

Your Shortcut to The Ancient Olympics

They ran for almost 12 centuries, Greeks came from all across the ancient world to watch and to compete, and they celebrated athletes who were fast, strong and ...in the nude! This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to The Ancient Olympics - the podcast where we dive into the who, what, when, where, why and how of the big news stories. I'm Christie Kijurina.

And I'm Bryce Corbett.

Bryce, unless you've been on a deserted island lately, you'll know that the Paris Olympics are scheduled to start on July 26 or July 27 in Australia.

Oh, I know. I've got my green and gold outfit all sorted, I've made my pom poms and my alarm is set for 3.30 on Saturday morning Australian Eastern time, so I won't miss the Opening Ceremony!

Wow, Bryce, you're really into the Olympics! But did you know, that the modern Olympic Games that we have today, have a very ancient history?

Well they've been going for as long as I can remember.

Yes, and they started many, many, many years before even you were born.

Wow, they really are ancient. Today, we'll talk you through WHEN the Ancient Olympics happened; WHAT sports the athletes participated in and; WHO competed in these ancient games.

Listen carefully - there'll be a S'quiz at the end!

To get where we're going, we're going to need to travel back in time. Like, REALLY far back.

Should I put my seatbelt on?

Most definitely, Bryce. We're going all the way back to 776 BCE. That's almost 2,800 years ago. Are you ready?

Yep let's go!

Phew that was a rocky ride. Could you get the door please Bryce?

My pleasure! Woah - where are we?

This, Bryce, is Olympia. We've landed in southwestern Greece. Beautiful, isn't it?

It is! It's all countryside and rolling hills... and are those...olive trees?

They sure are.

And what about those buildings over there...they're huge ...all those stone columns and that statue... who is that?

I'm glad you asked, Bryce, that there is the Ancient Greek God, Zeus. King of all the Gods. His home is Mount Olympus, and that's why this place, Olympia, is dedicated to him.

Wow.

It's pretty peaceful at the moment but just wait a little bit because it's about to get hectic.

Christie, you said this is 776 BCE right? Isn't that the year when the first ever Olympic Games were held.

Bingo, you got it.

The ancient Greek empire was enormous and people travelled from all across it to attend the games. They came from what we now know as France, Spain, Italy, Turkey and even Russia. At its peak, more than 50,000 people from across the Mediterranean made their way to Olympia for the Games.

They did, and it was so important that wars were put on hold to allow people to get safely to the Games. Imagine, 50,000 people here! That's a lot of people to feed.

It is, Christie, and if you're vegetarian, you might want to cover your ears for a second. On the third day of the Olympic Festival, the Eleans, the local folks who organised the games, gathered together 100 cows. They sacrificed these cows at the altar of the Temple of Zeus, leaving just a

little bit for the god. The rest was cooked up and shared with all the people who came to watch the Olympics.

Wow! So, it was like an enormous barbecue?

That's right, Christie. After all that travel, a big feast was just the thing. But what, Christie, had all these people come to see?

So, Bryce, back in 776 BCE, when things kicked off, there was only one event: the stadion, a sprint that was about 180 meters long, the length of the Ancient stadium. Can you guess where the event got its name?

Uh..it was called The stadion... so I'm guessing it was a lap of the stadium?

That's right! The race was launched with a trumpet's blare, and up to 20 runners would bolt down a dirt track, with officials at the start and finish to ensure fair play.

And over the years, they added other events: different running distances; long jump; discus; shot put; javelin; chariot races (which are buggies the athlete stands in pulled by horses); and a sport called pankration (pan-cray-shun). Pankration is an Ancient martial art that combines wrestling and boxing. Its name comes from the ancient Greek words 'pan', which means 'all', and 'kratos', which means 'might' or 'power.'

So it literally means “all of the might.” It is believed that the mightiest athletes, with the greatest strength and stamina, were the pankration fighters.

By ancient accounts, the pankration event was the crowd's favorite sport. Although it's not in the modern Olympics, it's like a precursor to modern mixed martial arts. We've given you a link to the World Combat Games' pankration event for you to check out. Now, Christie, I'm a bit embarrassed to bring this up, but I've got to call out the elephant in the room. You did say at the beginning of the podcast that the athletes were [Clears throat] naked?!

Ah yes, I was wondering when we'd get to that. So, it didn't start off like that, but as the story goes, one day, a runner lost his loincloth (that's like his undergarments) during a race and it tripped him up. So it was

decided that all competitors would perform better without clothes holding them back. But it's more likely that clothes were a symbol of status, meaning people could tell whether athletes were rich or poor, and being naked put everyone on an equal playing field. Like team uniforms today.

"Thank goodness for uniforms!

And there were no prizes either, other than being awarded a crown made of olive leaves and a red woollen ribbon, representing Nike, the goddess of victory. No trophies or money was handed out... but when the winners returned to their home states, victorious athletes were superstars. They would have statues carved for them, coins minted with their images on them, poems written telling of their heroic feats and they were given special status in their towns. So, we know a lot about what went on at the Ancient Olympic Games. But who, Christie, were these athletes?"

Well Bryce, I'll start by telling you who the athletes weren't. They weren't women. Women were banned from participating in the Ancient Olympics. Some say that unmarried women were able to attend as spectators but even this is disputed by the ancient sources.

Yes, Christie, but one woman managed to outsmart these rules. Kyniska, the daughter of the King of Sparta, won the 4-horse chariot event in 396 and 392 BCE—even though she didn't attend the games.

Wow! How did she manage that?

Because she owned the horses, she was recognised as the winner! Talk about horsepower!

That's pretty clever! The rules stated that competitors had to be free men (because they had slaves back in those days) and Greek citizens. But they could come from any level of society. They could be shepherds or soldiers, farmhands or philosophers, or even members of royal families.

That kind of equal opportunity is a philosophy that has carried through to today's Olympics. And I'm sure everyone listening knows at least one or two athletes they'll be cheering for over the next couple of weeks. So do we know about any of the ancient Olympians, Christie?

Great question, Bryce! There are a few who stand out. There was Milon of Croton, a 6-time Olympic wrestling champion. Milon was enormous and quite the showman. He carried a whole cow on his back into the Olympic sanctuary, then killed it and ate it all in one day!

"That's incredible!

Then, there's Theagenes of Thasos. He was the king of the pankration. He's said to have won 1,400 wreaths (the crowns of leaves) in various games throughout his career. One of his rivals was so frustrated with always coming second, he beat a statue of Theagenes every day so violently, that eventually, the statue toppled over ... and killed him. "

Oh, that sounds like something out of a Greek myth! Or 'Stupid Deaths' from Horrible Histories .. But we know these games eventually came to an end. How did that happen?

Well, Christie, after almost 1,200 years, the final ancient Olympic Games were held in 393 CE. Historians don't agree on a single answer as to how the Ancient Games ended. They do agree that the Roman Empire conquered Greece in 146 BCE, and about 60 years later, Olympia itself was invaded and looted—that means things were broken and stolen from the sanctuary. Flooding, earthquakes, and fire damaged the buildings in Olympia, and barbarians from the north were invading. Some believe a Roman Emperor banned the Games because he was a devout Christian and didn't want an event honouring Greek gods. There could be something to that theory, but there's no proof.

And while the focus of the ancient Games was fitness and athleticism, the core values of fairness, peace, and education that were held dear by the ancient Greeks were evident too. The very same values we see in the modern Olympics today.

Hold your horses, Christie. The modern Olympics are what we'll be talking about in next week's Shortcut... Now where did we leave the time machine? I've got to get back and get my face paint on. Aussie Aussie Aussie!

"This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening..."

"Question 1) Which God did the Ancient Greek games honour? (Zeus)

Question 2) What was the first event of the Ancient Games? (the stadion)

Question 3) What did the Spartan Princess Kyniska win, without setting foot in Olympia? (the chariot race) "

Well, that's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of the Ancient Olympics. Teachers, there are excellent classroom resources related to this topic on the Squiz Kids website and there's a link to them in the episode notes.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day!

Over and out.