History of Track & Field

Formalized track and field was first recorded at the Ancient Olympic Games of 776 BC in Olympia, Greece. The single event contested was a footrace of roughly 200 yards called the stade or stadion, from which we get the word “stadium.” The Ancient Olympics, deeply seeded in Greek mythology, commanded extensive cultural significance. Wars halted for the Games. Qualifiers swore oaths before Zeus, their highest god, that they had adequately prepared for competition. Poets wrote verse about each Olympic champion, and their deeds were chronicled for future generations. Eventually, though, the Games were abolished by early Christians in an effort to wipe out polytheism.

The marathon was not an event of the ancient Olympic Games. The marathon is a modern event that was first introduced in the Modern Olympic Games of 1896 in Athens, a race from Marathon—northeast of Athens—to the Olympic Stadium, a distance of 42.195 kilometers. The race commemorates the run of Pheidippides, an ancient “day runner” who carried the news of the Persian landing at Marathon of 490 BC to Sparta (a distance of 149 miles) in order to enlist help for the battle. According to the fifth-century BC ancient Greek historian Herodotus, Pheidippides delivered the news to the Spartans the next day. The distance of the modern marathon was standardized as 26 miles and 385 yards or 42.195 kilometers in 1908 when the Olympic Games were held in London. The distance was the exact measurement between Windsor Castle, the start of the race, and the finish line inside White City Stadium.

From 776 BC, the games were held in Olympia every four years for almost twelve centuries. Additional athletic events were gradually added until, by the fifth century BC, the religious festival consisted of a five-day program. The athletic events included three foot races (stadion, diaulos, and dolichos) as well as the pentathlon (five contests: discus, javelin, long jump, wrestling, and foot race), pugme (boxing), pale (wrestling), pankration (mix of wrestling & boxing), and the hoplitodromos (armored racing with a shield). Additional events, both equestrian and for humans, were added throughout the course of the history of the Olympic Games. Equestrian events, held in the hippodromos, were an important part of the athletic program of the ancient Olympic Games and by the fifth century BC included the tethrippon (chariot racing) and the keles.

Track-and-field athletics in the United States dates from the 1860s. The Intercollegiate Association of Amateur Athletes of America, the nation’s first national athletic group, held the first collegiate races in 1873, and in 1888 the Amateur Athletic Union (which governed the sport for nearly a century) held its first championships.
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Beginning in the 1920s, track and field's scope widened. The first NCAA national championships were held for men in 1921, and women's track and field became part of the Olympic Games in 1928. In 1952, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) sent its first Olympic team ever to the Summer Games in Helsinki, Finland, where the squad captured several track-and-field medals. Over the next 30 years, the U.S. and Soviet teams battled in one of the sport's longest and most competitive rivalries.

In 1936 Jesse Owens won a then-unprecedented four gold medals. He captured the 100 meter dash, 200 meter dash, long jump, and 4x100 meter relay. Owens was the first African-American to receive sponsorship in the form of a pair of Adidas shoes he received at the Games. Owens' success in Berlin was all-the-louder because Adolf Hitler, who was attempting to use the Olympics as a platform for his racial politics, essentially ignored Owens' dominant showing. Both the public and Olympic officials noticed Hitler's non-action. He was told to either greet every medalist, or none at all. Hitler skipped the rest of the medal presentations. Owens became a worldwide star.

Roger Bannister was another big historical figure in track & field. Since July 17, 1945, Swede Gunder Hagg had held the world record in the mile. However, three men came to the spotlight in 1953: Australia's John Landy, America's Wes Santee, and England's Roger Bannister. The trio had the audacity to intend to break the four-minute barrier for the first time — a feat many “experts” of the time (mostly sportswriters) deemed humanly impossible. Due perhaps to hype from these sportswriters and perhaps to the simplicity of the undertaking — four quarter-miles in one minute each — the race to sub-four garnered tremendous international attention. On May 6, 1954, Bannister won the race and captured the world record in 3:59.4. Bannister received the inaugural “Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year” in 1954.

Carl Lewis burst onto the international scene in the early 80s. The American won nine Olympic gold medals and one silver over the span of three Olympics. He won 10 world championship medals. He was the first since Jesse Owens to win quadruple gold in a single Games. Lewis went undefeated in 65 consecutive long jumps and it took someone else setting a new world record to end his streak. Track and Field News named him “Athlete of the Year” three times in a row. Sports Illustrated and the IOC followed suit with “Olympian of the Century” and “Sportsman of the Century,” respectively. Lewis was one of track and field’s first huge international sporting icons.
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Name ____________________________  Period ______________________

Answer the following questions about track & field from the reading.

1. Where did track & field originate from? __________________________

2. What single event was run at the original Olympics? ________________

What English word comes from that first Olympic event? ________________

3. How did early religion play a role in the ancient Olympic games? __________

4. Who ran the original marathon? ______________________________

When was the marathon first introduced into the Olympics? ________________

What historical event is the marathon based from? ________________________

How did the 42.195 kilometer distance become the distance used for the marathon?

5. How long were the ancient games held in Olympia? ________________

What events did athletes compete in during the ancient games in Olympia?

6. When did track & field begin in the United States? ________________________

What was the nation’s first national athletic group? ________________________

7. When were women first allowed to participate in track & field at the Olympic
games? ____________________________
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8. What country is considered the United States biggest rivals throughout Olympic history and when & where did they first compete in the Olympic games?

9. In which Olympic games did Jesse Owens dominate in track & field?

Why was it considered such an important historical event?

10. How did Roger Bannister make his mark on track & field history?

What country was he from?

What award did he receive for his historical result?

11. When did Carl Lewis burst onto the scene in track & field?

How many Olympic gold medals did he earn in his career?

What event did he go undefeated in for so long?

What other awards did he earn over his successful career?