



The author, **Margit Pudas-Timonen**, has studied the history of the ancient Olympic Games. The partly reconstructed colonnades once were a covered periphery of Palaestra, where wrestlers, boxers and jumpers practiced their sports.

In the birthplace of the Olympic Games

The shot put competition in Olympia saluted the history of the athletics

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Today is Tuesday evening, 17 August 2004. I have arrived in Olympia, a town located in Peloponnesos, Greece, at a driving distance of about 350 km from Athens. I am just now sitting in the town amphitheatre and looking on, how skilful athletics introduce the secrets of pankration, one of the most popular form of sports in Ancient Greece. Modern forms of wrestling, karate and judo have adopted many features from this struggle sports. The impressive act leads me this cooling evening to the spirit of the ancient Olympics.

Tomorrow will one of my most touching dreams come true: I shall bewitness new history of athletics in the shot put event of the Athens Olympic games. This specific event takes place in the Sanctuary of Olympia, in the home of Olympic spirit. It is also the place, where the first Olympic Games in 776 BC were held, and thereafter frequently up to 393 AD. The Games would now return here after a pause of 1611 years, but only to stay here this unique moment to honour the tradition of the ancient Olympics. Regarding the future events, archeologists claim that the site of the Sanctuary of Olympic is too sensitive to any mass events.

I am now excited and tuned up to wait for tomorrow to come.

The Sanctuary of Olympia

I pass high-spirited the security control and enter the Sanctuary of Olympia. I already have become familiar with this area, because I was here a couple of months ago. Poet Pindaros, who lived in the 400s BC, regarded this intersection of the two rivers, Cladeus and Alfeus, as the most beautiful place in Greece. Friendly Athens2004 volunteers greet their guests on the bridge of Cladeus. The rivers flooded in the 700s so that all the buildings of the Sanctuary were completely filled (and preserved) by a six meters high silt layer. Over 1000 years passed before the English archeologist **Richard Chandler** relocated the sanctuary in 1766. The excavations were started in 1875 and are still going on.

The Sanctuary of Olympia can be divided into three parts: the Temple area, the Stadium and the Hippodrome, which was washed out by the river.

The gate opening to the Temple area is closed for security reasons. Considering the historical significance of the shot put event, it is a pity that the majority of the Olympic guests seem to be less or more ignorant about the great history of this ancient sanctuary – or expressed in sports terms: the physical-training college. The ruins of many ancient buildings and open areas give clear proof on the athletics activities, for example the Stadium, Gymnasium, Palaestra, Bathhouse and Sports Club.

I can feel the ancient Olympic Spirit in my heart. I feel sorry the olympic guests, because they are not allowed to walk through the Temple area to the Stadium. Then they would have realized, how seriously and thoroughly athletics were respected thousands of years ago. Interestingly, aiming at utmost results, all the possible means of medicine, food knowledge and physical exercises were used in those days. I would like them to see the ruins of Palaestra, a rectangular area with covered periphery. There wrestlers, boxers and jumpers practiced their sports in order to prepare to the Olympic Games. Luckily, the road going to the stadium is located on higher elevation on the hillsides of Cronos. Thus the guests can catch a glimpse of the ancient town.

The Ancient Olympic Games in 2004

Entering the stadium is touching: Flying flags, welcoming volunteers in their colourful clothes and music from the album of the Enyan Orinogo River giving a timeless impression. This music is a perfect choice for this event, because the previous Olympic Games took place 1611

years ago, 393 AD. In this timeless moment I can imagine all the 40 000 spectators, arriving from the regions of modern Spain to Turkey, cheering to their favourites.

The Stadium is surrounded by slowly ascending lawn slopes. In order to guarantee to everybody a good view to the grounds, the ancient Olympic tradition is strictly followed: all except the honoured guests have to sit on the lawn in their designed zones. Tiers of seats in a specific zone have been reserved for the honoured people. Determined officials and the public make sure that everybody sits as expected.

I am sitting on the lawn close to the shot put ring. There is a stone formation on my left side. Once it used to be the box seat of jury, aristocracy, philosophers and other educated people. There is a stony stand on the opposite side of the field. It used to be the site of the oracle of Olympia. She was the only woman, who was allowed to be present in the Stadium during the Olympic Games. I wake up from my exciting daydream and see a shot put ring just in the middle of these historical landmarks. But I still want to return back in my mind to 776 BC, the year, when the first Olympic Games were held here. That time cook **Koroibos** from the nearby town of Elis won the only race of the Games, the 192-metre stadium run event. I feel to be privileged to sit just here and now!

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I always, even as a small child, have regarded both the **United Nations** and the **Olympic Movement** to be as the only forums, where nations still can meet each other. But soon would also the modern and the ancient Olympic Games meet.

The shot put event officials, wearing the 1896 styled dark suits and white boaters, step ceremonially through the Roman-built gate to the Stadium, from the direction of the Sanctuary. I feel like myself **Pierre de Coubertin** would be leading them. The traditional dressing, the manually operated result boards, the minimized modern techniques and sitting on the lawn bring us much closer to the ancient Olympics.

The modern olympics started from **Baron De Coubertin's** suggested principle that participation is more important than victory. Comparing to the Ancient Olympics 2800 years ago, it was the opposite because of the God Zeus cult: only victory was important. An athlete, who won in the Olympics, was believed to have divine characteristics. But the one, who was the second or the third, was a loser, who disgraced seriously his family. His fortune sometimes was to be abandoned by his family, and in worst case even to be killed. The youngster often considered best to move to another location.

Women's equality at the Stadium – Finally

The epoch-making and touching event is about to take place: women would soon for the first time in the history of the Olympic Games compete here. This makes me to speculate the present status of women in our modern world. I can hear affection also in the announcer's voice.

Soon the first shot put attempt of the qualification thud on the ground. That's it: the seal for men's and women's equality in the Olympic Games is now true on

this Stadium. The house explodes from cheering. I and my husband raise our Finnish flags to honour this great moment.

Meetings and comments

Today's shot put venue is rather the appearance of a big and well-arranged village event than being a part of the modern Olympic Games.

Cicadas in the Sanctuary and its surroundings fill the air with chirping sound. I realize similar sounds were raising the spirit in the ancient Olympics, too.

While cheering the first feminine shot put attempt, a cameraman dressed in white-and-blue clothes directs his camera towards me, my husband and our Finnish flags and takes a long shot. He raises his thumb saying in Finnish: "Greetings to home". What a surprising and pleasant moment just now!

I have been all day watching his skilled and careful working. Carrying a heavy camera on his shoulder, repeatedly kneeling down in front of every shot put athletics for better shots, doing this both in the qualification and the final, surely requires good physical condition and patience in today's heat.

I meet him, **Hannu Vaarala**, later on in the evening. He tells about the hectic twenty-four hours of the YLE (The Finnish Broadcasting company) team. They had arrived the preceding night after a five-hour bus ride from Athens. Then they had organized their work early in the morning and started to broadcast the qualification of shot put at 9.30. The finals started at 16.00 and now, at 8 pm, they are packing and preparing to return back by bus to Athens, where next day's work is waiting.

Because a Finnish shot put athletic **Tepa Reinikainen**, the 13th of the qualifying, is depressed. I go to him and comfort cheerfully: "Let's see in Beijing after four years". A sign of smile appears in his face.

Ilkka Kanerva, a cabinet-member of the IAAF and the head of the Finnish Federation of Athletics, is one of the few Finns attending the qualification event. He naturally is disappointed with not seeing any blue-white colours in the final, but he, however, having a realistic attitude, says that qualifying from the 44 participants into the group of 12, is not at all self-evident. **John Godina**, a world-class shot putter from the United States, faced great difficulties qualifying no't until with his third attempt.

Our discussion turns soon to the history the Sanctuary. While introducing the historical aspects of the Stadium, **Dr Ernest Obeng**, Director of Broadcasting in the IAAF, joins us for a while. Ilkka and Ernest, both former top class athletes, listening my talk about the channels on the ancient marbled starting line, suddenly get inspired to put away their knapsacks, to roll up sleeves and finally to take stand on the starting line to highlight the ancient Olympic Spirit.

Two impressive shot put athletes from Tonga and Samoa bring their exotic colour to this historical event. **Ana Pou'hila**, a charming person from Tonga, gave her contribution to women's shot put. This time her challenge ended in the qualification. She wishes to attend the Helsinki World Championships next year. Her trainer **Dragan Ivanov** is, however, satisfied with Ana's results after just three years of training. She analyses thoroughly all the shot puts with her trainer. And as I interview her, I almost can touch her strong will... No doubt, Ana belongs to the group of future Olympic winners.

A strong looking Samoan shot put athlete, whom I meet in the main street of Olympia, wonders, where have all the Finnish shot put athletes disappeared. He particularly remembers Sydney's gold medalist **Arsi Harju's** handsome nature. I welcome him attent-



A Finnish blue-and-white line in the unique shot put event of the Ancient Stadium of Olympia: a cheering group, **Hannu Vaarala**, a cameraman from YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company, and **Tepa Reinikainen**, a Finnish shot put athlete, in his attempt to qualify to the final.

Meetings and Comments



Ilkka Kanerva, a cabinet-member of the IAAF and the head of the Finnish Federation of Athletics and **Dr Ernest Obeng**, Director of Broadcasting in the IAAF, both former top class athletes, highlight here the ancient Olympic Spirit by trying the ancient starting line carved from marble. The athletics of the first Olympic Games in 776 BC were on the same line, but the starting position was not as modern as here.

ing the world championships in Helsinki 2005. He hopes to see the Finnish shot put athletes there and then in Beijing 2008.

Future games in Ancient Olympia?

The utmost highlight in the Athens2004 Olympics was no doubt the shot put event in the ancient Olympic Stadium. It seems this event will be unique: archeologists claim arranging any mass sports events in the future would danger the Sanctuary's fragile archeological buildings and unearthed treasures. The site is simply too sensitive to bear any mass events. And as the site is also a part of the irrecoverable heritage of antiquity, its environmental stress has to be remained minimal, practically just on a small-scaled tourist level.

Challenge for Beijing 2008

Only one state, China, has survived united throughout the whole 2800-year history of the Olympic Games. The an-



Hannu Vaarala – one of the heroes in the Finnish broadcasting work

cient Silk Road connected the Europe and the Far East of those times. It is evident that the Olympic Games culture has left its signs as well to Chinese athletics as to their everyday life. A good example is pankration that may have developed gradually even to its ancient form as a result of the Asian-European cultural cooperation. A closer study of Chinese history may expose many more details about the general development of the ancient Olympic Games.

We actually do not know much about the earlier history of the Olympic Games, the time before 776 BC. There is no reason, why the Olympic Games would not have adopted features from the over 4000 years old culture of China. Studying this and many other related questions will be in my focus during the next olympiad.

Recommended reading:

Olympia. Archeological guides. Explorer 2004. Athens. 198 pp.
The Olympic Games in ancient Greece. Travel guides 2003. Ekdotike Athenon S.A. 304 pp.

The past and modern games

- Only men participate in the Olympics, now women started the shot put event.
- Flute playing rhythmized the athletes of antiquity, replaced with favourite melodies of today
- Drinking water run in ground-side channels in the Ancient Olympic Stadium, bottled water is today's solution.
- Ancient athletics were naked, now they wear multi-coloured clothes.
- The public of antiquity came from the Spain-Turkey axis, nowadays from all over the world.
- Philosophers worked as sports reporters in the antiquity, now broadcasting companies and the press.
- Ancient Olympics took place in the heat of July, now in cooler August.
- Only victory was important earlier, now also participation is appreciated.
- Ancient athletics served the religious Zeus-cult, now nations get the honour.
- Ancient Olympics were held in Greece, modern Olympics in any country.
- Ancient wars were paused during the Olympic Games, today not.

The Finnish version of this article was originally published in Pohjolan Sanomat 22 August 2004. The English version includes complementary notes that are not printed in the original text. Contact info: Margit Pudas-Timonen maputi@nic.fi +358 40 5234 256, Mauri Timonen matimon@nic.fi +358 40 5875865 and Heikki Laakkola Heikki.laakkola@pohjolansanomat.fi +358 16 291 276