

Games and glory

Greeks competed at many athletic festivals, but won the most glory at the four 'sacred' games in the religious sanctuaries at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea and Isthmia. Here they took part in running or foot races, long jump, wrestling and discus throwing. Greeks believed that their gods gave them physical abilities, so keeping fit and taking part in the festivals were religious duties.

By the mid-6th century bc, the sacred games were scheduled in a 'circuit': at least one was held each year in a four-year period. These games were open to all Greek men. Greek women could only compete at Olympia in the **Heraia**, named after the goddess Hera. Like the other sacred games, the Heraia were held every four years but unlike the men's games they only consisted of one event – a foot race.



Relief showing victory crowns,
2nd century ad, from Isthmia

The 'sacred' or 'circuit' games were also called 'crown' games because the winner's prize was a crown of leaves (olive at Olympia, laurel at Delphi, pine at Isthmia, parsley at Nemea and later at Isthmia too). Athletic festivals held by *poleis* (city-states) were called 'prize' games because winners won valuable prizes, like or pots of oil.

The Greek concept of victory complied with strict standards. An athlete won glory only by winning many events; competing alone because there were no team sports in the ancient games. Victory was fleeting; this is why the Greeks pictured victory as a young, winged woman called **Nike** (meaning 'victory') [[Education 17](#)]. Just as Herakles' labours were his path to immortality [[Myth & Religion 41](#)] glory in the games were the athlete's path to immortality.

The Games were also celebrations of Greek identity. The Greeks believed they were superior to everyone so a winner at the Games was truly the best of the best.

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An Olympic Diary from the 5th century bc

Three months before

Three heralds travel to each **polis** (city state), where they announce the sacred **truce**. This is a time of peace, which guarantees that the athletes can travel safely to the festival at Olympia.

One month before:

Athletes finish their training at Olympia, under the watchful eyes of the judges. Everyone else starts to arrive over the next month.

GAMES BEGIN

Day 1: No competitions. Athletes swear to the gods that they will not cheat and pray to the gods for help.

Day 2: *Morning*: Horse and chariot races [[Education 21–24](#)]

Afternoon: **Pentathlon** including footrace [[Education 25–26](#)], long jump with **halteres** (weights) [[Education 18](#)], diskos [[Education 19–20](#)], javelin and wrestling

Day 3: *Morning*: Sacrifice of 100 oxen to Zeus and other sacrifices by **poleis** (city states)

Afternoon: Footraces – **Stade** (200 yards), **diaulos** (400 yards) and **dolichos** (long distance)

Day 4: *All day*: Wrestling; Boxing [[Education 28](#)], **Pankration** (means ‘all power’) and **Hoplitodromos** (footrace in armor).

Day 5: No competitions. Crowning of the winners (with olive wreaths). Sacrifices to thank the gods, more celebrations and a banquet (winners only).