

In antiquity, the polished marble Games came with rough edges

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ATHENS

In the good old days of the ancient Games, Olympia was the honorable playground of noble athletes, a theater of sacred peace, fair play and somber processions among white marble temples, right?

Wrong. The ancient Games were loud, smelly, sometimes scandalous, every bit as political as their modern counterparts and once even saw a full-scale battle in the middle of a boxing match.

"The games of antiquity were not the hallowed celebrations of amateur athletics which we are often led to believe," said David Gilman Romano, adjunct professor of classics at the University of

Pennsylvania. "The ancient Games were in many ways very much like the modern Olympics: intrinsically political, nationalistic and commercial."

The origin of the Games is shrouded in myth, but they are known to have been primarily part of a festival honoring Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. But rather than the somber affair of popular modern imagination, the ancient Games resembled a folk festival, and although the focus was on religion, there was enough eating, drinking and socializing to attract thousands of visitors.

"Ancient authors describe how hideous the conditions were," Romano said, "with the heat, the flies, the squeeze and the smell, and still tens of thousands of people came. It was worth the trip. It was fun."

People traveled from across the Greek world to attend, from Iberia to the Black Sea, in a testament to the importance of the Games as a political and social event. "The Games were like a glue that kept the diaspora Greeks together," said Emmanouil Mikroyannakis, a professor of ancient history at the University of Athens.

Some of the ills of the modern Games that raise grumbles about "the good old days" were not unknown back then.

"Cheating did happen, when athletes arranged who would win, tried to bribe the judges or falsely declared their age to be able to compete in a certain age group," said Ulrich Sinn, professor of classical archaeology at the University of Würzburg in Germany.

"There was no doping as such, but

people knew that a certain diet, for example a lot of meat, can make one stronger — there were always tales of athletes who had eaten a whole ox."

Cheating was considered an affront to the gods, and tough rules were in place to deal with it, Mikroyannakis said. A false start in a race was punishable by whipping. "Athletes who lied or cheated," he said, "like wrestlers who sneakily rubbed oil on their body to make it hard for an opponent to grab, had to pay a fine that financed the statues of Zeus that lined the route to the stadium, serving as a deterrent and a warning."

A case of cheating could also lie behind one of the hallmark traditions of the ancient Games — competing naked. Athletes ran clothed until Orsippos of

Megara started a new fashion by losing his shorts during a race in 720 B.C.

"During the race, his shorts fell off, winning anyway and setting something of a trend," Romano said. "No one is sure if it was an accident in the heat of the race, or he did it on purpose because he figured he could run faster naked."

Winners received only an olive wreath in Olympia itself, but wealth, privilege and adulation awaited them in their home city as reward for the glory they bestowed upon it.

Athens was one of the more generous cities, offering winners a gift equaling about two years' wages as well as the right to not pay taxes and to receive free meals for life, Sinn added.

Financial incentives were so tempting that some athletes dropped their al-

legiance to their city of birth and went on to represent another city, enraging their former fans. Some used Olympic victory to pursue other ambitions, like political careers.

Many losers never returned home, out of shame and fear of social reprisals; or, as the poet Pindar put it, they would "slink along back alleyways, shunning enemy eyes and nursing pain, the bite of defeat."

Contrary to modern belief, the Games were not all peaceful, either.

"One battle even happened during the Games," Sinn said. "The Elians attacked when athletes were competing in a boxing match. But the Arcadians had expected it and had posted soldiers inside the sanctuary, so it came to a battle right there and then."