

# Arena of ancient Olympic athletes

A visit to Olympia left a strong impression on **Jenny Stevens**.

IT is just a small sign, easily missed among the broken plinths and fallen columns of Ancient Olympia in Greece.

But its message has as much relevance today as in times past: if you cheat, or don't play fair, you will be named and shamed.

Athletes caught lying, eye gouging, biting or displaying cowardice were also summarily dealt with.

Ancient Olympia didn't have a Court of Arbitration in Sport but they did have a powerful tribunal and an effective deterrent.

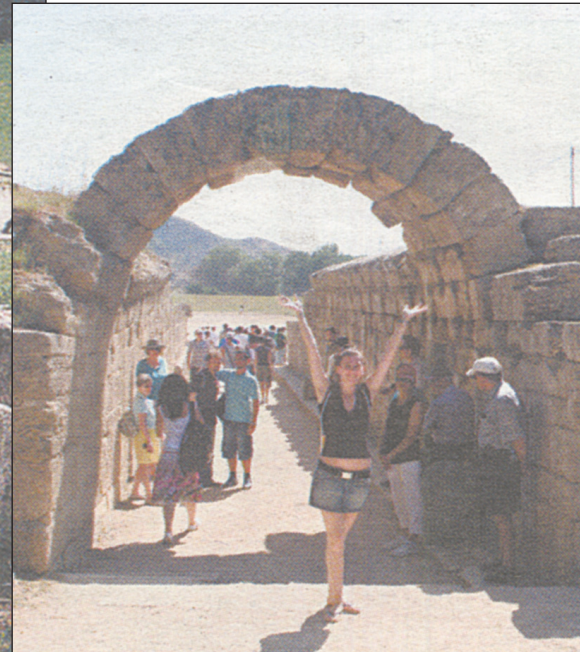
As early as 388 BC the names of transgressors were chiselled into stone bases holding bronze statues of the god Zeus, as a warning to

other competitors. Called Zanes, these were paid for by the shamed athlete and exhibited on the path leading into the Olympic stadium.

Few would notice the broken bases today among the thousands of fallen stones if it weren't for the innocuous sign. It's as if officialdom doesn't want to draw too much attention to the less glorious side of sport, which plagues the Olympics and other sporting contests even today.

But archaeologists and historians think differently. They are actively working the Olympia

Article from the Sunday Telegraph (escape section)



Arch of triumph: History comes alive at the stadium entrance at Olympia (above) and (left) the grass banks show how the spectators saw the action.

site, and demythologising the ancient games in the process.

Sporting festivals were never the pure, idealistic contests we envisage. Athletes switched allegiances, took bribes, and had enormous egos. According to one historian, the writings of Euripides and Plato contain descriptions of athletes as "unnatural, overdeveloped, socially burdensome and unsophisticated louts".

Even deaths occasionally occurred, not least because, in the most physical of sports, the pankration, a combination of boxing

and wrestling, punching, kicking, choking, finger breaking and blows to the genitals were allowed.

And while victors were crowned with wreaths from the wild olive trees which still grow on the site, they were far from rank amateurs, being feted and rewarded financially by their home cities.

Equestrian events — horse and chariot races in which the owners of the horses and not the jockeys or drivers were rewarded — were not without manipulation either.

The Roman Emperor Nero

made a travesty of the games of 67AD by cheating to win; most notably in a chariot race where he fell and did not finish but was still declared the winner. After all, who would challenge an emperor?

Nero's victory was later nullified, and all that remains of his inglorious stay at Olympia are the ruins of the villa built for his use.

Like Nero's records, the importance of the games at Olympia were eroded and finally discontinued in 393AD by the Roman Emperor Theodosius; the monuments and sanctuaries were

destroyed in 426AD. But it took earthquakes and floods in the sixth century to finish what the Romans began.

Covered by tonnes of earth, Olympia passed into oblivion until the 19th century, when the new-found science of archaeology began to unearth its secrets.

Ancient writings say Olympia was an idyllic place, beautiful and serene. Today the once remote site in the western Peloponnese is only a five-hour drive from Athens, and firmly on the tourist trail.

Buses disgorge hundreds of vis-

itors who walk around the site trying to envisage its glory days as a religious, athletic and pan-Hellenic centre.

Zeus's great statue, once a wonder of the ancient world, has gone. His imposing temple, the largest in the Peloponnese, is a stone base with one pillar from the colonnade resurrected for the Athens games of 2004. The others lie where they toppled, like dominoes.

Other buildings, like the baths, hostels, gymnasiums, workshops and temples are in various states of resurrection. The Altar of Hera,

where the Olympic flame is lit for the modern games by "priestesses" every four years, would be easily missed without a guide or reading the plaques. Only the stadium seems to have survived unscathed with grass banks for spectators on either side.

The loveliest temple of them all is the Philippeion, dedicated by the Macedonian King Philip II and finished by his son, Alexander the Great. Its circular skeleton stands near the Altar of Hera among the trees, a beautiful ruin and mute evidence of a once great era.



Classical revival: (from left). The ancient tabloids - plinths displaying the shame of the cheating athletes, remnants of the temple of Zeus and fragments of glory, piecing together a statue of Apollo in the museum.

