

Olympic Legacy of Ancient Greece and Washington State

Series of articles by Dan Youra, travel writer

Dan Youra compares the first Olympic Games in ancient Greece with the Olympic legacy in Washington State, where Olympic Mountains cast a spell across Olympic National Park. Ancient Greek games in Olympia were dedicated to Zeus. Washington's Olympia is shadowed by Mount Olympus, "Home of the Gods". Greek cities welcomed pilgrims to Olympic festivals 2,800 years ago. Washington towns on the Olympic Peninsula host festivals in the spirit of the original Olympic Games.

Ancient Greek Olympic Games

By Dan Youra, travel writer

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.

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