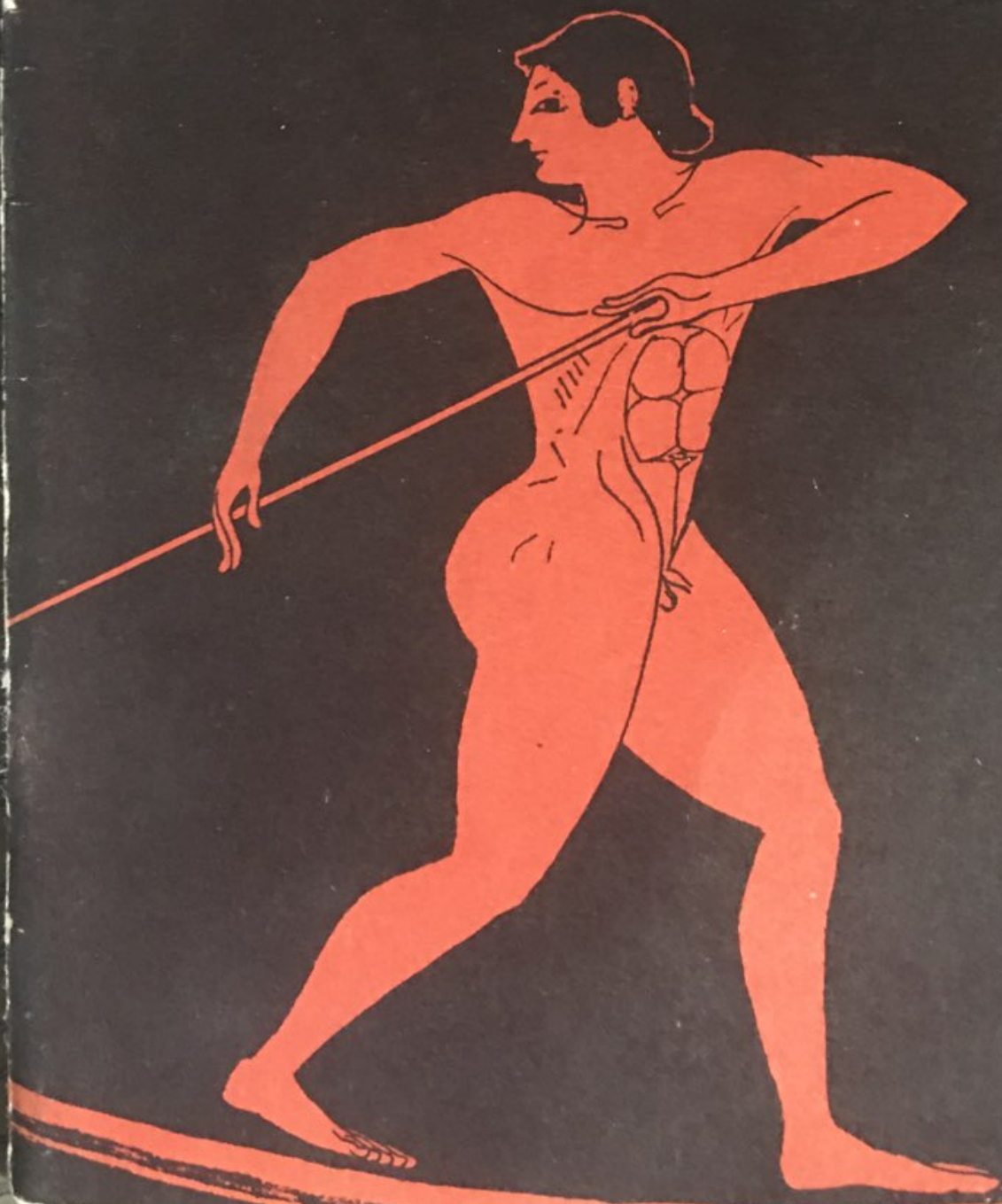


SCHOOL PICTURE SET

GREEK ATHLETIC GAMES

The Metropolitan
Museum of Art



GREEK ATHLETIC GAMES

by Nancy Cole

No people have ever been so fond of competition as the ancient Greeks. Their history speaks of contests in music, drama, poetry, art—even in beauty. The most famous competitions were those that tested athletic skills. *Athlos*, Greek for **contest**, signifies the idea of competing for a prize.

From earliest times, athletics were of major importance in the life of the Greeks; funerals were celebrated with games—for example, in Homer's *Iliad*. Legend has it that in 776 B.C. Herakles organized a series of athletic competitions as a thanksgiving after victory in war. These came to be known as the Olympic games, held thereafter every four years in honor of Zeus, the chief of the Greek gods. By the beginning of the sixth century B.C., Panhellenic (pan = all, hellenikos = Greek) games were being held at Delphi, Nemea, on the Corinthian Isthmus, and at Olympia. Many local games, such as those at Athens, were modeled after these four.

The Greeks esteemed the human body as the most beautiful of forms, and they tried, through exercise, to make their own bodies perfect. They felt that their love for athletics was one of the things that distinguished them from the barbarians, and only Greek citizens were allowed to compete in the games.

In the Greek world, which was comprised of small, independent states often at war with one another, athletic contests became a unifying, peacemaking force. During the Olympic games all wars were suspended. States sent their best athletes to compete. Victors were given public honors; statues were dedicated to them; victory poems were written to commemorate their feats.



1. Athletes practicing to music. Regular athletic training was important in the education of every Greek boy. Most Greek cities had gymnasiums, or athletic grounds, and palaestrae, or wrestling schools, in which youths from the ages of thirteen to nineteen were taught to develop their athletic skills and to care for their bodies. They often practiced to the music of the flute. This helped them to acquire a sense of timing and grace. Here two athletes are training for boxing. Their fists are wrapped with thongs ten to twelve feet long.

Black-figured pelike, attributed to the Acheloos Painter, Attic, about 510–500 B.C., Rogers Fund, 1949



2. Hoplitodromos and trainer. Practice in the handling of weapons was part of Greek athletic training, preparing a citizen to serve his city in time of war. An exercise especially suited to preparation for war involved running in heavy armor to the music of the flute. A foot race in armor was often included in the local and the Panhellenic games. The hoplitodromoi (hoplites = foot soldier, dromos = course) wore helmets and carried shields.

Red-figured neck amphora, attributed to the Pig Painter, Attic, said to be from Capua, about 510–500 B.C., Rogers Fund, 1949

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