funding and regularity were of a lower priority than the commercial side, which concentrated on the demonstration of agricultural and industrial inventions.

However, the sporting side of the games were hugely popular with the public, and the level of support meant that, in Athens in 1896, the Olympics as we know them began. Despite the occasional shambles of the sort we saw in St Louis in 1904, it has continued from strength to strength since then.

After reading

Exercise 1

Choose the correct answer to each of the following 5 questions about the text.

1. The Zappian Olympics were:

- (a) a 19th century attempt to revive the Olympic Games
- (b) a huge Frank Zappa concert
- (c) a competition between ancient Greek city states
- (d) a series of marathons

2. The 1904 Olympic marathon was eventually won by:

- (a) a man in a car
- (b) a drunk man who was carried across the finishing line
- (c) Evangelos Zappas
- (d) one of the competitors' trainers

3. In ancient Greece, an Olympic winner might receive:

- (a) an olive branch
- (b) a tax holiday
- (c) a sum of money
- (d) all of the above

4. An "Olympiad" is:

- (a) a promise not to cheat
- (b) a type of ancient vehicle
- (c) a four year period
- (d) a festival

5. The ancient Olympics attracted competitors from:

- (a) all over the world
- (b) Athens
- (c) all over Europe
- (d) all over Ancient Greece

More activities on this topic

You'll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of the Olympics at:
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-olympics-summer.htm>

- **Magazine article:** [The Olympics](#). *"Winning the Olympics is not about the medal. It is about how you feel, deep inside, at the moment of victory...it is about the unbelievable attraction of history."* (Matthew Pinsent: - Olympic Gold Medal Winner (Barcelona 1992, Atlanta 1996, Sydney 2000).
- **Word game:** [Olympic events](#) (x 4) Match names and descriptions of different Olympic sports.
- **Story:** **Athletes of the Ancient Olympic Games**. Read short biographies of 5 great athletes from the Ancient Olympics and do an activity in which you compare the information in them.
- **Trivia:** Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about the Olympic Games.
- There are also 2 Olympic-related cartoons, a poll and some carefully selected external links.

Answers to comprehension activity: 1. (a); 2. (b); 3. (d); 4. (c); 5. (d)

www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish