

# Comparison of Early Greek Olympic Games To Festivals on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula

by Dan Youra, northwest travel writer

*Dan Youra compares the first Olympic Games in ancient Greek culture with the Olympic legacy in the United States, where the Olympic Mountains in Washington State cast a spell across Olympic National Park and the culture of the Olympic Peninsula. Each culture claims its own Mount Olympus with an epithet of "Home of the Gods", a pilgrimage to sacred Olympia and a treasure trove of Olympic appellations. Just as Greek cities welcomed pilgrims who trekked to Olympic festivals 2,800 years ago, so are modern day travelers invited in 2008 to visit the Pacific Northwest's Olympian geography and experience festivals celebrated in a spirit reminiscent of the original Olympic Games.*

## INTRODUCTION

- I - Olympic Culture and Home of the Gods
- II - Five Defining Characteristics of Olympic Festivals
- III - Three Attributes of Success for Olympic Festivals

## Ancient Greek Olympic Games

### Mt. Olympus "Home of the Gods"

In the beginning the Greek gods created the Olympic Games. References to Olympic Festivals are richly recounted among the myths of Zeus, Apollo and Poseidon. Heracles, the legendary Graeco-Roman hero (Roman: *Hercules*) known for his super human strength, is credited with founding the Olympic Games at idyllic Olympia in honor of his father Zeus.

Zeus descended from Mt. Olympus "Home of the Gods" and saw that the games were good. He said, "Let the games begin". And, the games did begin around 776 B.C. and continued at four-year intervals as part of Olympian Festivals in four sacred locations: Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia and Nemea.

Pilgrims trekked great distances over land and sea to participate in festivals at the sites dedicated to Zeus, Apollo and Poseidon. Heracles ordained the olive branch as the crown and sole reward for the victor of the games.

The lines between myth and fact are not easy to define. Some accounts indicate that the games originated in an annual foot race, run by girls, for the privilege of becoming the priestess of the Moon-goddess Hera. When Zeus married Hera – when, that is, a new form of sacred kingship had been introduced into Greece, a second foot race was run by young men for the privilege of becoming the priestess's consort. Thereafter, the annual races were run every four years.

The games lasted 1200 years, ending in 394 C.E., when they were abolished by the Roman emperor and the Olympic site was destroyed by the Gothic invasion. Two earthquakes and a flood obliterated Olympia. The ruins lay hidden for 14 centuries, until rediscovered by archaeologists in 1829. The modern Olympic Games reignited the torch to open the 1896 games in Athens, Greece. Twenty-four Olympic Games were hosted since its rebirth 112 years ago. China hosts the 25th Olympiad in 2008.

## Washington's Olympic Peninsula

### Mt. Olympus "Home of the Gods"

The Olympic spark was first ignited in the new world in 1788, just 12 years after the colonial declaration of independence. While sailing off the coast of what is now Washington State, the British sea captain, John Meares, christened the majestic, glacier-covered peaks with this inspired proclamation:

*"If that be not the home where dwell the gods, it is certainly beautiful enough to be, and I therefore call it Mount Olympus".*

Since its English christening, the northwest peninsula has been recognized as an idyllic sanctuary worthy of a name inspired by the divine mythologies of ancient Greece.

What Captain Meares did not realize when he nominated the white-topped peaks as "Home of the Gods" was that the native peoples, who inhabited the nearby coasts, had long revered the spirit powers of the same majestic mountains, which they called *Sun-a-do*, protector of the tribes.

One of the most powerful spirits for the native peoples was Thunderbird, whom they knew to live in the "Lair of Thunderbird" on Blue Glacier high atop Mt. Olympus. Their legends sing the praises of the winged god who swooped down from his lair to pluck a giant whale from the ocean and deliver it to a starving tribe on the coast.

Three short years after Captain Meares proclaimed the divine residency of the mountains, British explorer, Captain Vancouver, entered a notation in his ship's log, identifying the land around Mt. Olympus as "Olympic Peninsula".

In the 1840's the forested land and snow-capped mountains were officially recognized by the young United States government as the *Olympic Peninsula*. In succeeding years individual peaks of the Mt. Olympus massif were named by mountaineers for Greek, Roman, Germanic and Norse gods.

The names of Greek gods gracing the peaks of Mt. Olympus are Athena, Athena's owl, Aphrodite, Apollo, Aries, Circe, Hermes, Icarus, Pan and Poseidon. The Roman god of merchants, Mercury, is immortalized on his own peak.

Germanic and Norse gods, whose name badges are pinned on the Olympic Mountain peaks, are Baldur, Bragi, Freki, Frigga, Geri, Hugin, Loki, Munin, Steipner, Thor, Mimir, Valhallas, Valkyrie, Vidar, Vili and Woden.

## **Olympic Festivals in Ancient Greece and Olympic Peninsula**

The original Greek Olympic Festivals which grew into the Olympic Games were characterized by five defining elements. Variations of these five characteristics are reflected in the culture of the Olympic experience on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula located at the most northwest corner of the contiguous United States.

1. Tribute to the Gods and Nature
2. Sacred Places
3. Pilgrimage
4. Festivals
5. Athletic Games

### **1. Tribute to the Gods and Nature**

First and foremost the original Greek Olympic Festivals of the 8th century B.C. were tributes to the gods. Pilgrims trekked to sacred sanctuaries to share a religious experience, witness cultural and athletic events, and glow in the pride in being part of a shared community.

In the early festivals the athletic events were only one small part of the Olympian gatherings, which were richly infused with music, singing and dancing, theater and even poetry reading.

The classical Grecian ideal of health, summarized in Juvenal's 2nd century plea for a "sound mind in a healthy body" (*L. mens sana in corpore sano*), was an integral part of the earliest Olympic festivals. They were set up to allow attendees and participants to relax and enjoy the five-day festivities. People came to the festivals to amuse themselves and share the festal joys, not to compete for medals.

The natural beauty of the U.S. Olympic Peninsula is the magnet that draws visitors to search out its wild, remote, majestic treasures. As a peninsula, washed on three sides by salt water, its *Call of the Wild* is heard in the heart's of people who trek from around the world to experience its spirit.

In the Pacific Northwest visitors sail across Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca to land on the pristine shores of Washington State's Olympic Peninsula, where they discover gems of nature that they thought only existed on the National Geographic channel. The peninsula is anchored by Olympic National Park, one of the most richly endowed parks in the United States national park system, with natural wonders from divinely named mountains to the Hoh, Queets and Quinault Rain Forests, the only three temperate rain forests in the United States. Olympic Park is a World Heritage Site with world record trees, some easily accessible to curious visitors. Wilderness forests deep in the park beckon to modern day pilgrims seeking similar sacred encounters as sought by Greek sojourners almost three millennia ago.

## **2. Sacred Places for Olympic Festivals**

### **Greek Sacred Festival Sites**

Greece's Olympic festivals took place on a four-year schedule at the four sacred sanctuaries, each dedicated to a Greek god: Olympia and Nemea dedicated to Zeus; Delphi to Apollo; and, Isthmia to Poseidon. In most cases arduous journeys were required to sail the winds and currents to distant shores, followed by heart pumping hikes over mountains, across rivers, to arrive at the sometimes remote sanctuaries awaiting pilgrims and participants. In the earliest games everyone was a participant, not just a spectator.

#### **Olympia**

It's the water. Year round rivers made the valley of Olympia attractive and capable of hosting the celebrants attending the festival and games. On the site were constructed temples, gymnasia, markets and viewing areas.

#### **Delphi**

The festivals at the sanctuary of Delphi, dedicated to Apollo and not Zeus, were ranked second to those at Olympia based on reputation. Delphi, noted for its oracle, was believed to be in the center of the inhabited world and people called it the naval of the earth. More easily accessible by sea it was in the very center of Greece.

#### **Isthmia**

The festivals at Isthmia, dedicated to Poseidon, were staged in valleys that do not have as fertile soil, easy access to water and the more prestigious temples so popular at Olympia and Delphi. Isthmia was prized for its strategic importance.

#### **Nemea**

The site at Nemea, dedicated to Zeus, had neither the charm of Olympia, nor the grandeur of Delphi, nor the strategic importance of Isthmia. Excavations on the site have revealed a glimpse to its past – a stadium, sanctuary, water channels, spas, public area, temple to Zeus, and what seems to have been a hostelry where pilgrims stayed.

### **Olympic Peninsula Festival Sites**

The geography of the Olympic Peninsula is dominated by the massive and other worldly majesty of Olympic National Park. The park's 1442 square miles of Olympic Mountains were crowned with national park status in 1938. From the glacier-topped Mount Olympus to the giant firs and cedars of Olympic National Forest the park is home to hundreds of species of wildlife, including 300 species of birds. Around the park Native American tribes and small towns survive, most with a heritage rich in fishing and logging.

The scenic drive around the Olympic Peninsula is commonly referred to as the "Olympic Loop". After the completion of Highway 101 in 1932, visitors were invited to *Tour The Olympic Loop*. In 1933 the Olympic Peninsula Resort and Hotel Association banded together resort owners to promote travel and offer their hospitality to arriving guests. The famous Highway 101, which is a ribbon along the west coast of the contiguous United States, actually begins in Olympia, Washington, makes a loop around the east, north and west perimeter of Olympic National Park, before unwinding on its trip through Oregon and California. Washington's Olympic Loop is connected across the south of the Olympic Peninsula by State Route 8.

Four distinct regions encircle Olympic National Park and define the geography and communities that inhabit its foothills and shores.

**Hood Canal** on the eastern flank of the Olympic Peninsula is a 90-mile long fiord connecting Kitsap Peninsula to Olympic Peninsula. At Port Gamble near its north entrance the Hood Canal Bridge, at one mile in length, the world's longest floating bridge over salt water, welcomes travelers who ferried across Puget Sound from Seattle or who spanned the Tacoma Narrows Bridge. Squamish and Hoodspout on south Hood Canal welcome visitors along Highway 101. Friendly emerald towns open their arms, beaches and river roads winding up to the high country campgrounds and lakes of Olympic Park.

**Strait of Juan de Fuca** along the north coast of the peninsula washes the communities in the heart of the hills, where travelers drive up to Hurricane Ridge, the most easily accessible route to view Mt. Olympus and the expansive panorama of Olympic Mountain peaks at the center of it all. A nearby port is an international entry point for visitors traveling by ferry from Canada.

**Pacific Beaches** frame the west end's wild side of the peninsula. Tatoosh Island at the entrance to the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Cape Flattery, most northwest point of the lower-48 states, protect Neah Bay, home of the Native American Makah tribe, hosts of the annual Makah Days festival August 23-25, one of the largest gatherings of native peoples in the northwest. Surfers search out the waves on First Beach in La Push to test their board skills. The beach is a popular shrine for readers of the *Twilight* book series with stories set on the Olympic Coast. The visitor center in the Hoh Rain Forest is a popular staging area for hikers heading up the Hoh River and for climbing teams leaving to ascend Mt. Olympus.

**Olympic Forests** stretch across the south flank of the Olympic Peninsula from Puget Sound's fiords around Olympia and Shelton to the green hills of Aberdeen and Hoquiam. The two cities on the shores of Grays Harbor are welcome points to travelers arriving up Highway 101 and jumping off points for visitors heading for fishing fleet festivals in Westport, seafood festivals in Ocean Shores and kite flying in coastal towns.

### 3. Pilgrims and Travelers

The devotees who made the pilgrimage to Greek festivals traveled on foot and by sea around the Peloponnesian peninsula and across mountain ranges to arrive at the sacred destinations. In the pre-classic period of the earliest Greek Olympics the attendees were best described as "pilgrims", characterized by people making arduous trips for religious or spiritual purposes. Pilgrims had courage and deep faith to leave family and town in order to trek to a destination that was often very far from home.

To reach Olympia a pilgrim could brave a boat ride on the wind swept seas combined with a 60 or 100 mile trek over hills and across streams. Idyllic Olympia was characterized as a place of relaxation and pleasure and not of struggles in which the aim was to destroy the opponents. Faithful fans arrived to participate in the festival celebrations and witness their sacred Olympian Games.

Visitors who arrive on Washington State's Olympic shores are described more as tourists or travelers. Some might be called pilgrims, as they are on a soulful journey in search of a spiritual encounter with nature. Favorable summer weather welcomes mountain climbers, hikers and sightseers, driving along ocean beaches, through magical rain forests and up windy roads for spectacular views, which for some visitors, may be a once in a lifetime event.

Many visitors are activity seekers, such as those who brave the white rapids of fast moving rivers and those who paddle a surf board into cold, ocean waters in search of the perfect wave. But most are looking for rest and relaxation, time away from the madding crowd, for contemplation, beachcombing and the simple enjoyment of breathing fresh air, saltwater scents, and taking in the sounds of squaking seagulls and serenading loons.

### 4. Olympic Festivals & Games

The ancient Greek games were all about enriching the mind and training the body. Alongside the physical games were games which were called *musical* and which encouraged the practice of the Muse's arts – not only music but also poetry and the drama. Participants played the flute and cithara. They held competitions in music, literature, tragedy, comedy and poetry to the pleasure of the actors and the spectators.

People gathered in a desire for peace and conviviality. In early Greek games the aim was not the victory of one team over another, but the manifestation of Greek culture and the demonstration of its world view through the perpetuation of art, movement and social interaction.

This was radically different from the values of the modern Olympic Games, which glorify the super human powers of the individual and demand victory at all cost, with success measured by the number of medals won, the amount of sponsorship money banked and the size of the global viewing audience.

In the United States festivals and community events held in the halo of Olympic National Park are more reflective of the divinely inspired Olympic festivals begun three thousand years ago. Washington State's Olympic festivals are held at regular intervals in the cities and towns protected by the parthenon of gods atop nearby Mt. Olympus. Festivals are celebrated during the summer, when the days are longer, the weather is warmer and more visitors are enjoying vacations in the pretty ports strung like pearls around Olympic Park between the mountains and the saltwater bays.

Chamber music bows from a barn near Center on summer weekend afternoons at the Olympic Music Festival. Fiddle tunes and jazz jump from festivals in a fort near a Victorian port. Festivals on ocean shores and sandy straits serenade the sunsets. Gallery walks, fairs, art shows and concerts tack their welcome signs on blog posts and light posts. There are parades for marchers, marathons for runners, contests for car collectors and prizes for builders of sand castles and wooden boats.

## 5. Olympic Games and Recreation

Athletic events that took place during the festivals in the early days of the Greek festivals consisted mainly of running races and tests of physical strength and endurance. The winner of the track and field events was judged also on the skills demonstrated in the arts of music, drama and poetry. The well rounded winner, adept at speed, elocution and playing the flute was crowned with the single olive wreath for the Olympic champion.

Pilgrims to Washington's venues in Olympic Park are searching for a personal experience in the Ellysian forests that cover the Olympic Peninsula. The ultimate triumph is a climb to the glacier-covered summit of Mt. Olympus to touch the gods. Most are content to hike the temple like trails of Olympic Park and Olympic Forest. Enthusiasts arrive from near and far to fish for salmon at native villages in La Push and Neah Bay. They fish the Hoh, Queets and Quinault rivers, floating beneath the verdant canopies of the rare Olympic rain forests to catch steelhead and salmon.

## Success of Ancient and Modern Olympic Festivals

The original games were collective activities, not popular adulation of individual accomplishment. They had distinct ethical and civic objectives. Festivals and games were promoted by host cities. Invitations were sent out by local ambassadors. Guests who attended were treated with extra hospitality. The Games came together under three Grecian customs: 1. organization of great festivals, 2. promotions by sacred ambassadors and 3. warm welcomes by Olympic city hosts.

### Great Festivals (Gr. *panegyris*)

*Panegyris* is the Greek expression for the congregation of many people who come together on the occasion of a solemn festival and particularly when the Games are held. Great festivals were encouraged in order to foster the kinship that exists among Greeks from all regions of the country and to make people feel more kindly towards each other. What mattered to ancient commentators on the games from Aristotle and Plato in Greece to Pliny in Rome was the propagation of a sense of identity that could be shared by all pilgrims and participants in the festivals.

### Sacred Ambassadors (Gr. *theoroi*)

*Theoroi* were the Greek ambassadors who journeyed out from host cities to circulate through other regions to invite people to come to the festivals and games. The job of the *theoroi* was both to advertise the Games and to be present at them.

### **Welcoming Hosts** (Gr. *proxenis*)

*Porxenis* were the citizens of a Greek city who were delegated by another Greek city to look after the interests of its people when they arrived in their town. They were more generally the welcoming hosts of Olympic towns who looked after the needs of visitors to ensure that their stay during the festivals was a joyful experience.

Inhabitants of Washington State's Olympic Peninsula live in small communities, close to nature and share a sense of stewardship for the bounties of Olympic Park and Olympic Mountains that are integrally woven into their daily lives. In reenactments of the community efforts of nearly three millenia ago in the sacred valleys of Greece, modern day trustees of the ancient Olympic traditions manifest the same values in promoting today's festivals.

### **Festivals and Events**

Regional festivals, cultural events and music concerts are organized in the cities and towns of the Olympic Peninsula, especially during the summer months, when the weather is warmer and sunnier, and when more people have vacations and are able to visit. Events are put on by private and public groups. Summer concerts in a barn, musical events at a fort and musical groups playing on a strait are held over the days of the summer season.

### **Publicity and Promotion Agents**

Festivals and recreational opportunities are promoted by local ambassadors in the form of non profit associations, who advertise the events and distribute guidebooks and maps in multi media formats, some produced with government supported tax money and some supported by businesses with advertising money. Local chambers of commerce help promote summer festivals. Peninsula-wide promotions of events are lead by groups such as the **Olympic Peninsula Travel Association**, actively inviting visitors to the Olympic Peninsula since 1933.

### **Local Welcoming Committees**

Visitor bureaus and chambers of commerce fund visitor centers to receive travelers and look after their needs to ensure that their stay during the festivals and vacations is a pleasant experience. Owners of businesses, especially lodging owners, are helpful hosts who work to help visitors while they are traveling on the Olympic Peninsula. For more information on visiting the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State call the Olympic Kitsap Visitor Bureau at 800-416-5615. Visit the peninsula portal online at OlyPortal.com and on the mobile web at OlyPortal.mobi.

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### **MORE INFORMATION ON VISITING WASHINGTON STATE'S OLYMPIC PENINSULA**

- OlyPortal.com** - one stop website with resources for people planning trips to Olympic Peninsula.
- OlyPortal.mobi** - accessible on mobile web enabled cell phones while traveling on Olympic Peninsula.
- OlyGold.com** - download Olympic Peninsula guide
- OlyMap.com** - online Olympic Peninsula map
- OlyCatalog.com** - online store to order maps and videos

For assistance planning a trip to Washington State's Olympic Peninsula call the Olympic Kitsap Peninsula Visitor Bureau at (800) 416-5615

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To interview Dan Youra, author, call 360.379.8800  
Dan Youra's website is [www.youra.com](http://www.youra.com)  
Dan Youra's email address is [dan@youra.com](mailto:dan@youra.com)