

Athletic Competitions

The ancient Olympics originally had only one event, the *stadion*, a footrace that took roughly 30 seconds to complete. Over time, more events were added, transforming the games into a multi-day spectacle of athleticism. Some events, such as footraces, discus-throwing, and wrestling continue into the modern Olympics. Others, like the *pankration* and hoplite races, belong firmly to the ancient games. Events such as wrestling didn't divide competitors into weight categories, but had separate competitions for boys and men.

Equestrian Competitions



Horse races, be it a single rider, a two-horse team, or a four-horse chariot, took place in the *Hippodrome*, an apsidal track located slightly south of the stadium. Horse races were the only opportunity women had for participating in the games: they were allowed to train horses to race at the Olympics, provided that they themselves weren't the driver.

Red-Figure Volute Krater Depicting the Sack of Troy, Greek, Apulian, ca. 340-330 BCE, Ceramic, 1999.011.006A, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

Tethrippon

Introduced in 680 BCE, the *tethrippon* was a four-horse chariot race over a distance of 43,200 feet.

Keles

The *keles* was a single-horse race with only one lap around the *hippodrome*, a distance of 3,600 feet. It was introduced much later than the *tethrippon*, in 648 BCE.



Intaglio with Cupid Driving a Two-Horse Chariot, Roman, 2nd century CE, Red Jasper, 2008.031.321, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

Sunoris

An even later addition to the games, the *sunoris* was added to the program in 408 BCE. It was a two-horse chariot race that took eight laps around the *hippodrome*, totaling 28,800 feet.

Apene

The *apene* was a mule-cart race introduced in 500 BCE, but it was removed from the games by 444 BCE.

Kalpe

The *kalpe*, a dismounting competition, was introduced in 496 BCE, but like the *apene* it was discontinued by 444 BCE.

Running

Dolichos

The *dolichos*, introduced in 720 BCE, was a footrace of ten laps around the stadium, a distance of 12,000 feet. Due to its longer distance, this race was less of an all-out stampede and more about stamina and strategy.

Diaulos

Twice the distance of the *stadion*, the *diaulos* was a sprint over 1,200 feet with a sharp turn on the course. It became part of the Olympics in 724 BCE.

Hoplitodromos



Red-Figure Cup Fragment with Warrior (Inside) and Symposium of Women (Outside), Greek, Attic, ca. 500 BCE, 2006.018.003, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

One of the later additions to the Olympics, the *hoplitodromos* was a race completed in armor, typically made of bronze, including a helmet, shield, and greaves, across a distance of 1,200 feet (two laps around the stadium). The weight of the bronze made running especially difficult, and athletes would move at a much slower pace than during the *diaulos*.

The Pentathlon

Introduced in 708 BCE, the *pentathlon* was, as the name suggests, a five-part event, encompassing a broad variety of athletic skills. Because measurements were much less precise in ancient Greece, and there were no recordings to be played back, athletes were given three attempts at each event and only the best result was counted.



Red-Figure Amphora Fragment with Discus Carrier (Diskophoros), Greek, Attic, ca. 490 BCE, Ceramic, 1984.014A, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

Discus

Followers of the modern Olympics, or track-and-field events in general, will recognize the discus throw. Athletes were given three bronze discuses to throw, casting each only once. These discuses weighed around 5.5 pounds but weren't standardized, so weights varied.

Long Jump

Although familiar to modern audiences, the ancient Greek long jump differed from the modern event. Athletes used weights, **halteres**, as a counterbalance to propel themselves over the *skamma*, a soft patch of dirt set up in front of the judges' stand.

Javelin

In the javelin throw, athletes sought to throw the **akon**, a wooden staff with a bronze tip, the farthest. Distance, rather than accuracy, was the name of the game. As with the long jump, competitors had a tool to increase distance. In this case, it was the **ankule**, a leather strap tied in a loop around the javelin's shaft in order to create greater thrust, allowing the javelin to travel farther.

Stadion

The **stadion** was the oldest event, not just in running, but at the Olympics in general. It was the very first event to be included in the games, in 776 BCE. It was also the shortest event, only 600 feet, comparable to the sprinting events of modern-day track-and-field.

Pale

Pale was an upright form of wrestling. The goal was to force your opponent to the ground using only above-the-waist holds, although foot-tripping was allowed (For more on what moves were banned, see Section 9: Rules and Regulations). Victory was declared when one athlete hit the ground with his hip, shoulders or back three times. Unlike modern wrestling, there was no time limit for how long they had to stay down.

Combat Sports



Red-Figure Kylix Fragment with Bust of Young Boxer, Greek, Attic, ca. 490-480 BCE, Ceramic, 2005.026.003, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

Pugmachia

Pugmachia, boxing, was introduced in 688 BCE.

Athletes wore ***himantes***, leather straps wrapped around their hands, both for protection and to add extra force to their blows. Punches were aimed at the head with the goal of either knocking one's opponent unconscious or forcing them to forfeit the match. The Spartans, who claimed to have

invented ***pugmachia*** as a military training

exercise, refused to participate in boxing at the Olympics. The exact reason for this is not known: some suggest that the Spartans eschewed any competition that required submission, others that the Spartans viewed athletics as inappropriate training for war, which was their highest priority.

Pankration

A combination of boxing and wrestling, the ***pankration*** was a no-holds-barred event introduced in 648 BCE. There were only two illegal moves: biting and eye-gouging. Although athletes began fighting upright, they soon progressed to wrestling on the ground, grappling until one of the fighters was forced into submission.

Suggested Further Reading

Faulkner, Neil. "The Programme". In *A Visitor's Guide to the Ancient Olympics*, 195-243. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

Gardiner, Norman E. "The Pankration". In *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals*, 435-50. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1910.

_____. "Throwing the Javelin". In *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals*, 338-58. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1910.

___ "Wrestling". In *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals*, 372-401. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1910.

Hodkinson, Stephen. "An Agonistic Culture? Athletic Competition in Archaic and Classical Spartan Society."

In *Sparta: New Perspectives*. Edited by Stephen Hodkinson and Anton Powell, 147-87. Swansea:

Classical Press of Wales, 2009.

Kyle, Donald G. "Greek Athletic Competitions: The Ancient Olympics and More". In A

Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity, 1-18. Oxford: John

Wiley and Sons, Incorporated, 2014.