Learning A–Z	level Z	Multi-level	R W Z
Grade	5	Word Count	2,104
Lexile	1080L	Nonfiction • Informational	

Refer to the Focus Question on page 2 of this title to guide discussion and support additional learning connected to the text.

To many athletes, competing in the Olympic Games is the ultimate honor, where they strive to be the best in the world. **The Olympics: Past and Present** examines the ways in which the Olympic Games in ancient Greece evolved into the modern-day Olympics. Photographs, illustrations, maps, and diagrams support this informative text. The book is also available for levels R and W.

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The Olympics: Past and Present

Written by Katherine Follett and David Dreier

motto *(n.)* page 4
a phrase that represents a guiding idea of a person or group

procession *(n.)* page 7
an orderly, formal parade

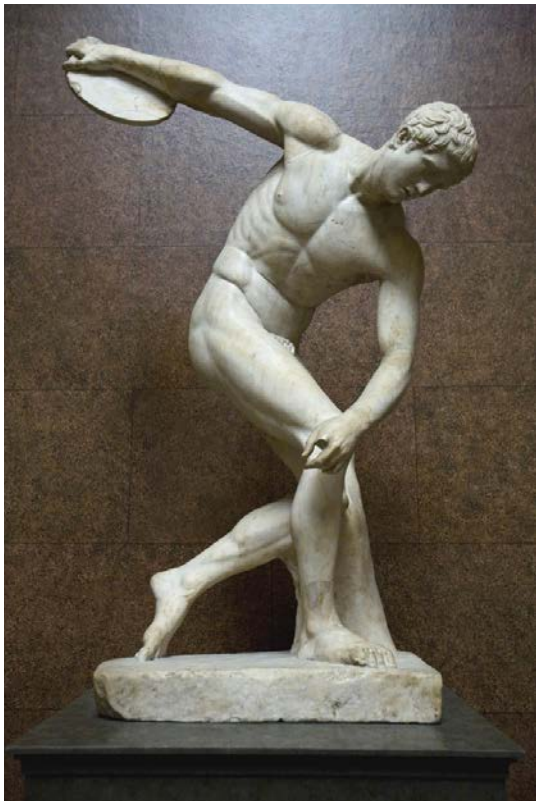
qualify *(v.)* page 20
to demonstrate a high enough level of skill to be allowed to compete in a difficult event

symbolic *(adj.)* page 11
representing an idea

tarnished *(v.)* page 21
disgraced; made less shiny, polished, or pure

truce *(n.)* page 8
an agreement to keep the peace

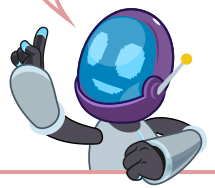
The Olympics: Past and Present



Written by Katherine Follett
and David Dreier

Focus Question

Why are the Olympic Games held?



Words to Know

ancient
archaeologists
athletes
character
competitors
controversies
motto
procession
qualify
symbolic
tarnished
truce

Glossary

ancient *(adj.)* page 4
from a long time ago; very old

archaeologists *(n.)* page 10
scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures

athletes *(n.)* page 4
people trained in sports, games, or other activities that require strength, speed, and skill

character *(n.)* page 10
the moral strength of a person

competitors *(n.)* page 4
people or teams that take part in contests

controversies *(n.)* page 22
disagreements over an issue

Since the mid-1970s, Olympic officials have routinely tested athletes for performance enhancing substances. Olympic champions who fail these tests can be stripped of their medals. For example, Lance Armstrong, a cycling star, had to return his medals when it was discovered that he was using steroids and growth hormones to perform better.

Controversies have also arisen concerning judges of figure-skating and diving competitions. Some judges may have awarded undeserved points to athletes from their own countries or agreed to trade points with other judges. It is the responsibility of the IOC to keep the Games honest and fair for everyone.

The Olympics continue to grow bigger and more popular each time they are held. Each Olympics includes the world's best athletes, a welcoming host country, and often some amazing surprises. Few Olympics pass without world records being broken. The modern Olympic Games encompass centuries of history and provide an opportunity for breathtaking individual and team efforts. Like the ancient Olympics, the modern Games continue to represent the ideal of sportsmanship and peaceful competition among nations.

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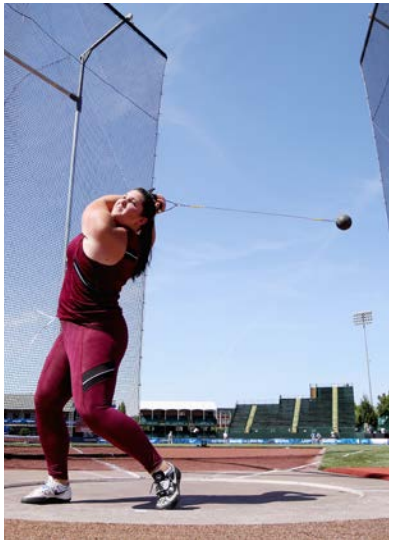
María Colón of Cuba throws to win the women's javelin final in 1980. Her throw of 68.4 meters set a world and Olympic record at the time.

To Be the Best in the World

Citius, Altius, Fortius. These three Latin words, meaning "Faster, Higher, Stronger," are the **motto** of the Olympic Games. All **athletes** who do well in any sport strive to outperform their **competitors**. But in Olympic competitions, winning means even more. Athletes who win Olympic gold medals are the best in all the world.

Did you ever wonder where the Olympic Games came from? The Olympics began in **ancient** Greece and have a long history of promoting peaceful competition. Even though it costs a lot, many cities around the world compete for the honor of holding the Games. Hosting the Summer Olympics or Winter Olympics makes a city part of the Games' rich tradition.

In order to compete at the Olympic level today, athletes must train harder than ever. To be contenders for medals, Olympic athletes must use the latest equipment and find the best trainers and sponsors. Athletes often begin their training at an early age as coaches help them develop their abilities. Athletes who want to compete in the Olympics devote a great deal of time to honing their skills. Many countries have special Olympic training centers to support athletes while they train.



Deanna Price, shown here competing in college, trains 7 days a week in preparation for the Olympic Games.

The pressure to win is so strong that some athletes cheat. They think they need even more of an edge than training can provide. In recent years, some Olympic athletes, often with the help of team trainers or doctors, have secretly used performance-enhancing drugs to win. The use of prohibited substances by these athletes has **tarnished** the image and reputation of the Olympics.

Today's Olympics

The modern Olympics have changed in many respects since they resumed in 1896. The Games have grown into a huge spectacle and have become enormously competitive. Training to be globally competitive is a physically and emotionally grueling full-time job. Most early gold-medal winners would not even **qualify** for a modern Olympics. Today's athletes routinely perform at levels that would have astonished those earlier competitors. Consider, for example, cross-country skiing. In 1924, the winner of the men's 50-kilometer (31 mi) cross-country ski race finished in 3 hours and 45 minutes. In 2022, the winner of the same event finished in just over 1 hour and 11 minutes.

Chloe Kim won gold medals in the Halfpipe event at the 2018 and 2022 Winter Games.

The Ancient Olympic Games

The ancient Greeks held regional athletic competitions throughout Greece for centuries, and many of the events were intended to honor important Greek deities. Each city-state in Greece had its own government and laws as well as its own army. City-states clashed with one another often—both in war and in athletic contests.

Zeus was the god of the sky in Greek mythology.

Ancient writings say that a central, organized festival of competition began in Olympia, Greece, in 776 BCE, although many historians believe it was probably much earlier. The ancient Greeks actually held four different athletic competitions, one every year, each honoring a different god. The Olympics was just one competition of the cycle, and now the Summer Games and Winter Games alternate every two years. The Olympics honored the king of the gods, Zeus, who lived on Mount Olympus. Because Zeus was the most important god of the Greek pantheon, the Olympics quickly became the most important athletic competition.

Map of ancient Greece around the time of the first Olympic Games

The earliest Olympics only included footraces, but the Games quickly expanded to include fourteen separate contests. Competitions in running, boxing, discus throwing, javelin throwing, wrestling, and jumping were held in a racetrack called a hippodrome. The ancient contests were much more freewheeling and violent than today's events. Wrestlers could kick, punch, pull hair, and break bones, while charioteers often crashed into each other with painful and bloody results, especially at turns in the racetrack. Serious injuries and even deaths were common.

Do You Know?

The Paralympic Games showcase competition among athletes with varying disabilities. The first Paralympics took place in Italy in 1960, featuring 400 athletes from 23 nations. The 2021 Paralympics brought together more than 4,400 athletes from 162 nations.

The Paralympic Games have happened alongside the Olympic Games ever since the Summer Games of 1988. For the Paralympic and Olympic Games to share the same cities and venues, the International Paralympic Committee partnered with the International Olympic Committee.

Guides in bright yellow vests help visually impaired runners stay in their lanes. The two are connected at the wrist by a piece of rope called a tether.

A global pandemic affected some of the Olympic Games. The 2020 Summer Games were postponed for a year. As the virus that caused COVID-19 continued to spread, the 2022 Winter Games went on as scheduled. Many athletes' chances at competing ended when they tested positive for COVID-19 during the Olympics.

1936 Olympics Disrupted

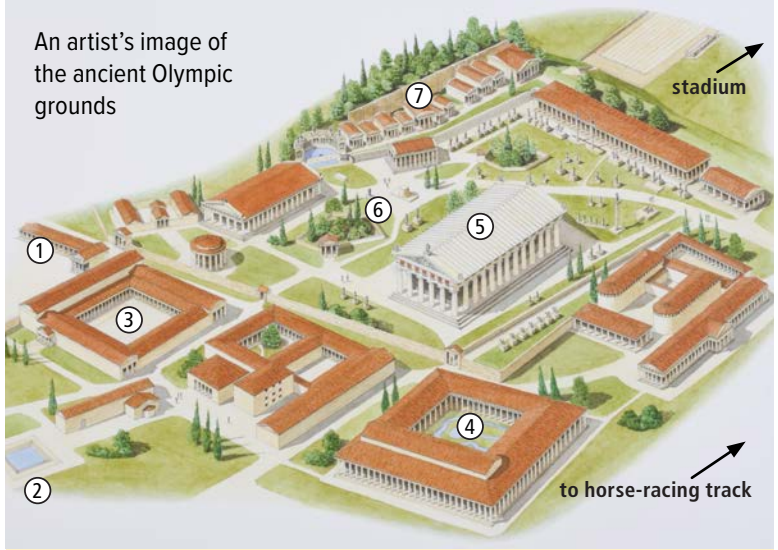
The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany were controversial worldwide. At the time, Adolf Hitler was the leader of Germany. His supporters were the Nazi Party, a racist group whose actions would later cause World War II. The Nazis used the 1936 Olympics to spread their racist ideas, but they were humiliated by the amazing performances of eighteen Black American Olympians, including runner Jesse Owens.

Jesse Owens (far right) set several world records and became famous as a college track star before competing in the Olympics.

Thousands of spectators traveled from all across Greece to see the Games. Athletes trained for months, or even years, and were showered with glory when they won. The only official prize was an olive branch from a sacred tree. But Olympic champions were often given money by their hometowns to celebrate their victories. Champions were also excused from paying taxes ever again.

The ancient Games provided important opportunities for trade and communication. People sold food and supplies, and provided lodging to visitors. Because great numbers of people came from all over Greece to see the Games, Olympia was a popular place to hold business meetings and to attend family reunions. The Olympic grounds had luxuries including a hotel, a swimming pool, a sauna, a marketplace, and a bank, in addition to the stadium, gymnasium, and horse-racing arena.

Many religious, civil, and social functions were part of the early Greek Olympics. A temple and an enormous gold-and-ivory statue of Zeus stood on the grounds. The ceremonies included a **procession**, or parade, of all the athletes and officials, followed by a sacrifice of as many as one hundred white oxen and a celebration feast.



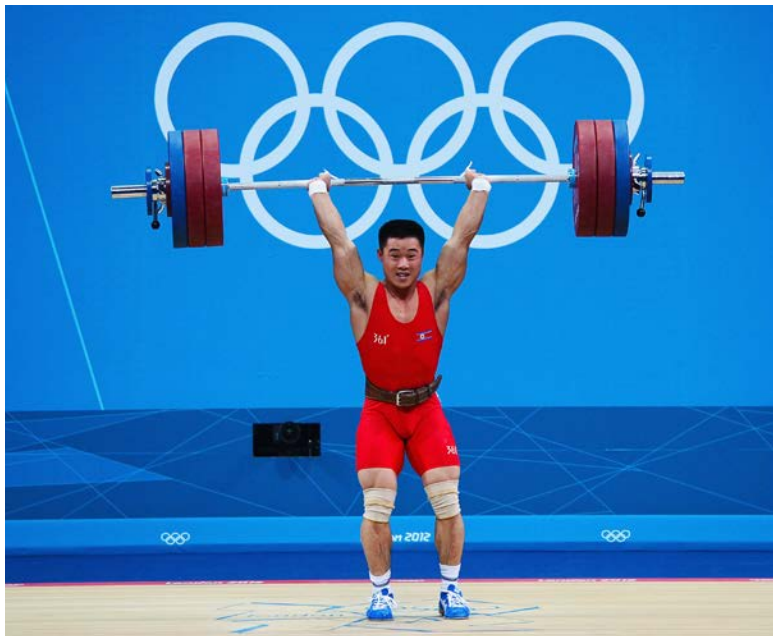
1 Gymnasium
2 Swimming pool
3 Boxing and wrestling areas
4 Athletes' living area
5 Temple of Zeus
6 Temple of Hera
7 Bank and market

But most importantly, the Games signaled a time of peace in Greece. During every Olympics, the city-states observed a strictly enforced **truce**. The Games allowed the city-states to compete with one another on peaceful terms. No one was allowed to carry a weapon into the city of Olympia during the Games. While the Games were being held, people could travel freely throughout Greece without fear of war among the city-states.

Olympics Trivia

The gigantic statue of Zeus inside the temple at Olympia was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Conflicts sometimes disrupt the Games. Three Olympics were canceled because of war. Other Olympics happened during times of great global controversy. Many athletes have protested against racial and gender discrimination during the games. At the 2020 Games, as Raven Saunders stood on the podium to receive her silver medal, she crossed her arms in an X. Saunders, who is a Black woman and belongs to several different communities that face discrimination, used the X as a symbol. She said the crossed lines represent the place where people who face different kinds of discrimination meet.



North Korea's Un Guk Kim sets a new weightlifting world record at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Officials began using the Olympic torch in 1928. In 1936, the tradition of running the torch relay began. To honor the origin of the Games, the torch is lit in Olympia using magnified sunlight. Runners carry the torch from Olympia to the new host city, passing the torch from one to the next as it moves through countries and across oceans. At the opening ceremonies, the final runner hands the relay torch to a special guest. Often a former Olympic champion, this guest uses the relay torch to light the Olympic flame, which burns for the duration of the Games.

Australian sprinter Cathy Freeman lights the Olympic cauldron for the opening ceremony of the 2000 Olympics. Freeman went on to become the first Aboriginal woman to win an individual gold medal.

Most Olympic athletes competed nude or wore only small shorts. The Greeks considered nudity to be socially acceptable and believed loose clothing could trip up an athlete.

Women athletes compete in the Heraean Games.

A strict civil law prohibited women from participating in, or even watching, the Games—on pain of death. However, the Greeks allowed girls to attend the Games as spectators. In 470 BCE, the Greeks created a separate women's athletic festival to honor the goddess Hera, the wife of Zeus.

The ancient Olympic Games were wildly popular for centuries. The Games continued even after the Roman Empire conquered the Greeks in 146 BCE. But around 393 CE, the Roman emperor Theodosius (thee-uh-DOH-shee-us), a Christian, banned all pagan festivals, including the Olympics. Olympia and the Olympic grounds were abandoned. After hundreds of years of neglect, war, earthquakes, and floods, the ancient Olympic grounds were buried and forgotten.

The Olympics Revived

Although the site of the Olympics was lost in time, legends about the Games continued to interest many historians. In the 1700s, **archaeologists** began searching for the Olympic grounds. By the 1890s, they had located and excavated most of the major buildings at Olympia.

A Frenchman named Pierre de Coubertin (duh coo-bair-TAHN) was fascinated by the ancient Olympics. He liked the idea of using sports instead of warfare to compete, and he thought that participating in sports helped a person to develop good **character**. Coubertin promoted the idea of reviving the Olympics as a worldwide sporting competition. People loved the idea, so Coubertin formed the International Olympic Committee, or IOC, in 1894.

Ruins of the stadium entrance built around 200 BCE in Olympia, Greece

Chamonix (sham-oh-NEE), France, hosted the first Olympic Winter Games in 1924. More than 250 athletes from 16 nations competed, including 11 women and girls. The first Winter Games had sixteen events, including speed skating, cross-country skiing, ski jumping, and ice hockey. The Winter Olympics grew to become very popular.

Norwegian skater Sonja Henie

One of the skaters at the 1924 Winter Games was Norway's twelve-year-old Sonja Henie (SOHN-yuh HEN-ee), who fell and finished last in her event. But falling and failing at age twelve did not deter Henie. She became one of the greatest competitors of the early Winter Olympics and one of the most famous athletes of all time. Henie won gold medals at the 1928, 1932, and 1936 Winter Games and went on to star in spectacular ice shows and in films.

The year 1928 was a milestone for women athletes. That year in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, women were officially allowed to compete in the Summer Games for the first time.

The Olympics Evolve

In 1906, at Games held in an off-schedule year, Olympic organizers revived the ancient tradition of an opening procession. Athletes paraded around the stadium behind the flags of their nations before the competition began. From then on, each Olympics has included a colorful and elaborate opening ceremony.

Coubertin also designed the Olympic flag, first flown in 1920, which is white with five colored rings. The interlocking rings on the flag represent the five settled continents of the world working together in peace and harmony. At least one color on the flag can be found on the flag of every nation.

Posters for the 1900 Summer Games held in Paris, France, and the 2004 Summer Games held in Athens, Greece

Coubertin had strong beliefs about how the Games should be organized. He hoped that the modern Olympics would be a time of peace, when nations would put aside politics and warfare, as the Greeks had done for the ancient Games.

Coubertin was adamant that all of the athletes should compete out of love for the sport, not out of a desire for prizes. For that reason, modern champions, like their ancient counterparts, receive only a **symbolic** prize rather than money or goods. The IOC also made a rule that only amateur athletes—those who did not make money from their sports—could compete in the Games.

Jim Thorpe Controversy

Jim Thorpe

Although the Olympics started as a competition for amateur athletes, over time, the IOC relaxed the rules that kept professional athletes out of the Games. Before this change, however, an American athlete and member of the Sac and Fox Nation named Jim Thorpe was stripped of his 1912 gold medals in the pentathlon and decathlon (a total of fifteen events) after the IOC learned of his brief time playing professional baseball. Some people believe racism played a role in this decision. Despite the fact that his medals were never reinstated, he is considered one of the greatest athletes of all time.

Greece, home of the ancient Olympics, hosted the first modern Olympics in 1896. Thousands of proud Greek citizens crowded into the rebuilt stadium to watch. Over two hundred athletes from fourteen countries registered for the Games. Like the ancient Olympics, the organizers did not allow women to compete in these Games. Athletes competed in track-and-field events (running, jumping, and throwing), tennis, weightlifting, cycling, wrestling, swimming, and gymnastics. The winner of each event in these new Games received an honorary olive branch, a certificate, and a silver medal.

Athletes run in the men's marathon during the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing, China.

The Olympic flag is lowered at the closing ceremony of the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing, China.

The next two Olympics, in Paris (1900) and in St. Louis (1904), were less successful. The host cities did not build Olympic grounds or "villages," so the athletes had poor housing and equipment. Many outdoor events were delayed or canceled because of bad weather. The Games were not promoted or advertised well, so people took little notice of them and attendance was low. The Games also had to compete for audiences with the world's fairs that took place in the Olympic host cities in 1900 and 1904. Organizers learned from their mistakes, however, and the Games slowly grew into the popular Olympic Games we know today.