

GAMES FOR

By THOMAS F. SCANLON

Pericles' statement, "Fame will be great...for the woman whose reputation for excellence or blame is least known among males," reflects a typical attitude toward women's activities in ancient Greek literature. Yet tantalizing fragments of evidence suggest that some Greek girls did engage in athletic competitions, mostly at religious festivals marking their progress toward womanhood.

According to mythology the Olympics were founded by King Pelops after he defeated Oinomaos, king of Pisa, in a chariot race. For his victory Pelops won the princess Hippodameia as his wife. In thanksgiving he founded the games to honor Zeus, while Hippodameia established the Heraia, a festival honoring Hera, Zeus' wife. Most of what we know about the Heraia is from a description by the second-century A.D. author Pausanias, who noted that the Heraia had only one event, a footrace for maidens. This was run in the same stadium as the men's races, but with a course shorter by one-sixth, corresponding to the average shorter stride of women. Their festival, like the men's, took place every four years and may well have been open to girls from all Greek states. The Heraia was probably held during the Olympic year, just prior to the men's games, since the participants probably would have traveled to the sanctuary with the males in their families.

There were three footraces, one for each of three age divisions unspecified in the ancient sources, but perhaps ranging from six to 18. Winners, like victors in the men's games, received an olive wreath crown and a share of the one ox slaughtered for the patron deity on behalf of all the participants. Heraia victors attached painted portraits of themselves to Hera's temple in the Olympic sanctuary. The paintings are now gone, but the niches into which the votives were attached on the temple columns remain.

Unlike men, who competed nude, girls wore a short dress called an "off-the-shoulder chiton," which left the right shoulder and breast bare. This style, not in imitation of Amazon warrior women as some have speculated, was an adaptation of a typical light garment worn by men in hot weather or while performing hard labor. Thus the girls dressed like men, a ritual custom often followed in ceremonies of initiation to adulthood, an inversion of gender roles, perhaps to experience the status of the "other" before assuming one's own role.

Adult women were prohibited from attending the



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Bronze statuette of a girl runner, ca. 560 B.C., with off-the-shoulder chiton, the hot-weather costume of Greek men. Racing may have been a rite of passage for young girls.

men's Olympics on penalty of death. The laws of Elis, the city that hosted the games, dictated that any woman caught entering the Olympic assembly on the forbidden days or even crossing the river that borders the site was to be hurled to her death from the high cliffs of Mount Tropaion opposite the stadium. There is no evidence that such executions were ever carried out. Kallipateira, who attended disguised as a trainer and leapt into the stadium to congratulate her victorious son, went unpunished out of respect for her illustrious family. But to prevent such a violation from happening in the future, trainers thereafter had to enter the stadium naked. Yet maidens could attend the men's games, probably to familiarize them with the world of men. The only married woman permitted to watch the Olympics was the priestess of Demeter, whose privilege probably derived from the location of an ancient altar and sanctuary of that goddess in the middle of the stadium seating area.

G I R L S

In Sparta girls were favored with an exceptional educational system that included training in most of the same athletic events as boys. The aim was eugenic: healthy women produced healthy citizen-warriors. The contests were restricted to unmarried girls, who competed either nude or wearing only skimpy dresses. Boys were admitted as spectators, a practice intended to encourage marriage and procreation. Some Spartan maidens ran a special race for Dionysos, god of adult females, and this athletic ritual may also have celebrated their communal rite of passage.

At the sanctuaries of Brauron and Mounychion in Attica, girls celebrated the Arkteia or "Bear Festival," a quadrennial mystery ritual in honor of Artemis, goddess of wild animals and maidens. Legend says that this was a prenuptial festival required of all girls of Attica. A series of vases found at the Arkteia sanctuaries depicts girls, both nude and in short chitons, apparently performing various ritual activities, including dancing and running. The scenes of running appear to show girls chasing one another in a contest symbolic of their change of status from "wild" to "tame."

Only after the classical period did Greek girls come to compete in men's athletic festivals. References to this are few and late, suggesting exceptional social circumstances and perhaps the pressure of the Roman political system, which allowed the daughters of the wealthy to participate in men's festivals. Several noble girls are recorded as victors in the chariot race at Olympia and elsewhere, but they were owners, not drivers. A first-century A.D. inscription found at Delphi records young women who personally competed in chariot races or footraces at Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea, but not the Olympics. Yet these girls probably competed only against other girls, as in a race for daughters of magistrates at the Sebasta festival in Naples during the imperial period and the races for women instituted by Domitian at the Capitoline Games in Rome in A.D. 86. ■

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Questions to answer

1. What does Pericles' statement tell you about how women were regarded in Ancient Greece?
2. Who founded the Olympic Games? What was the purpose for founding the games?
3. What name was given to the "games for girls"? Who founded the event and what was it called?
4. What was the only event held in the girl's games?
5. What was the age range of the female participants?
6. What prizes were awarded to the victors?
7. Describe the "athletic gear" worn by the female competitors.
8. What was the penalty for adult women who attended the games and how was it carried out?
9. What was implemented to prevent female trainers from attending the male games?
10. Why did Spartan girls train for male athletic competitions?
11. Describe the *Arkteia*.
12. When did women begin to compete in the men's games and under what circumstances?