

SPORTS AMONG THE ANCIENTS.



AMONG warlike peoples, feats of strength, speed and endurance have ever excited admiration and commanded that popular support necessary for the development of national games. Festive days were dedicated by the ancients to some national deity and games were held either to amuse the multitude or to satisfy the will of the gods. For the competitors there was no other inducement than emulation or at best the prospect of a small reward.

The nations most conspicuous among the ancients for their agility and celebrity were Greece and Rome. To these nations then we must look for the earliest form and fullest development of ancient games.

In Greece, the games were generally connected with, or formed part of some religious observance, celebrated at fixed intervals of time, and connected by myth or legend with some hero, demi-god, or local deity. The most noted place for the games was Olympia, an enclosure in the rich plain of Elis. The celebrity of the Olympia games led to the institution of several others, similar in nature, but less in importance, such as the Nemean, Isthmian and Pythian games.

An international law proclaimed a general suspension of hostilities whereby the Greeks from all parts were enabled to attend the festivals without danger or hindrance. Another law mainly regarded the athletes. It obliged them to undergo a course of training for ten months in a gymnasium before entering any contest, and to appear before a tribunal on the festive day to prove by witnesses that they were of pure Hellenic blood, and had no stain, religious or civil, on their character. Afterwards they swore that they would refrain from employing fraud or guile in any of the sacred contests. At the approach of a great festival heralds proclaimed from the mountain fastness of Thessaly to the remotest colonies of

Cyrene and Marseilles the truce and all warfare ceased. A safe conduct during the sacred interval was assured to all and the different tribes assembled and formed a band of union among the Doric race.

The contests at the festivals consisted of exhibitions, displaying all modes of bodily activity, the principle being races on foot, with horses and chariots, contests in leaping, wrestling, boxing and several others of minor importance. The games were increased according to the interest and popularity they gained. At Olympia, a festive day was held every fourth year, and the different events of the programme were contested in the following order :—

Foot-race.—This usually attracted much attention, and the number of competitors entered for it was generally large. The distance at first was two hundred yards : afterwards it was extended to four hundred yards, and finally at the fifteenth Olympiad it was extended to three miles. Tradition has handed down no records for any of the distances, but certainly the speed displayed was not above the ordinary among modern athletes. The runner relied wholly upon his strength and endurance, ignoring both style and form of running.

The encumbered race was, as at present, very exciting and frequently elicited the most enthusiastic applause especially from the friends of the contestants. At present this contest is termed the fatman's race. Among the Greeks it was customary, if a man did not come up to the required weight, to wear a heavy armour. Plato highly recommended this as a preparation for military service.

The Chariot-race.—This was considered the most important of the national contests. Rich and poor alike competed in it. It was introduced in the twenty third Olympiad and held in the hippodrome, a race-course, laid out on the left side of the hill of Kronos. The course was noted as having one sharp turn, which brought death to many a hero. Sometimes twenty chariots entered one race and the danger the charioteers were exposed to was appalling. Pausanias