The Olympic Games

Today, people around the world thrill to the arrival of the Summer Olympic Games every four years—an international sports competition involving events from boxing to basketball.

Falling halfway between the Summer Olympics are the Winter Olympics, featuring skiing events, skating competitions, and snowboarding. The spirit of these biannual athletic contests began on the Greek Peloponnesus in the year 776 B.C.

Although the original Greek Olympic Games were very different from today's extended international games, the competition was keen. Even when the various city-states were in conflict or at war, every four years they sent their best athletes to Olympia along the banks of the Alpheus River on the Peloponnesus.

At the 776 B.C. Olympics, the people of Elis (the Eleans), who lived on the level plains near Olympia, held a foot race of about 200 yards to honor their god, Zeus. As other Olympics were held, other city-states sent their athletes to compete in the races.

By 708 B.C., the games included not only foot races, but jumping, discus throwing, wrestling, and javelin throwing. Later games included boxing and chariot racing.

As many as 50,000 Greeks might gather at the games as spectators, cheering for the athletes from their city-state with patriotic pride. The games were scheduled during the months of August or September. By then, farmers had brought in their annual harvest and were free to attend the games. But the season is a hot one on the Peloponnesus, and the athletes competed in burning heat.

Perhaps this is why the athletes generally performed in the nude, covering their bodies with oil.

Typically, Greek Olympic Games lasted five days, with the first day marking the opening of the events by a sacrifice to Zeus. During this ritual, athletes swore to compete honestly and not to cheat. Judges vowed to be fair, as well.

The second day featured chariot races, which might pit as many as 40 chariots against one another. Other events held on the second day included a pentathlon, consisting of running, long jumping, discus throwing, javelin throwing, and wrestling. Long jumpers held lead or stone weights when jumping, which they swung forward to help carry them farther through the air.

One brutal event at the games was pankration, a no-holds-barred combat with only two rules: no biting and no eye-gouging.

Foot races were held on the third and fourth days, as well as boxing and wrestling. The foot races were eventually held in a stadium measuring 218 yards long with a sand-covered field.

On the fifth day, the winning athletes received prizes which included a great banquet and a wreath of wild olive cut from the sacred trees outside the temple of Zeus. Other prizes might include exemption from taxes and honor at home.

Research and Write

Research the modern Olympic Games. What Greek events are still included in today's games?
Introduction
The Greeks of ancient times loved games. The truth is the Greeks loved competition of any kind—wrestling until one submitted, drinking the most wine, or even staying awake the longest. Something in their character pushed them to be winners, no matter what the contest. We don’t know when this passion for competitive games first appeared, somewhere in prehistory. The first real reference to such competition is in Homer’s *Iliad* when the warrior Achilles organized some games to go along with the burial rites of his fallen fellow Hellenes, Patroclus, who was slain by the Trojan soldier Hector at the gates of besieged Troy. This event occurred at the end of the so-called Trojan War, about 1250 B.C. The events staged included chariot racing, boxing, wrestling, weight-throwing, and foot racing. Winners received highly prized treasures like bronze cauldrons and horses.

From these beginnings, the Greeks in 776 B.C. started to put on organized and periodic Olympic Games. For nearly a thousand years the Greek world saw athletic competition of excellent quality. In A.D. 394, Emperor Theodosius, a practicing Christian, abolished the games in the Roman Empire. They were, he believed, pagan spectacles and had no place in Christianity. For 1500 years no organized athletic competition existed on the scale of the games at Olympia. In the 1890s, the games were revived. The first modern Olympics in Athens in 1896 began the festival that is still presented every four years.

Exercise and the cult of the body
The original aim of any athletic games of Greece was to produce the physical vigor, strength, and skills needed. Greeks went to war, among themselves or against barbarians (foreigners). Hellenes of all ages put a high value on health, strength, and beautiful bodies. Almost on a daily basis, Greek males, old and young, went to the gymnasion to work out. An open space in the gymnasion was known as the *palaestra*, usually a place for wrestling but also used for practicing sports such as discus throwing, boxing, and long jumping. Because exercise of the mind was also considered important, the men discussed their ideas, gave advice, and watched other athletes train. The palaestra was a sort of exclusive men’s club which everyone could not join. Women, of course, were excluded.

Greek athletes also pursued health outside the gymnasion. They included in their lifestyle plenty of rest, cheerful surroundings, and pure air, which Greece had in abundance. Diet, too, concerned the Greeks. Foods they considered healthy included olives, almonds, bread and
grains, watered-down wine, honeycakes, and, on special occasions, fish, porridge, vegetables, and fruits. Incidentally, fruits such as oranges and apples were unknown. In any case, moderation was the standard when it came to food. Few, if any, fat people were tolerated in a culture which revered the body so highly. All this must have prolonged life for the Greeks. To illustrate this point, Greeks in their 70s and 80s fought in battle; Sophocles wrote one of his better plays when he was 90.

The Olympic Games
No doubt the games held every four years at Olympia, in northwestern Greece, began before 776 B.C. What we do know is that competitive games and Greek religion are intertwined. Greek gods were pleased by mortals’ application, hard work, self-reliance, and personal achievement. Zeus himself, ruler of all Greek deities, watched over the games. For centuries, the athletic competitions were held in his honor.

The first Olympics, allegedly held in 776 B.C., lasted only one day. Only footraces were staged. Coroelus won the one race that was even considered major—a sprint the length of the crude stadium. Gradually, the games grew to a full week. Other events were added: wrestling, jumping, boxing, throwing, horse racing, and chariot racing. As the festival evolved in importance, most Greek city-states sent their best trained athletes, the ones who excelled in the palaestras of their individual poleis. There were no points kept to gauge how well each city-state stacked up to the others. All that mattered was that individual winners came from Athens, Sparta, or, perhaps, Corinth. These champions usually received a branch of olive leaves to wear on their head. Later, it was possible that a winner could win gallons of olive oil or fine horses, both prized objects to an ancient Greek. Sometimes, winners paid no taxes for the rest of their lives, and they were excused from military service.

Usually it was only adult males who participated. By 632 B.C., sporting events for boys ages 17-20 were introduced. Two competitions were held for this age group: a sprint down the length of the stade (stadium) and a wrestling match. Female athletes, as records indicate, never participated in the Olympic games, but did compete in events in non-Olympic years. Girls had to be satisfied with the roles of spectators. Though for years male athletes performed in the nude, women still packed the stadium to watch. To the Greeks the human body, clothed or unclothed, was something to admire, and who better to exhibit the male form than the athlete.
The quadrennial games attracted a cross-section of spectators. Since there was no admission, no tickets, and no reservations needed, Greeks of every class, occupation, and persuasion often trekked to Olympia for the festival. It took a real sports fan to enjoy the competition because of the inconveniences—no drinking water close by, no toilets, flies by the millions, and the merciless August sun baking on them all day. When the events weren’t being staged, there were other exciting attractions. Around the stadium it was a carnival with the typical array of tents, booths, and shrewd peddlers selling every product and service imaginable. Along the way there were also orators, philosophers, artists, acrobats, magicians, writers, and even pickpockets, who no doubt had a field day at the games.

Needless to say, the Greeks honored and revered the winners at Olympia. That fact has not changed in the modern games. Many today are still challenged by the motto “Citus, altius, fortius” (“Swifter, higher, stronger”); they devote years of their lives in the struggle to win events in the Olympic games.

Four days of Olympic competition
Most athletes came from all over Greece a month before the events began. Most of the time during this training period these athletes were supervised by specially selected judges. Once the competition was on, however, the athletes were on their own. What follows is a day-to-day breakdown of the events:

Day 1 After a day or two of preparation, worship, and the usual sacrifices, the competition opened with chariot races. The two-wheeled chariots were drawn by four horses. An 800-meter horse race came next; the rider rode without saddle or stirrups.

Day 2 This day was devoted to the pentathlon, which included the standing long jump, sprinting 200 meters, wrestling, and throwing the discus and javelin. Except for wrestling, these events were held in the stadium.

Day 3 Usually coinciding with a full moon, the third day had a religious flavor to it. Religious rites, processions, and sacrifices filled the day, ending with a huge banquet.

Day 4 The day began with a 200-meter dash. During the afternoon came the exhausting, but popular, contact events—boxing and wrestling. These events were brutal with few rules, no time limits, and no ring in the modern sense. The last event, the pankration, was a combination of wrestling and judo, with a bit of boxing. The athletes punched, kicked, bit, and slapped until one opponent surrendered. As a finale to the games, a 400-meter race in full armor was held.

GREEKS—Olympics 6:5
The Olympics: Claim, Evidence, and Interpretation

Prove the claim below by pointing out the differences between the ancient Olympic Games and the modern Olympic Games. Following the claim, you will need to provide 2 pieces of evidence to support your claim, these will come from the articles attached. Each piece of evidence will need to be explained to show how it helps to support your claim (support/interpretation of evidence).

Claim: The ancient Olympic games were very different from the modern Olympics games of today.

Evidence #1: __________________________________________________________

Support of evidence/interpretation: ______________________________________

Evidence #2: _________________________________________________________

Support of evidence/interpretation: ______________________________________