

OLYMPICS 2004 ATHENS



SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS' JOHN ZANT REPORTS FROM ATHENS

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ANCIENT GAMES - WORLD'S FIRST ATHLETIC SPECTACLES BEGAN IN 776 BC

Life-or-death competitions make today's events seem tame

By JOHN ZANT
NEWS-PRESS SENIOR WRITER

Most of us attribute the quote, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," to an Italian-American football coach, Vince Lombardi.

But many centuries before Lombardi's team won the first Super Bowl game in 1967 AD, the ancient Greeks professed the same uncompromising notion about the transcendence of victory.

They celebrated their champions in the world's first athletic spectacles, which we know as the ancient Olympics, dating back to 776 BC. Those games unfolded regularly at the altar of Zeus in the valley of Olympia, Greece, for almost 1,200 years. They were banned by a Roman emperor in 397 AD and lost in the dust of history until an idealistic Frenchman revived them in 1896.

For the next 17 days, the Olympics returns to Athens, but the Summer Games will be quite different from what transpired there 2,500 years ago, according to local experts on Greek history.

The stories that are told about the life-or-death competitions of antiquity make our modern sports seem tame.

Synchronized swimming? Rhythmic gymnastics?



JOHN ZANT is covering his seventh Olympics for the News-Press.

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KNIGHT RIDDER/TRIBUNE PHOTOS
The Parthenon sits atop the Acropolis in Athens.

No blood, no guts, no glory in ancient Greece.

Passions were superheated in the games of old. In fact, the Greeks did not call them games. Their word was "agon," which means struggle, the root of agony.

Only those who triumphed in the struggle were deemed worthy of honor. Blame it on Homer's epic tales of heroism.

"The Olympic spirit is encoded in the oldest document of Greek culture, 'The Iliad,'" said Apostolos Athanassakis, a UCSB classics professor who specializes in Hellenic studies. "It is a story of competitive action, of wanting to be the best at everything. What is the pleasure of being a wretch? Intentions don't count for Homeric Greeks. Only deeds, what you do."

Athanassakis recently discussed the Olympic Games of past and present along with Brice Erickson, another classics professor with expertise in archaeology, and John Lee, a history professor who is writing a book on Greek warfare.

Their research confirms the adulation bestowed on the naked athletes who triumphed in the early Olympics. They competed in the most elemental ways — sprints of about 200 yards, boxing, wrestling, a no-holds-barred combat called the pankration, jumping, discus and javelin throws.

Poetry, painting and sculpture depicted them as idealized figures.

"Physical male beauty — the Greeks were obsessed with it," Erickson said. "It delights the gods."

Some of the oldest ruins in Olympia are bronze tripods.

"Most people think they were placed to honor winners," Erickson said. "They didn't receive cash prizes. The winner of the stadium race took the torch to the sacrificial altar, a great honor."

The games belonged to religious festivals that included animal sacrifices, music, dance and poetry. Olympia was best known for its athletic events, but there were other gatherings (Nemean, Isthmian and Pythian) that staged various entertainments in a four-year cycle.

"Athletics were just one part of the whole person to the Greeks," Lee pointed out. "Plato was a wrestler. Socrates was a runner. But the complete man was not just an athlete."

Yet those who became successful in athletic competition were elevated to special status because of their visibility. They were real-life dramatists, almost godlike in their performances. "When an athlete receives the 'athlon' (prize), people had to see him," Athanassakis said. "If you received it without an audience, it would be worth nothing."

Although the athletes may have received nothing more than a laurel wreath at Olympia, most scholars agree that there was rampant professionalism and commercialism in the ancient games, which led to instances of cheating.

"Athletes were subsidized by their home cities," Lee said.

"It's a simple fact," Athanassakis said. "How could a very poor man, unsupported by others, have the time to pursue athletic training?"

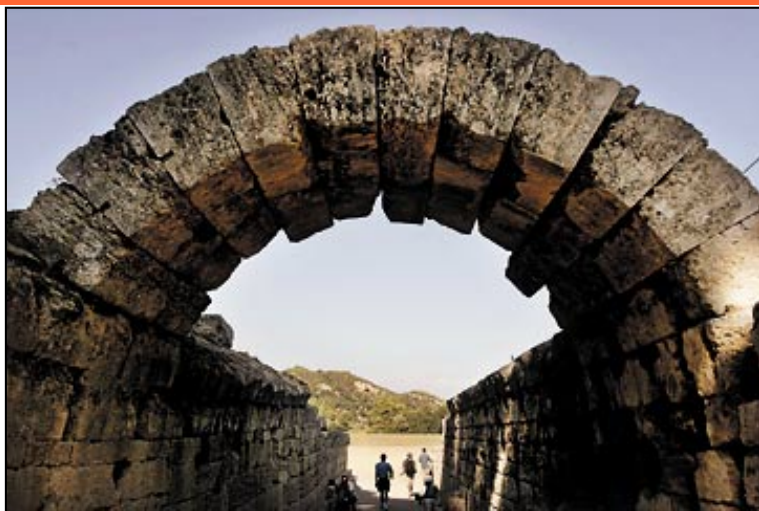
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Athletes will cross under this arch — which marks the entry point of the stadium at the Olympia Archaeological site in Olympia — as they enter the historic site for the shotput competition during the 2004 Games.

Thrusting oneself into the athletic arena carried risk. Losers were subjected to humiliation. There was no such thing as a "heroic loser" in the ancient Games. And if caught, cheaters were flogged.

"Every culture has an ideological kernel," Athanassakis said. "In the Judeo-Christian tradition it's guilt. The most powerful force in Greek life is shame."

Whereas guilt implies self-reproach, shame brings one down in the eyes of others who

also feel the pain of failure.

"If another Greek does something awful, it shames you as well," Athanassakis said. "Shame is Hellenic. You do something wrong, you have to move somewhere else."

The passionate pursuit of excellence in ancient Greece attained a remarkable flowering in the fifth century B.C., after they defeated the Persians on the battlefield. A form of democracy came to Athens, and the city vibrated with philosophy, art and literature. The Acropolis, which has more splendor in its ruined state than any modern skyscraper, is a monument to that era.

James Stathis, a local dentist, is enthralled by the achievements of his Hellenic ancestors.

"Imagine Greece in the Golden Age," Stathis said. "In a population of 50,000, they had thinkers like Socrates, they had dramatists and sculptors who were the greatest the world has seen... It's like having Einstein, Shakespeare, Michelangelo and Frank Lloyd Wright all together at the same time. And over at Olympia, you had Jim Thorpe. When the Romans took over, they couldn't improve on what the Greeks had done. They copied it."

Stathis took part in a retelling of ancient myths during Santa Barbara's 31st Greek Festival at Oak Park two weeks ago. His parents are founders of the annual event.

He carries on the family tradition of preserving their heritage. For the past several years, Stathis has explored the museums and historic sites of Greece while gathering material for an ongoing video project, "Greece: Spirits of the Ancients."

But putting on the Summer Olympics of 2004 is the work of the moderns. Everybody has heard about the construction delays and squabbling that have taken Athens right down to the wire in preparation for tonight's opening ceremonies.

The Greeks have been under a lot of stress over the years. For four long centuries, until 1821, they were held in bondage by the Turks. They suffered unimaginably at the hands of the Nazis in World War II, they killed each other off during a Communist insurgency after the war, and they were ruled by a military dictatorship from 1967 to '74. Forget the glories of victory. They were just trying to survive.

Athanassakis thought it would be too much to ask the beleaguered Greeks to stage the

modern Olympics, which have grown to unwieldy proportions (37 different sports, 200 competing nations), and are a precarious venture in a troubled world.

"I would have cast a negative vote when they lobbied for the Games," the UCSB professor said. "The effort is huge, the cost is enormous."

The Greeks are pulling it off in their own way.

Athanassakis said the hosts have mixed feelings about the United States, the country that is expected to win the most medals in their Olympics.

"Greeks don't hate Americans, but they're tired of seeing Americans at war on their TV screens," Athanassakis said. "They have suffered so much in war. Ever since Kosovo, U.S. troops have been in the region. They have a revulsion to this nonstop warlike activity."

There was a concept during the ancient Games known as the Olympic truce. Scholars say the festivals did not necessarily bring about a cessation of hostilities, but no harm came to the participants in the Games during their journeys to and from Olympia.

The spirit of the ancients might be a good thing to revive in the true land of their birth.

"Maybe this is a chance for the Greeks to show who they want to be," Lee said, "instead of other people defining them."

The most blatant example was the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, when the Nazis staged elaborate rituals — including the first torch relay — that suggested the Third Reich had its seeds in ancient Greece.

"The Germans said, 'We are the Greeks,'" Lee said. "Let the Greeks be themselves."

Stathis, who has Greek citizenship, said the country's character will be revealed in the Olympics, but he was concerned how it will be portrayed on television.

"NBC is trying to go after the 25-year-old male and turn the athletes into MTV characters," he said. "I think it's a big mistake if they don't show the history of the Games and the beauty of Greece. This is a unique event in all our lifetimes."

"I don't think the Games will be as commercial as they had become. They'll be more grass roots, more hometown."

But there is one case where the Greeks would pull out all the stops.

"If a Greek athlete wins gold," Stathis said, "put in your ear plugs."

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