

## The Mythical History of The Olympic Games

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### 1. Introduction

The choice of this research topic stems primarily from the notable scarcity of studies that explore the relationship between sports and ancient history, despite the fact that sports have been a fundamental element in the development and progress of societies. In ancient Greece, sports evolved into a distinct art form, so much so that the city of Athens dedicated an entire festival with specific days to celebrate athletic competitions as a way of honoring the gods. Furthermore, sports have gained global attention as a significant area of interest, leading to numerous conferences and scholarly research aimed at advancing the field and elevating its status among academics.

This study also aims to highlight the role of sports in shaping the ethics and social values of Athenian society specifically, and Greek society more broadly, by examining artistic representations found on pottery and other artifacts. These visual sources provide valuable insights into the origins and development of sports in ancient times.

The objectives of this research include providing a comprehensive overview of the history and evolution of sports from the classical ancient period to the present day. It seeks to analyze the connection between ancient Greek society and athletic practices, as well as to offer a detailed account of the variety and nature of Olympic games during both the Greek and Roman eras. Additionally, this study aims to facilitate knowledge exchange and communication among researchers and enthusiasts by presenting diverse perspectives and ideas.

However, this research faced several challenges. There is a notable lack of accessible foreign and Arabic references on this topic, making it difficult to obtain comprehensive information. Moreover, the geographical distance between the researcher and the primary area of study further complicated access to resources. Establishing contact with foreign authors who have contributed to this field also posed difficulties, though international sports conferences currently held, particularly in the United States, provide opportunities for researchers to connect, share expertise, and gain deeper insights from leading scholars

### 2. The Mythical History of The Olympic Games

The intricate decoration on this bronze alabastron—a vessel traditionally used by athletes to store and apply oil after exercise—symbolizes the legendary foundations of the Olympic Games [1]. Designed with a practical swinging handle and a chain-attached lid to prevent spills, the alabastron served as an essential item in the athlete's ritual of cleansing and preparation. The imagery prominently features sculpted figures of Hercules and Hermes, positioned on either side, resting atop pillars adorned with lion skins [2]. These figures evoke the palestra, the gymnasium environment where athletes engaged in disciplined training. This artistic representation underscores the close intertwining of mythology and athletic practice in ancient Greece, where physical prowess was celebrated not only as a human achievement but also as a reflection of divine favor and heroic virtue [3].



**Figure 1:** A bronze Alabastron. Location: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Date: 1st–2nd century CE

According to Greek mythology, many gods and heroic figures are said to have competed in the original Olympic Games at Olympia. Zeus, for example, is believed to have wrestled his father, Cronus, for supremacy; Apollo is said to have outperformed Hermes and defeated Ares in boxing [4]. Heracles (Hercules), who is often credited with founding the Olympic Games, is associated with victories in wrestling and pankration—a notoriously brutal combat sport. These legendary narratives served as sources of inspiration for ancient Greek athletes. The renowned wrestler Milo of Croton, for instance, modeled himself after Heracles, even donning the hero's iconic lion skin while earning six Olympic wreaths [5]. Likewise, the Athenian boxer Dioxippos gained fame for defeating a fully armed Macedonian soldier while wearing nothing but the symbolic “uniform” of a victorious athlete: naked, oiled, crowned with an olive wreath, and armed only with a club, in imitation of

Heracles. Another notable figure, the legendary boxer Diagoras of Rhodes, was mythically declared a son of Hermes, the messenger god, in recognition of his extraordinary athletic achievements, which were perceived as nearly divine in nature [6-8].

As in the modern era, ancient athletes often specialized in particular events and trained extensively under the supervision of professional coaches. Among the most intense disciplines was pankration, a brutal combat sport involving full-body contact, which closely resembles modern mixed martial arts. This event combined elements of wrestling, boxing, and kicking, yet was nearly devoid of rules. Only actions such as biting and eye-gouging were explicitly prohibited, highlighting the extreme physicality and violence permitted within the competition [9].



**Figure 2:** An Attic Terracotta Skyphos (Deep Drinking Cup) Depicting A Trainer Supervising Combat Sports.

**Dimensions:** 6 ½ × 9 inches (16.2 × 22.5 cm), **Date:** 5th century BCE, **Attributed to:** Theseus Painter, **Collection:** The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

This **skyphos** depicts a trainer closely supervising a life-threatening combat match, emphasizing the intensity and danger of ancient Greek fighting sports [10]. Some fighters became known for their distinctive and often brutal fighting styles, earning them infamous nicknames. One such figure was *Sostratos of Sikyon*, nicknamed “Finger-Tips” due to his notorious tactic of breaking his opponents’ fingers at the very start of the match. Unsurprisingly, the Greeks became remarkably advanced in the field of sports medicine,

driven by the physical toll of these violent competitions [11]. The ancient Greeks believed that music played a vital role in enhancing coordination and movement, whether in dance, military training, or even manual labor. As a result, alongside personal athletic coaches, professional musicians also held an important place in athletic practice. On this **pelike**, a man is shown playing the *aulos*—a double-reeded wind instrument—accompanying two boxers as they march energetically and engage in synchronized shadow boxing. The presence of live music in training sessions reflects the holistic approach to physical and rhythmic discipline in ancient Greek sport [12].



**Figure 3:** An Attic Pelike (Wine Jar) Attributed to the Achilles Painter, Depicting A Scene Of Athletic Training Accompanied by Music.

Dimensions: 13 ¼ inches (33.3 cm), Date: 510 BC.  
Collection: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

One of the renowned boxing champions, Melankomas of Caria, secured a distinctive place in history due to his extraordinary combat style [13,14]. Remarkably, he was able to overcome his opponents without ever striking a blow or receiving one himself. Owing to his exceptional physical condition and remarkable endurance, he could maintain a defensive posture with his arms raised until his adversary eventually succumbed to fatigue and defeat.

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