

Rules and Regulations

The ancient Olympics had the potential to be very dangerous, even deadly, and a strict set of rules were imposed to regulate the behavior of athletes. Rules also applied more broadly to the spectators and even the city-states themselves.

Who Enforced the Rules?

Judges, called the *Hellandikai*, were selected from the citizens of **Elis** and given ten months' training by **Elia**n officials on how to oversee the games. Once trained, the *Hellandikai* were responsible for sorting



Terracotta Skyphos (Deep Drinking Cup), Greek, Attic, ca. 500 BCE, TerraCotta, 06.1021.49, New York City, Metropolitan Museum of Art

competitors into age categories, ensuring the **Sacred Truce** was upheld (see Section 6: Politics), supervising the training of athletes prior to the games, and enforcing the code of conduct for both spectators and athletes. The *Hellandikai* had additional help with enforcement and punishment: *mastigophoroi* (whip-

bearers), *rabdouchoi* (rod-bearers), and *alytarches/alytai*, responsible for crowd control.

Rules for Athletes



Red-Figure Cup Fragment with Athletes, Greek, Attic, ca. 480 BCE, Ceramic, 2006.042.007, Atlanta, Michael C. Carlos Museum

Athletes needed the permission of the *Hellandikai* to participate in the Olympics. Only male citizens were eligible. If accepted, they spent ten months in training before the start of the games. Even then, their participation wasn't guaranteed. The

Hellandikai oversaw the ten-month training period

and reserved the right to remove substandard athletes from the competition. Athletes might also be removed during this period if the city-state they represented violated the **Sacred Truce**.

Once the games began, athletes were required to perform in the nude, with the exception of chariot drivers and jockeys. While it is not known where this practice of nude athleticism originated, it carried with it an element of **Panhellenism**, a common identity shared by the Greek city-states; neighboring empires, such as the Persians and, later, the Romans, considered public nudity uncouth. Lack of clothing, therefore, came to symbolize Greekness as well as status and masculinity, since only male citizens could be nude. For women and enslaved people to be seen nude was a mark of shame. Enslaved people could only participate in the Olympics as chariot drivers or jockeys, who weren't required to be nude, and women as horse-trainers.

Rules for Specific Events

Just like today, different events at the ancient Olympics were governed by specific regulations. The *Hellandikai* monitored the athletes closely and punished rule-breakers with flogging and, for serious infractions, fines.

Pale

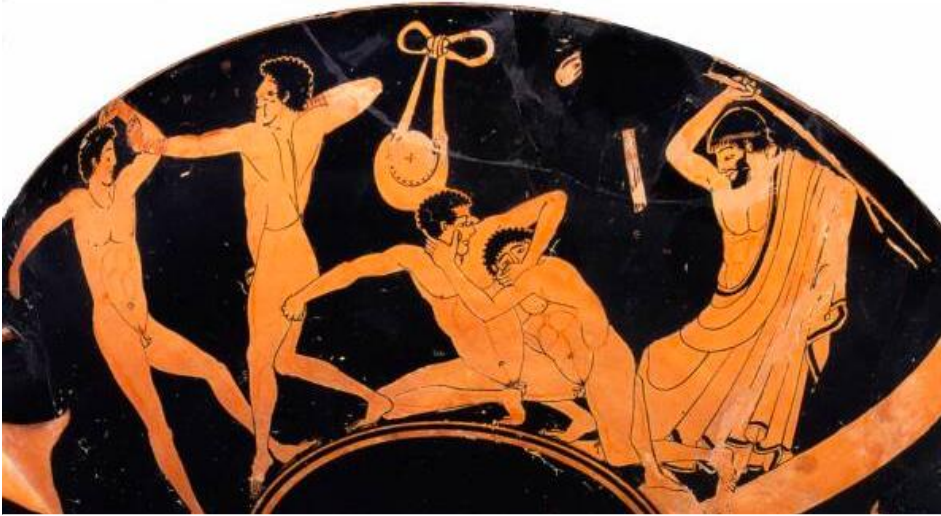
A bronze inscription found at Olympia (SEG 48.541) forbids wrestlers from breaking their competitor's fingers. Pausanias, however, wrote about the famous wrestler Leontiskos of Messene, who was known for bending his opponents' fingers back until they broke (Pausanias 6.4.3). The rules may have changed over the years, or Leontiskos may have been operating outside of the rules. Competitors attempted to throw one another to the ground without being knocked down themselves. The match ended when one of the athletes had fallen to the ground three times. Other rules included:

1. No intentional hitting or kicking
2. No gouging or biting
3. No grasping of the genitals
4. Any other hold, no matter how painful, is permitted
5. Those who violate the above rules will immediately be whipped by the referee until the behavior stops
6. Three points are needed to win a match
7. There are three ways to score a point:

- a. The opponent's back touches the ground
- b. The opponent taps out
- c. Any part of the opponent's body touches an area beyond the wrestling zone

8. Once a point is scored, wrestlers are given a chance to recover before the match restarts

Pankration



The *pankration* was governed by the least rules, making it the most dangerous event. It was also the most popular event. Only two moves were prohibited: biting and eye-gouging. Athletes who violated these rules were flogged by the *Hellanodikai*. Victory was decided

Via <http://ancientolympics.arts.kuleuven.be/picEN/slides/P0077.jpg.html>

either when a fighter submitted, as in the *pale*, or when he was unconscious or dead. This could be strictly enforced. Pausanias describes a match between a man named Arrhachion and some unnamed opponent who strangled Arrhachion around the neck and midsection. Arrhachion managed to dislocate his opponent's toe but then died from asphyxiation. Nevertheless, the opponent tapped out due to the pain in his foot, and Arrhachion was awarded the match posthumously.

Pugmachia

We do not know what rules governed the *pugmachia*, but ancient texts give a sense of what was permitted. The Greek author Philostratos wrote in 230 CE that *himantes*, a precursor to boxing gloves, made of pigskin were banned because they left painful cuts that took a long time to heal. We can also reasonably assume that gouging and biting were prohibited, since even the *pankration*, the most extreme combat sport, didn't allow such moves. Fights could be violent, even deadly: we are told that during a match at Nemea, one of the other **Panhellenic games**, Daxomenos of Syracuse pulled out the guts of his opponent, Kreugas of Epidamnos. Other rules likely included:

1. No holds or wrestling
2. No time limits for matches
3. *Hellanodikai* enforced the rules via flogging
4. If a match went on for too long, opponents could choose to exchange unblocked blows. This was the situation in which Kreugas' guts were pulled out.
5. Matches were decided when a boxer either conceded or was incapacitated (i.e. knocked unconscious or killed).

Footraces



Balbis at Olympia. Photographed by Stephen G. Miller. In *Sport and Festival in the Ancient Greek World*, pg. 8

Runners lined up before each event at individual starting gates made of wood and string (*hyspleges*). Behind each *hysplex* was a stone starter called a *balbis*, on which the runners placed their left foot forward and their right foot back. Those who began running before the trumpet sounded were flogged, and they were required to start in an upright position. Tripping and ramming into other athletes was strictly

prohibited. In the *hoplitodromos*, runners were disqualified if they dropped their shield and didn't pick it back up (see Section 4: Athletic Competitions).

Pentathlon

Discus: As with the footraces, athletes stood behind a *balbis*, which could not be crossed when an athlete made his throw. Competitors were given three bronze discuses to throw; only their best throw was counted.

Javelin: In order for a throw to be counted, a javelin had to hit the ground and remain in place. If the javelin fell over, it was discounted. The *balbis* once again served as a starting line.

The *pentathlon* was won by the competitor with the three best performances out of all five events.

Equestrian Events

Charioteers and jockeys lined up behind the *aphesis*, a starting-gate system that staggered the release of each lane in order to compensate for the difference in distance on the curved track. As with footraces, those who started too soon were flogged. Horsemen who tried to cut in front of the other competitors were flogged at best, fined at worst.

The Zanes

Pausanias describes a series of statues lining the path to the stadium at Olympia known as *Zanes*, which were paid for by fines levied against athletes who violated the rules of competition. Excavations at Olympia have uncovered the bases of these statues, which are inscribed with details of the infractions they memorialize.

Pausanias comments on six *Zanes*, all erected in 388 BCE and paid for by Eupolos of Thessaly as punishment for bribing all the competitors in the *pugmachia*. The third and fourth *Zanes* were uninscribed, but the other four bore inscriptions composed in elegiac couplets, a meter used in poetry. The first emphasized that victories at the Olympics were achieved through athleticism and skill, not money. The second explained that the statues were set up to honor **Zeus** and serve as a warning to those contemplating breaking the rules themselves. The fifth commended the **Elians**, especially for fining the boxers, and the sixth informed the Greeks that they shouldn't try to buy a victory at the Olympics.

Women

The only method of participation in the Olympics available to women was training a horse or team of horses to race in the equestrian competitions (see Section 7: Famous Athletes). Girls could participate in the Heraea, a festival in honor of Hera that included footraces, but direct participation in the Olympic games was prohibited. According to **Pausanias**, women who tried to attend the games illegally were thrown off Mount Typaeum. However, one woman, called Callipateira, who posed as an athletic trainer to enter the games, was not punished because her father, brothers, and son were all Olympic victors. According to **Pausanias**, this was why trainers were subsequently required to strip before entering the arena.

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