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OLYMPICS



BY STACEY SPARKS

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If you are like most Americans, you have watched the Olympic games on television. Maybe you have even been lucky enough to see the games in person.

Did you know that this sports event dates back to ancient Greece? The first written record of the Olympics dates back to 776 B.C.



The first Olympics were not just sports events. They were held to honor Zeus, the Greeks' king of the gods. Ancient Greece was a land of independent city-states. These states were often at war with each other. Yet every four years, these cities would all agree to stop fighting. That way, athletes from all over Greece could go to the games.

The athletes met in a field at the foot of Mount Olympus. They were surrounded by statues of former winners. Thousands of people watched them.

The most important event in the early Olympics was the sprint. There were also chariot races, boxing, and wrestling. At first, women, slaves, and foreigners were barred from competing. For a long time, women weren't even allowed to watch!

Then this rule changed. Women were allowed to enter the 128th Olympics. That year, a woman athlete won the chariot race. These racers must have been very confident. The chariot races were fast and dangerous. Many of the drivers lost their lives.



In about 100 B.C., Rome conquered Greece. Greek life began to change. So did the Olympics. Athletes competed for their own glory rather than to honor Zeus. Some winners even demanded money.

The Olympics reached their lowest point in A.D. 67. That year, the Roman emperor Nero competed in the games. He won every event he entered. No athlete had the nerve to beat him. Nero tended to execute anyone who got in his way.

Several hundred years after Nero, another Roman emperor put an end to the Olympics.

In the mid-1800s, German historians found the site of the Olympic games. A French baron read about the discovery. He admired the Greeks' love of sport. He thought it had helped make their civilization great. He decided to revive the games. He believed that people from all over the world should compete together. Then they would understand each other better. This would make wars less likely.

In 1896, athletes took part in the first modern Olympics. In honor of the past, the games were held in Athens.

The most important event in the 1896 Olympics was the marathon. This race, based on an old legend, is more than twenty-six miles long. In the story, a Greek runner learned of his country's victory over their enemies at the Battle of Marathon. He then ran all the way to Athens without stopping—a distance of more than twenty-six miles. When he reached the city, he told the people of the good news.



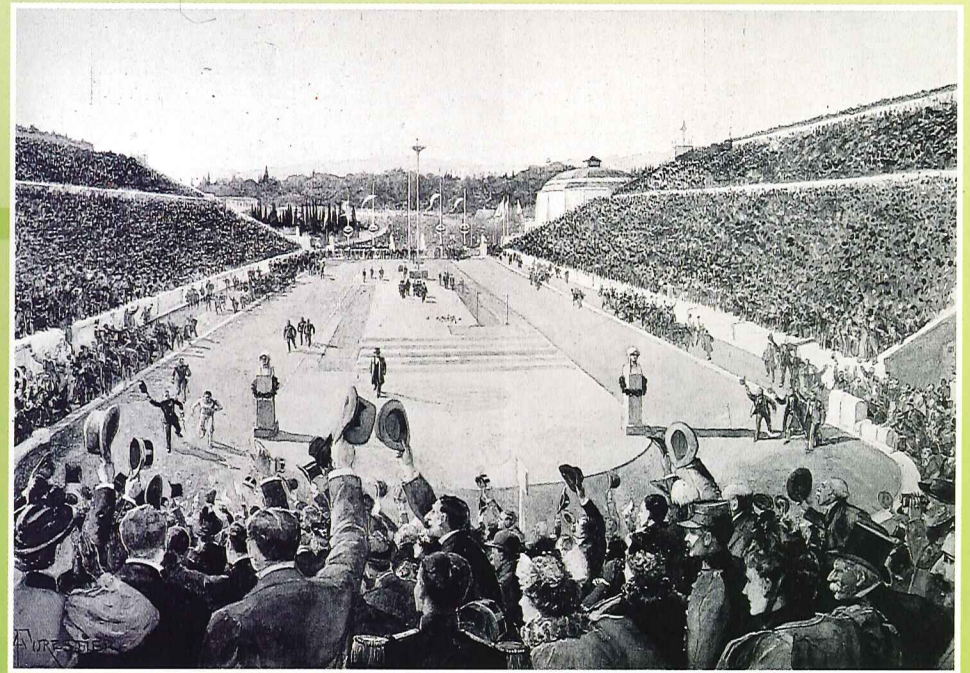
In the 1896 Olympics, seventeen runners started out in a marathon. Many of the runners became sick and tired. They had to drop out.

The finish line of the marathon was in a stadium in Athens. For almost three hours, people waited inside.

Would anyone complete the course?

Finally a small runner entered the arena. It was Spiridon Louis, a Greek! The crowd roared with joy. Two Greek princes rushed down from the stands. They ran the final lap with Louis.

Like the early Greek Olympians, Louis ran for the glory of his homeland. He turned down offers of food, jewelry, and money. He accepted only a humble horse and cart to take back to his small town.



On July 24, 1908, another Olympic marathon took place. This time the games were in London. The day before the marathon, there was an argument between British and American runners. The British were angry. They badly wanted to win the marathon. Even more, they wanted the Americans to lose!

As in the Athens Olympics, athletes were supposed to run through the streets for more than twenty-six miles. Then they were to enter a stadium for the final lap. The British runners started out fast—too fast. About halfway through the race, they fell behind.

The first runner who entered the stadium was Dorando Pietri. The crowd sighed. Pietri was Italian, not English. Pietri looked sick and dazed. He started running the final lap in the wrong direction. Then the poor man fell, stood up, and then fell again.

Another runner burst onto the track. The British onlookers were dismayed. It was John Hayes, an American! He was going to win!

A British official helped Pietri over the finish line. Then he raised the Italian flag to show that Pietri had won! The Americans said this was not fair. In the end, Hayes was declared the winner.



Women did not take part in the first modern Olympics. However, they did play tennis in the Games of 1900. It wasn't until the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics that women competed in track and field.



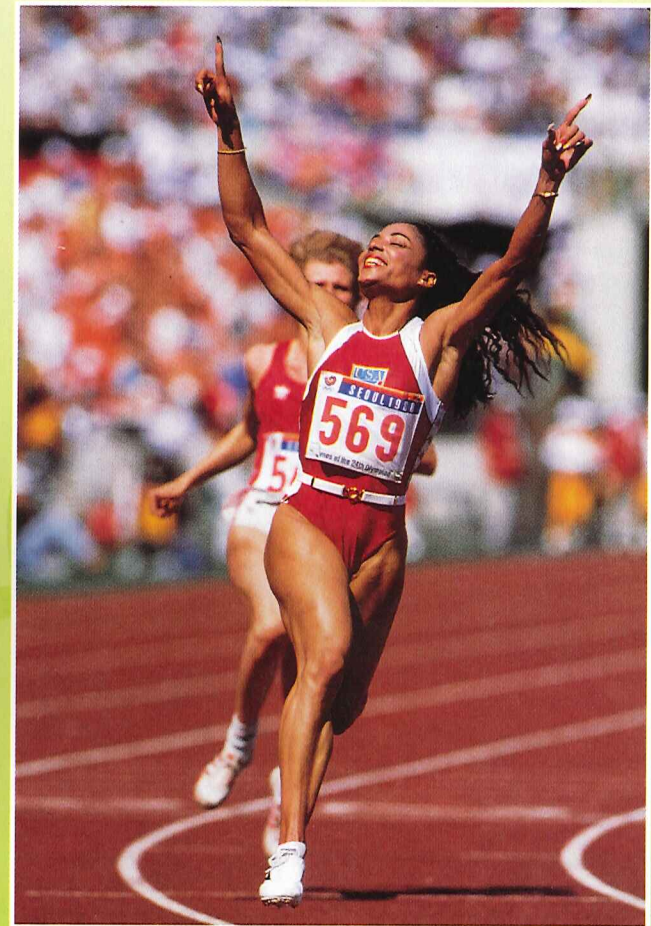
One of the greatest female Olympians was Wilma Rudolph. Rudolph was born in Tennessee in 1940. As a child, she had a string of illnesses. She was left with a paralyzed leg. Wilma's mother had little money for special treatments. Still, she was determined to cure her daughter. She and other family members gave Wilma leg rubs every day. Rudolph began to walk again. Then she began to play basketball. By age sixteen, she was a star runner.

In the 1960 Olympics, Wilma Rudolph won three gold medals. She tied the world record in the hundred-meter sprint. Then she set an Olympic record in the two hundred meter race.



In the four hundred meter women's relay, Wilma Rudolph showed her true strength as an athlete. The battle was between the German and American teams. At the beginning of the relay, the Germans were in the lead. Near the end, the Americans surged ahead. Rudolph was the last of the four runners in the race. When she reached out for the stick, the third runner dropped it. Confident as ever, Rudolph picked up the fallen stick and took off. Somehow she caught up with the German runner, and then beat her to the finish line!

Many other athletes have overcome obstacles on their way to the Olympics. They have conquered sickness and poverty. They have risen above prejudice and bad luck. Men and women of all backgrounds have come together to carry on the spirit of the Olympics.



Next time you watch the opening Olympic ceremonies, think about what lies behind the parades and the trumpets, the flags and the costumes. Watch as the runner carries the torch into the stadium. Remember that the original torch was lighted from a fire on Mount Olympus in Greece.

Think about the games that started in ancient Greece. Think about the athletes who have honored those games. Think about Spiridon Louis and Wilma Rudolph. With their persistence, drive, and heart, they have shown us what the human spirit can do.



The Leveled Readers are easy-to-read selections that give children additional reading experiences with tested vocabulary and targeted comprehension skills, as well as a variety of literary genres.

Skills Reinforced in This Book:

Vocabulary: *athlete, confident, relay, sprint*

Comprehension Skill: Context Clues

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