

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Ancient Greeks Athletics



The Ancient Greeks considered physical training to be an important aspect of life, as frequent wars demanded that men were fighting fit. However, a healthy body was not only a necessity but was regarded as a thing of beauty and worthy of veneration. Physical fitness and beauty were inseparably linked to the arts and religious worship. The ancient Greeks enjoyed competition and believed a competitive nature to be an essential component of a good warrior.

The competitive, spiritual and aesthetic aspects of life were combined in large athletic festivals or games which were dedicated to a particular god, the oldest and most important being the Olympic games, dedicated to Zeus. Religious ceremony, including sacrifices and dedications of gifts, music, drama and athletic events were integral components of any games.

Herakles Wrestling with Antaeus
Case 10, Object 17, Museum number GR 4.1954

Training

As most athletic events improved fighting skills such as strength and agility, physical training was included in a boy's education from a young age in order to prepare him for his role as a citizen and soldier. Wealthier families paid an instructor called a *paidotribe* to train their sons in wrestling, boxing and the long jump whilst discus, javelin throwing and running were taught at a large athletics ground known as a *gymnasium*.



Training and competition took place in the open air; because of the heat, the impossibility of exercising in the long draped clothing fashionable at that time and the Greeks' veneration of the body, the athletes wore no clothes. To protect their skin, the athletes covered themselves in olive oil. At the end of the day, a bent metal tool called a *strigil* was used to scrape off this oil along with the mingled sweat and dust.

Strigil
Case 4, Object 29, Museum number Gr.B.II

Events

There were many local festivities which included athletic events. The four most prestigious were the Olympic games, held at the base of Mount Olympia in honour of Zeus, the Pythian games held at Delphi in honour of Apollo, the Isthmian games held at Corinth in honour of Poseidon and the games at Nemea which, again, were in honour of Zeus. Collectively, these four events were known as the Panhellenic games. They took place on a four year rotation and attracted competitors from all the city states.

Events included running (sometimes in armour), long jump (performed from a stationary position, the impetus provided by swinging hand held weights), discus and javelin throwing, wrestling, boxing and *pankration* (a rough type of wrestling with virtually no rules). There were also chariot races, but the expense of maintaining a team of horses excluded all but the wealthiest from participating in this event.



The winners of each event received a plain wreath - the honour of winning was considered sufficient reward. However, as personal honour was closely linked to civic pride, athletic success could lead to material reward. Poor but talented athletes who had not had the advantages of an early athletic training, were able to compete due to patronage from wealthier citizens. Eventually, professional athletes came to play a significant part in the games.

Stemless cup: a young man running

Case 4, Object ??, Museum number GR.48.1864

The young man wears greaves and carries a shield and helmet. He may be a "hoplitodromos", a participant in a race that was run wearing or carrying full armour.