

Olympiad

by *MariLu McGinnis*

Eons ago, before the Olympics were institutionalized in 775 BC, Homer tells us in “The Iliad and the Odyssey” that games were played. Achilles declared games to be celebrated in honor of Peleus, a friend of his. They were chariot races. In the Odyssey, games were played at a stopping point just before Ulysses was returned home. He threw the discus. This was in the Pre-Classical ages – before written language. The men’s only rule was carried out when the games were institutionalized. Greek civilization was regulated by men for men and for the benefit of this very chauvinistic civilization. Women were not allowed at the games. The games were held in Elea, a small Province on the coast of the Aegean Sea. Access was easy for all the surrounding countries. A general and sacred truce was declared during the period of the games. In 217 BC Sparta was charged with breaking the truce and judged by the Eleans, and banned from taking part in the games. This was a great public humiliation so the Spartans appealed, but the Olympic court, composed of Eleans, found against them and imposed a fine! The Eleans then proposed to waive half the fine if the Spartans would return Lepreum to them – and so on. Politics were ever present in 416 BC when political rivals in Athens vied for power. In 417 Nicias, playing on his reputation for piety, gave a costly demonstration of his devotion to the Gods. At sunrise he led an Athenian contingent from the nearby island of Rheneia over a bridge of boats he had built. Nicias dedicated a bronze palm tree that soon became famous and gave the god a piece of land that cost no less than ten thousand drachmas. There is more. Most Athenians were deeply impressed. Next year his rival Alcibiades entered seven chariot teams in the race – more than any other private citizen had ever entered. Three of them came in – first, second and fourth. He said he wanted Athenians to feel powerful and not worn down by war. His immediate target, however was the Athenian voter. In 200 BC the games held in Alexandria – during what is known as the Hellenistic era—after Alexander the Great. It is said they were carried out with great excess. Later they were held in Rome. In the third century CE with the advent of Christianity, they were banned by Theodosius I. They were not revived until 1896.

The Peloponnesian Wars - Donald Kagan

The Iliad - Trans. Samuel Butler

The Odyssey - Trans. Samuel Butler