

The events of the games were for entertainment. Thus the participants were there for the pleasure of the spectators. They were servants, if you will.

## **A look at the Isthmian Games**

In Ancient Greece and later under Roman rule people went to festivals to fulfill a religious obligation, and also to be entertained. One form of entertainment was watching the athletes compete with each other and thereby pay homage to the gods.

Corinth was the pleasure city of Greece: the Isthmian festival offered more amusements than the other three great festivals in Greece. The games were held every two years not to coincide with the games of Olympia.

So many people gathered in the vicinity of the sanctuary of Poseidon on the Isthmus at Corinth that overcrowding became dangerous to their health. The time of the Isthmian games came to be regarded as a time of illness; there was a verb, "staying on the Isthmus" which became a proverbial saying for being ill.

The overcrowding was due to the need to accommodate very many visitors in a very cramped place at the narrowest part of the land bridge. The usual accommodation was tents, which spectators and competitors alike apparently brought with them. Visitors reserved space in advance in which to pitch their tents. If people failed to do so, they had no place to stay.

The athletic program of the Isthmian Games consisted essentially of the same events as the programs of the other Greek festivals: chariot races, horse races, foot races, the pancration (a combination of boxing & wrestling), the pentathlon, and ship races.

Processions and parades had a religious character and were also a part of the visual entertainment at the various games. Upon arrival at the festival site on the Isthmus the official delegation made its way to the temple of the chief deity, Poseidon, in a sacred procession.

At the head of the procession walk the sacrificial animals, a hundred black oxen with horns that are gilded or wound with garlands of flowers. They are led by countrymen dressed in white and holding double axes in their right hands. Behind the oxen follow different kinds of animals destined for sacrifice. After the animals and the herdsman come young women wearing their best finery. On their heads they carry baskets filled with fruits and flowers, and sweets and aromatic substances. The train progresses to the accompaniment of flutes and pipes. The women in one group perform dancing movements as they walk along, those in another group sing a hymn in time with their steps. The rear guard is brought up by horsemen dressed in crimson, white, and blue, riding horses with gold and silver trappings.

## **A day in the arena in Rome was not much different than a ballgame today...**

In Roman times arena games were advertised beforehand on conspicuously displayed billboards, giving the reason for the game, its venue, date and the number of paired gladiators to be used. Highlighted features were included, such as executions, music and any luxuries to be provided for the spectators; these might include a decorated awning against the sun, and water sprinklers. Food, drink, sweets and occasionally "door prizes" could be offered. A more detailed program was prepared for the day to show the names, types and match records of gladiator pairs (of interest to gamblers) and their order of appearance. Copies were distributed among the crowd on the day of the match. Left-handed gladiators were advertised as an interesting rarity; they were trained to fight right-handers, which gave them advantage over most opponents and produced an interestingly unorthodox combination.

The day began with beast hunts and beast fighting gladiators. Sometimes beasts were unharmed and simply exhibited. The content of the games was variable, but usually involved executions of those condemned to the arena. There were also comedy fights; some may have been lethal.