

Famous Athletes

Olympic athletes were just as celebrated in ancient Greece as they are today. We know the names and achievements of a number of competitors thanks to surviving inscriptions and textual evidence.

Pausanias

The Roman travel writer Pausanias noted several remarkable Olympic athletes in his *Description of Greece*. *

Hermogenes

Pausanias writes that Hermogenes the Lydian won a total of eight wreaths over the course of three Olympics. He also remarks that Hermogenes was given the surname “Horse”, suggesting he may have competed in equestrian events.

Polites

Polites of Ceramus participated in the track and field events. According to Pausanias, he won the *stadion* (600 feet), the *diaulos* (1,200 feet), and the *dolichos* (12,000 feet) all on the same day.

Leonidas

Leonidas of Rhodes was, according to Pausanias, the most famous runner at the Olympics. Over the course of four Olympics, he won twelve different events, although the specific type of race is not mentioned.

Pheidolas

According to Pausanias, Pheidolas of Corinth was thrown from his horse Aura at the beginning of the race, but Aura continued to follow the course and halted at the finish line before any of the other horses, which the judges determined meant that Pheidolas won.

Nicasylus

The Olympics had divisions for men and boys, but athletes who entered the boys’ division were sometimes forced to participate in the men’s, and vice versa. Nicasylus of Rhodes, for example, intended to compete as a boy, but, according to Pausanias, was put into the men’s category because he was eighteen years old. Despite this, Nicasylus won the *pale* not only at Olympia, but also at Nemea and Isthmus, two other **Panhellenic games** (see Section 4: Athletic Competitions).

Artemidorus

Artemidoros of Tralles failed spectacularly, in the boys' division no less, at his first Olympic games in the *pankration* event, purportedly due to his young age. At games held in Smyrna, however, he managed to defeat the very same group of boys that he had faced at Olympia, then the "beardless youths," and then the men. His decision to compete with the youths was apparently due to his trainer's prompting, and he took on the men because one of them insulted him. In 68 BCE, **Pausanias** claims, Artemidorus returned to the Olympics and won the *pankration* in the men's division.

Milo

Milo of Croton is perhaps one of the most well-known ancient Olympic athletes. At Olympia he won the *pale* six times, five in the men's category and once in the boys'. At the **Pythian games** he was victorious six times in the men's category and once in the boys'. **Pausanias** remarks on some of Milo's exploits: he held a pomegranate tightly enough that no one could take it from him, but gently enough that the fruit wasn't damaged; he would tie a cord around his head and break it in half with the veins in his forehead; he balanced on a greased ring and encouraged people to knock him down, which none were able to do.

Archippus

A citizen of Mitylene, Archippus was victorious in the *pale* not only at Olympia, but at Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmus as well, at only twenty years old, earning himself the ancient Greek equivalent of an EGOT.

*This list is by no means exhaustive, and readers interested in Pausanias' complete account of the statues he saw at Olympia are encouraged to read his chapter, "**Elis 2**," which is available for free through the Perseus Project.

Inscriptions

The **Panhellenic Sanctuaries** are filled with dedications celebrating the achievements of particular athletes, as well as statues set up as fines for cheating.

Hagias

A statue at Delphi boasts that Hagias was the first Thessalian man to win the Olympic *pankration*.

Kyniska

Kyniska, a Spartan princess, is listed on a statue as being the only woman in Greece to have won the *tethrippon*.

She went on to win the same event at the next Olympic games.

Theogenes

Theogenes of Thasos wished to compete both in the *pugmachia* and *pankration* on the same day.

Exhausted after the *pugmachia*, however, he forfeited his *pankration* match with Dromeos of Arcadia, for which he was fined. At the next Olympics, he only competed in the *pankration* and therefore became the first to win both the *pankration* and *pugmachia* at the Olympic games.

Pindar

Victorious athletes were celebrated in poetry as well as through the commission of statues. A number of victory odes by the 5th-century BCE poet Pindar survive today, providing information several victors.

Name	City	Year	Event
Hieron	Syracuse	476 BCE	Single Horse Race
Theron	Acragas	476 BCE	<i>Tethrippon</i>
Psaumis	Camarina	452 BCE	<i>Tethrippon</i>
Psaumis	Camarina	460 or 456 BCE	Mule Car Race
Hagesias	Syracuse	472 or 468 BCE	Mule Car Race
Diagoras	Rhodes	464 BCE	<i>Pugmachia</i>
Alcimedon	Aegina	460 BCE	Boys' <i>Pale</i>
Epharmostus	Opus	466 BCE	<i>Pale</i>
Hagesidamus	Western Locri	476 BCE	Boys' <i>Pugmachia</i>

Ergoteles	Himera	466 BCE	<i>Dolichos</i>
Xenophon	Corinth	464 BCE	<i>Stadion, Pentathlon</i>
Asopichus	Orchomenus	488 BCE	<i>Stadion</i>

Suggested Further Reading

Kyle, Donald G. "Athletes in Greek Society: Heroes, Motives, Access." In *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, 190-208. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Incorporated, 2014.

Pausanias. "Elis 2". In *Description of Greece*. Translated by W. H. S. Jones. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918.

Pindar. *Olympian*. Translated by William H. Race. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Young, David. "First with the Most: Greek Athletic Records and 'Specialisation.'" In *Greek Athletics*. Edited by Jason König, 267-83. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.