

Wrestling rules at the Ancient Olympic Games

From lifting live bulls to tearing trees apart with their bare hands, wrestlers were the wildly popular heroes of the Ancient Olympic Games. With an unrivalled prominence, the sport basked in its glory days. As participants in the oldest and most widely practised sport on the Ancient Olympic Games programme, wrestlers at Olympia received great levels of attention and adulation. With the vast majority of fans likely to have passed through wrestling schools themselves, it was the ancient equivalent of modern-day football.

From carrying live bulls around the stadium on his shoulders to breaking bits of string by popping the veins on his head, more words were written about six-time Olympic champion wrestler Milon of Croton than any other ancient Olympic athlete.

Part of the pentathlon, as well as an event in its own right, wrestling was innately connected to warfare. Naked and covered in oil, combatants would contest one of two disciplines. 'Upright wrestling', conducted in a sandy pit, required one wrestler to throw the other to the ground three times. In contrast, 'rolling' or 'ground' wrestling was only over when one man was so exhausted further resistance was impossible. Defeat in this case was signalled by the raising of a hand with one or two fingers extended.

Rules were limited to the forbidding of biting and of attacking the genitals. Broken bones were a regular occurrence, with wrestlers often snapping fingers or even arms to escape holds. In fact, two-time champion Leontiskos of Messene became famous for employing just this tactic.



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The savage nature of bouts was no doubt one of a number of reasons why wrestling was considered such a worthy test of athletes at the Ancient Games. And while that raw brutality has been left in the past, Wiebe believes her chosen sport retains the qualities that made it so popular.

Erica Wiebe, the Rio 2016 Olympic Games gold medallist in women's 75kg freestyle, is one of just a few modern wrestlers to have some idea of how her acclaimed predecessors would have felt at the Ancient Olympic Games.

“I don’t think there is another sport like it. It is a true display of character, perseverance, resilience and grit.”



Erica Wiebe
Rio 2016 Olympic Games gold medallist in women's 75kg freestyle, Canada

Naturally, tales of almost inhuman levels of strength abound among accounts of the Ancient Games. While Amesinas of Barka trained by wrestling a bull, Isidoros of Alexandria, is reported to have never once fallen in competition.

Australian Liam Neyland, multiple junior Oceania Championship winner and Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games hopeful, knows what it is like to come up against such pure power.

“For the Oceania (2017 Championships – his first as a senior), I was facing a New Zealander,” Neyland said. “Normally I am one of the strongest for my weight (65kg) but I swear this guy wasn't human. He had so much body strength, it felt like I was trying to move a boulder.”

The famous Milon of Croton falls firmly into this category. A student of philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras, the huge wrestler is reported to have held up the ceiling in his teacher's house during an earthquake, allowing everyone to escape unharmed. A statue in the Louvre Museum, Paris, depicts how ultimately the big man's strength was his undoing. Caught by a tree in the wild, having tried to split its withered stump with his bare hands, Milon was eaten by wolves.

Despite the prominence of power, technique and cunning have always played a crucial role in wrestling.

“I actually took an Ancient Rome and sport class at university,” Wiebe revealed. “And I know there are a lot of legends about the strength of wrestlers, but there were also some (stories of) tricky wrestlers and I think I would fit into that category.”

Perhaps there is some Italian ancestry in the Canadian's bloodline – in ancient times the Sicilians were known as crafty wrestlers, while the Spartans were renowned for their honour and the people from Argos were famed for their skill.

Another factor that has not altered in the centuries separating Milon of Croton and Neyland of Queensland is the capacity of wrestlers to consume quite unfathomable amounts of food and drink. While Milon slaughtered a bull in the middle of the stadium at Olympia and ate every piece in front of the baying crowd, Neyland has, to date, been a little less conspicuous.

“I have been known as a bottomless bag,” the 21-year-old said. “I ate a kilo of meat in a burger in under an hour. I won one of my coaches a bottle of wine.”

Milon would have approved. He is reported to have washed down his bull with nine litres of ancient Greece's finest red wine.

OTHER SPORTS

Boxing

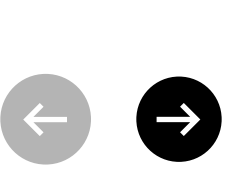
Boxers wrapped straps (himantes) around their hands to strengthen their wrists and steady their fingers. Initially, these straps were soft but, as time progressed, boxers started using hard leather straps, often causing disfigurement of their opponent's face.

Chariot racing

The Equestrian events included horse races and chariot races and took place in the Hippodrome, a wide, flat, open space.

Long jump, javelin, discus

Athletes used stone or lead weights (halteres) to increase the distance of their jump. They held onto the weights until the end of their flight, and then jettisoned them backwards. The discus was originally made of stone and later of iron, lead or bronze. The javelin technique was very similar to the modern technique, with one end pointed, the javelin was thrown with one hand. The javelin was the most clearly militaristic event on the programme at the Ancient Olympic Games.



ANCIENT OLYMPIC GAMES

From boxing contests with no weight classifications or point scoring to chariot racing where danger lurked on every corner, it is easy to see why the ancient games enthralled the Greeks for so long. Here, we give you the essential lowdown, highlight our favourite facts.

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