



You Wouldn't Want to Be in the Ancient Greek Olympics

Teachers' Information Sheet by Nicky Milsted

It is the middle of the 5th century BC and the hero of *You Wouldn't Want to Be in the Ancient Greek Olympics!* is growing up in a small village near Athens in Greece. His father is a farmer, but he has significant ambitions for his son: he wants his son to represent his birthplace in the Olympic Games!

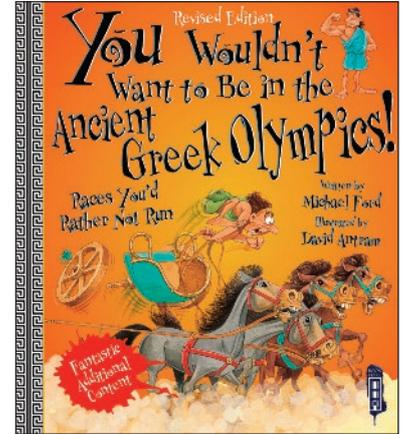
At this time, ancient Greece is made up of separate city-states, which are often at war with each other. The city-states are united by a common language and religion, and by athletic competitions such as the famous Olympic Games. Every four years, since 776 BC, athletes from the different city-states have competed against each other at the Olympic Games, trying to win honour and recognition for their birthplace.

The boy in *You Wouldn't Want to Be in the Ancient Greek Olympics!* begins his journey to the Olympics by attending school, where his education is centred around the history of Greece, writing, mathematics, music and physical education. He works hard, especially on his physical training, which will aid his Olympic ambitions. At the age of 18, he becomes an *ephebe*. This means that he is ready to become a Greek citizen. However, he must first spend two years in military service. The hard physical training in service further develops his physical prowess... it is time to prove himself in an athletic competition: the Olympic Games.

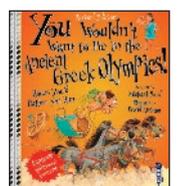
The Games take place at the sanctuary at Olympia, and the athletes must travel there from across Greece on foot as pilgrims. It's a long way! On arrival there are sacrifices and offerings to be made at the Temples. It is still ten months until the Games begin, so time for much more hard physical training and practice alongside the other athletes.

Finally, the summer arrives, and the athletes get to compete. The athlete in the book is taking part in the pentathlon, which consists of five events: running, long jump, discus, javelin and wrestling. The pressure is high, and the events are tough. And he must compete in the nude!

During the Olympic Games, disputes between the city-states are supposed to be suspended. This is, however, difficult to achieve. At the time of the book, the city-states of Sparta and Olympia are at war, which means that fights and brawls between competitors and supporters often break out. It is a dangerous and difficult event to be involved in, and even if you do win, after the Games finish it is back to normal life – which may mean the battlefield. It is clear that *You Wouldn't Want to Be in the Ancient Greek Olympics!*



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About the Olympic Games

The first Olympic Games took place in 776 BC at Olympia in Elis on the Peloponnese peninsula. They were held every four years, a period of time which became known as an *Olympiad*, for the next 1,170 years. Unlike the modern Olympic Games which are held in a different city every Olympiad, the Games in ancient Greece were always held at Olympia.

Male citizens from all of the Greek city-states were eligible to compete in the ancient Greek Olympics. Often the different city-states were at war with each other. However, for a month before the start of each Olympic Games, and during the Games themselves, a period of truce, called an *ekecheiria*, was observed. The truce enabled the athletes from the city-states to travel safely to Olympia.

The ancient Greek Olympics were more than a sporting spectacle; they were also a religious festival, honouring the king of the Greek gods, Zeus. From around 435 BC, the sanctuary at Olympia featured a huge 13m-tall statue of Zeus sitting on a throne, made of ivory and gold. It was created by the sculptor Phidias and was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Unfortunately the statue was lost during the 5th century AD and is now only known from contemporary ancient Greek writings and pictures on coins.

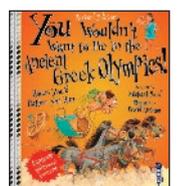
During the Games, alliances between the often warring city-states were arranged and announced, making them an important political event. Poets, sculptors, musicians and actors also congregated at the Olympic Games to show off their works of art, making Olympia during the Games an artistic hub too.

The Olympic Games only featured one event, the *stadion* race, from 776 to 724 BC. It was run on foot over a distance of one *stade*, which is about 190 metres. Our modern English word *stadium* comes from the name of this race. The winner of the stadion race in the first Olympic Games was local favourite, Coroebus of Elis. In 724 BC, a second running race called the *diaulos* was introduced. It was run over a distance of two stades. There were two further running events added to the Games over subsequent Olympiads: the *dolichos* which was a long race over several kilometres, and the *hoplitodromos* in which the runners had to wear helmets and carry shields! The hoplitodromos was named after the Hoplite citizen-soldiers of ancient Greece.

In later Olympiads further events were added to the Games, and it grew from a one-day event to a four-day festival. These events included javelin and discus throws, long jump, boxing, equestrian events, and wrestling – including the no-holds-barred *pankration* which was a vicious combination of boxing and wrestling featuring kicks and chokes (although eye gouging and biting were prohibited!). The *pentathlon* was introduced at 18th Olympiad in 708 BC. It was a combination of five events (the word comes from *pente*, meaning ‘five’, and *-athlon*, meaning ‘competition’). It included discus, javelin, long jump, running and wrestling. Only men were allowed to compete in the Games. However there was one event in which women could win because they were able to own the horses that took part in equestrian events, and in these events it was the owner of the horse, and not the rider or chariot driver, who took the prize!



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The ancient Greek Olympics took place every Olympiad for around 1,170 years.

They continued to be held and celebrated even after the Roman Republic took control of Greece in 146 BC following the Battle of Corinth, which was won by the Roman Republican army under the command of General Lucius Mummius Achaicus. Eventually the Games began to decline, and after the Olympiad in 393 AD, the Roman emperor Theodosius I banned them altogether because he thought that they were a pagan festival, and did not fit in with Christianity which was the official religion of Rome.

In 1896, some 1,500 years after the last ancient Greek Olympiad, the first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens. 241 athletes from 14 different nations competed in the first modern Olympics. There were 43 different events across the sports of road cycling, track cycling, athletics, fencing, gymnastics, shooting, swimming, tennis, weightlifting and Greco-Roman wrestling. The first Olympic champion in more than 1,500 years was American athlete James Connolly, who won the triple jump on 6th April 1896.

The most recent Olympic Games took place in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 2016. It was the first time that the Games had been held in South America. 11,237 athletes from 207 countries competed in 306 events across 39 different sporting disciplines. At the 2016 Games, American swimmer Michael Phelps became the most successful Olympian of all time. He first competed at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, and since then has won 23 Olympic titles and a total of 28 medals at five Olympic Games.

Activity 1: Greek school

The young boy in the book begins his journey to competition in the Olympic Games by attending school. He learns about Greek history – which means learning poetry and philosophy off by heart! He also learns writing, mathematics, and music, and physical education is as important as his other lessons.

Challenge your pupils to create a timetable for an ancient Greek school day. What subjects might be included and what might the Greek students learn?

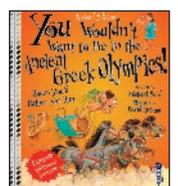
Can your pupils compare their ancient Greek school timetable to their own school day? What similarities and differences are there?

Why not try... making abacuses? Greek pupils use these – not calculators! – to help them solve maths problems. Provide your pupils with a range of materials – e.g. cardboard boxes, string, garden wire, lengths of dowel and wood, glue, air-drying clay, paint etc. – and challenge them to create an abacus. They could try researching on the internet for ideas and inspiration. Before they begin making their abacus, they should create several different plans and sketches. Throughout the ‘build’ of their abacus, encourage your pupils to continually evaluate their progress making changes to their design as necessary. When their prototype abacus is complete, ask them to either:

- produce a set of instructions that would enable others to make their own abacuses of the same type; or
- evaluate their design and describe how they overcame any challenges that they faced



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Activity 2: Greek gods and goddesses

Before the Olympic Games began, competitors made offerings and sacrifices to the Greek gods. The Games were a religious festival as well as an athletic competition, and were sacred to the king of the Greek gods, Zeus.

The Greeks had many gods and goddesses including Aphrodite, Apollo and Ares, Hermes, Hera and Hestia. There were gods or goddesses of music, travel, wisdom, trade, love, wine, medicine, war, the sea, hunting, farming, and death – and many more ideas, places, people and things.

Challenge your pupils to pick an ancient Greek god or goddess and find out more about them. You could assign a different god or goddess to each pupil, and ask them to research the same elements; for example, their name, what they were god or goddess of, their family members (all Greek gods and goddesses were related!), and a story about them. Can they retell a story about their god or goddess in their own words?

Extension activity: using the activity sheet, challenge your pupils to create their own god or goddess. They should choose a name for their god/goddess, draw and describe them, and explain what they are god/goddess of.

Why not try... playing Greek god and goddess bingo?! Using the information collected by your pupils in their research, create a list of gods and goddesses and what they were patron of. Make sure that your list includes at least 20 different Greek gods and goddesses. Display this list prominently in the classroom (for example on the class whiteboard). Create two sets of cards – one set which lists the gods' and goddesses' names (one per card), and one set that has what they were patron of (again one per card).

You can play the game two ways: using the grid on the activity sheet, ask your pupils to write in the boxes either the names of nine of the gods/goddesses, or nine of the subjects that the gods/goddesses were patron of, of their own choice, taken from your class list.

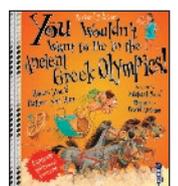
If you are playing with the gods/goddesses' names in the grids, shuffle the cards with the subjects that they were patron of. Draw one card at a time, telling the pupils what is on the card. If they have the corresponding god/goddess, they should cross it out on their grid. The winner is the first pupil to cross out all of the gods/goddesses in their grid.

If you are playing with the subjects that the gods/goddesses' were patrons of in the grids, you will need to use the god/goddess cards.

Once your pupils are confident with which gods/goddesses were patrons of which subjects, you could try playing the game without the list visible.



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Activity 3: Greek temple design

The ancient Greeks built extravagant temples to their gods and goddesses. Challenge your pupils to design a Greek temple. It could be for a 'real' Greek god or goddess, or for their own god/goddess that they created in **Activity 2**.

Extension activity: using squared paper, can your pupils create a plan drawing of their temple layout? A plan drawing is one that shows a bird's-eye view. More able pupils could be encouraged to draw their plans to scale. What scale is appropriate to use?

Activity 4: Pentathlon

Pentathlon is the name given to an athletic competition that is made up of five different events. The word comes from combining two Greek words: *pente* (meaning 'five') and *-athlon* (meaning 'competition').

The ancient Greek pentathlon that took place in the Olympic Games included javelin, discus, long jump, running, and wrestling.

Split your class into five groups. Challenge each group to devise an event to include in a class pentathlon. You could give each group different equipment to use in their event; for example, bean bags, hoops, balls, relay batons etc. You could make your pentathlon as sporting – or silly – as you wish! However, it is important that each event in the pentathlon can be measured, judged or timed in some way if you are going to have your pupils competing against each other.

Each group should demonstrate their event to the rest of the class. Allow all of your pupils to try each of the different events in your class pentathlon! Who is the winner?!

Why not try... analysing the times, distances or scores achieved by your pupils in the pentathlon events? Pupils could create graphs or diagrams that show the results, or could determine average scores, times and distances, for example.

Activity 5: Sports report

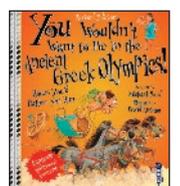
Provide your class with a range of different media coverage of a sporting event – you could choose to look at reports from the latest Olympic Games, for example. What elements are included in sports reports? As a whole class, brainstorm some of the important information to include, for example: details of the event itself such as where it took place; scores/times/distances/results; team line-ups; records that might have been broken; particularly good (or bad!) performances by individuals; and quotes from competitors or managers.

After analysing the different media reports, challenge your pupils to produce their own report about a sporting event. You could even challenge them to report on your class pentathlon!

They could choose to produce a newspaper article, a story for a sport website, a radio report, or even a short TV report if you have the appropriate technology in your school.



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Activity 6: Celebrating victory

The farmer's son in *You Wouldn't Want to Be in the Ancient Greek Olympics!* returns to his village outside Athens as a minor celebrity. He won the pentathlon! The victors in the ancient Greek Olympic Games did not win financial rewards for their exploits, however. The prizes were simple; a wreath of laurel leaves and a decorated jar of olive oil. Some ancient Greek Olympians did also have their successes recorded in artistic works. Occasionally they were immortalised in statues, or had poems written about their wins. The famous Greek poet, Pindar (c. 522 – c. 443 BC), wrote a number of odes to Olympic victors.

Challenge your pupils to write a poem about an ancient Greek Olympic victory.

Extension activity: Olympic winners were presented with a decorated jar of olive oil. Your pupils can design their own ancient Greek jars on the activity sheet. Typical ancient Greek pottery has black silhouetted figures on a red background, with borders of repeated geometric patterns.

Why not try... getting your pupils to recreate their designs using black marker pens on terracotta flower pots?

Activity 7: Top Olympians

There are five top ancient Greek Olympians described in the back of *You Wouldn't Want to Be in the Ancient Greek Olympics!*

- Coroebus of Elis won the only event in the first Olympic Games in 776 BC
- Milo of Croton was a famous wrestler who competed in the 6th century BC
- Polydamas of Skotoussa fought in the pankration, a mix of boxing and wrestling
- Theagenes of Thassos won the boxing event in 480 BC
- Leonidas of Rhodes ran in four Olympic Games from 164 BC to 152 BC

Can you pupils choose one of these Olympians and find out more about them and their stories? Can they research the events that they took part in at the ancient Greek Olympics? Encourage them to present their findings on a poster or in a PowerPoint presentation. They could also complete the 'Ancient Olympian factfile' template on the activity sheet.

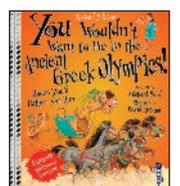
Extension activity: challenge your pupils to pick a modern Olympian or Paralympian and produce a factfile about them using the template on the activity sheet. Create a class display of your ancient and modern Olympian factfiles and posters.

Activity 8: Actors' masks

The Olympic Games were a religious and artistic festival that encompassed much more than the sporting events. There were often plays put on during the Olympics, and the actors would wear masks to show how their characters felt, and to represent different characters. Swapping between the masks would enable the actors to play several different roles – and would enable male actors to play female roles.



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Greek actors' masks had exaggerated expressions, to clearly show different feelings such as shock, anger and happiness. Challenge your pupils to draw different facial expressions on the mask template activity sheet. Can they identify the expressions on their classmates' mask designs?

Why not try... making a Greek actor's mask? A simple mask can be made with an oval of cardboard, with eye holes cut out, and which is worn using a piece of string around the back of the head. For a more sculpted mask, begin by blowing up a balloon to the same size as the mask wearer's face. Cover half the balloon in papier-mâché and allow it to dry long enough to become completely hardened. Use this as the base for the mask, again cutting out eye holes and decorating it with an exaggerated expression.

Pupils' pack contents

- 'Greek school timetable' activity sheet
- 'My Greek god/goddess' activity sheet
- 'Greek god and goddess bingo' activity sheet
- 'My Greek jar design' activity sheet
- 'Ancient Olympian factfile' activity sheet
- 'Modern Olympian/Paralympian factfile' activity sheet
- 'Greek masks' activity sheet
- Blank sheet with the border top and bottom for your pupils' own artwork and writing



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