

Olympic Facts



The Olympics were named after Mount Olympus, but they were actually held in the rural sanctuary of Olympia, in Greece's western Peloponnese region. It was a sacred area, featuring picturesque olive tree plantations and a giant statue of the god Zeus. By the second century BC, the main stadium held approximately 45,000 people, who stayed in tents around the building.

All free male Greek citizens were entitled to participate in the ancient Olympic Games, regardless of their social status. Several emperors even took part. Women were not permitted to compete. There was, however, a loophole to this rule. In chariot racing, the horse owners were declared Olympic champion, and not the riders. Anyone was allowed to own a horse and Kyniska, daughter of King Archidamos of Sparta, subsequently became the first female Olympic victor in Antiquity. Her four horses won in the 396 BC and 392 BC Olympiads.

A separate festival called the **Heraean Games**, dedicated to the goddess and wife of Zeus, Hera, was created for women. These Games were also held in Olympia, and featured young girls competing in a footrace on a track one sixth shorter than the men's equivalent.

There were no gold, silver, and bronze medals on offer at the ancient Games. In fact, prizes were awarded only to the winners, which began with a wreath made from the leaves of the sacred olive trees at Olympia.