

# An Athlete's Journal

by Anthony Hollingsworth

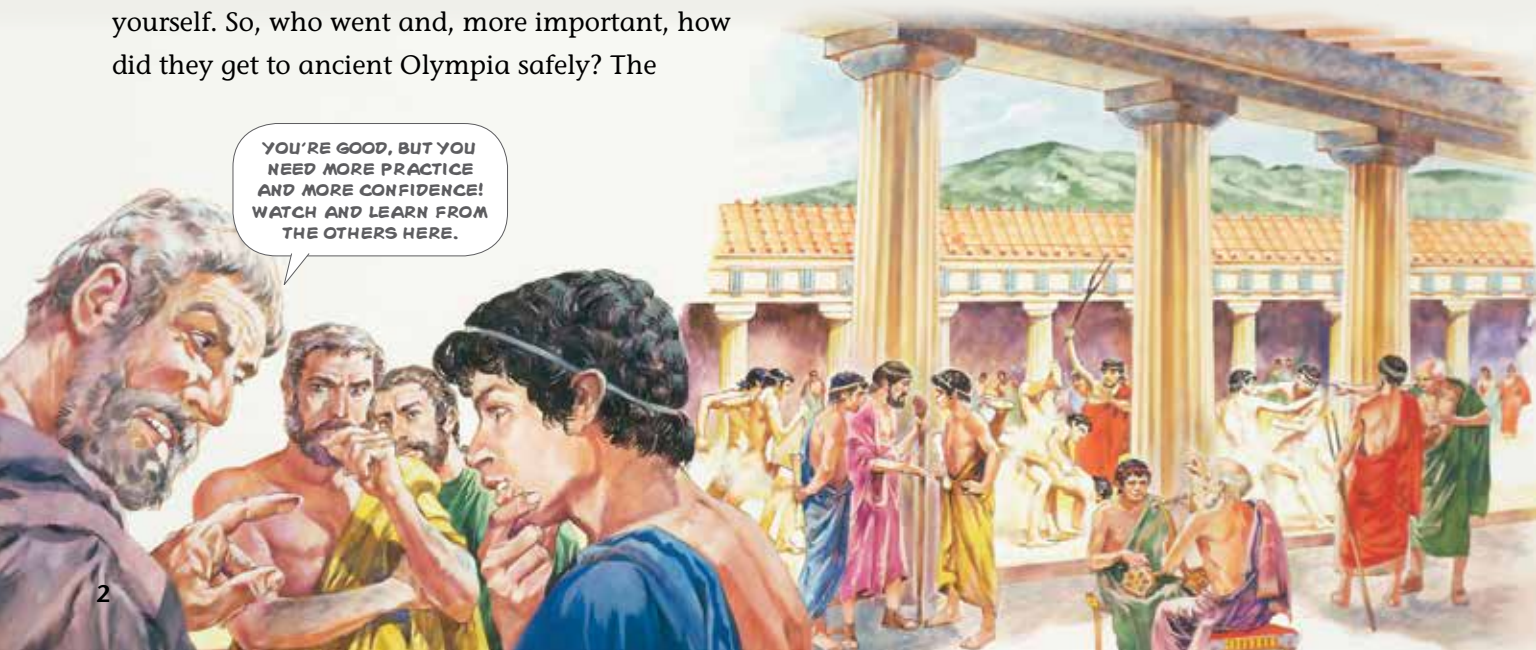
**W**hen Brazil's capital, Rio De Janeiro, was chosen to host the 31st Olympics, people from all over the world began preparing to follow the events in this South American city. For 16 days, all eyes would be on Brazil. The lucky among us would have the opportunity to watch the games live, while the rest of us would have to be content to follow the competition on the Internet or on television.

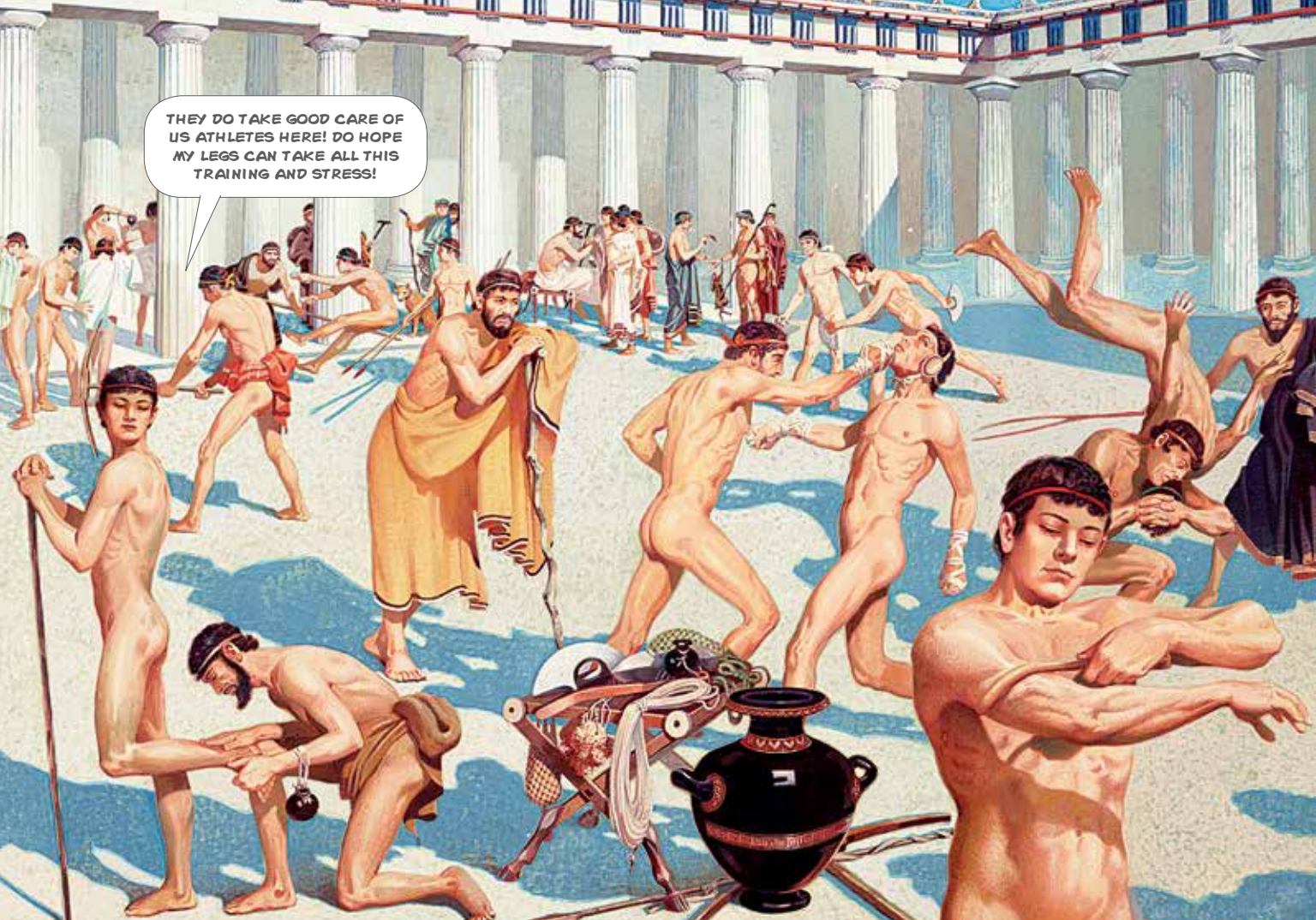
Today, getting information about the Olympics is easy. But what about in ancient Greece? How did the people in the Greek-speaking world follow the events, especially since they had no Internet or television? In fact, the Greeks did not even have newspapers. If you wanted to know what happened, you had to wait for those who did go to the games to return home or you had to go yourself. So, who went and, more important, how did they get to ancient Olympia safely? The

ancient Greeks could not just take a plane or call for hotel reservations.

Ancient writers and poets loved describing the Olympics and the athletes who won. We know more about the games and the events leading up to them than we know about some battles and wars that happened at the same time. Consider, for example, the Olympic runner Leonidas of Rhodes. We are told that he won the 200-yard dash three times in a row—in 160, 156, and 152 b.c. We also know how old he was and how he changed many of the training methods used by other Olympians. If he had kept a diary during his training and the games, it would have probably read as follows.

YOU'RE GOOD, BUT YOU NEED MORE PRACTICE AND MORE CONFIDENCE! WATCH AND LEARN FROM THE OTHERS HERE.





### **10 MONTHS BEFORE THE OLYMPICS**

Although I have been training for the Olympics for a while, it is now time to get serious about it. The *Hellanodikai*—those strict judges on the Olympic commission—will expect me to swear an oath to Zeus that I have been preparing for 10 months. Lying about my training would be a bad way to start. Zeus does not like liars.

### **2 MONTHS BEFORE THE OLYMPICS**

The Olympic messengers have finally arrived in our city to announce the games. We live so far away and have been waiting for a long time. Some of our children were surprised that the messengers do not live in Olympia. I explained to them that the messengers are from the town of Elis, the city

that controls Olympia. “How can a city control the land of Zeus?” they ask. I tell them, “Olympia is a place that is holy to Zeus and not really a town. It is just a sanctuary, and no one lives there, except, of course, for the month before the competition. Then, everyone wants to live there!”

“These messengers,” I explain, “have come to announce the Olympic Truce, the *Ekecheiria*, as they call it. They are here to help the athletes reach the sanctuary of Zeus and compete in the games. After the announcement of the temporary peace, we can travel by sea and land to Olympia and not fear getting caught or captured by one of our city’s enemies. No wars until the end of the Olympics, that is Zeus’ will, and woe to that city that breaks this command.”

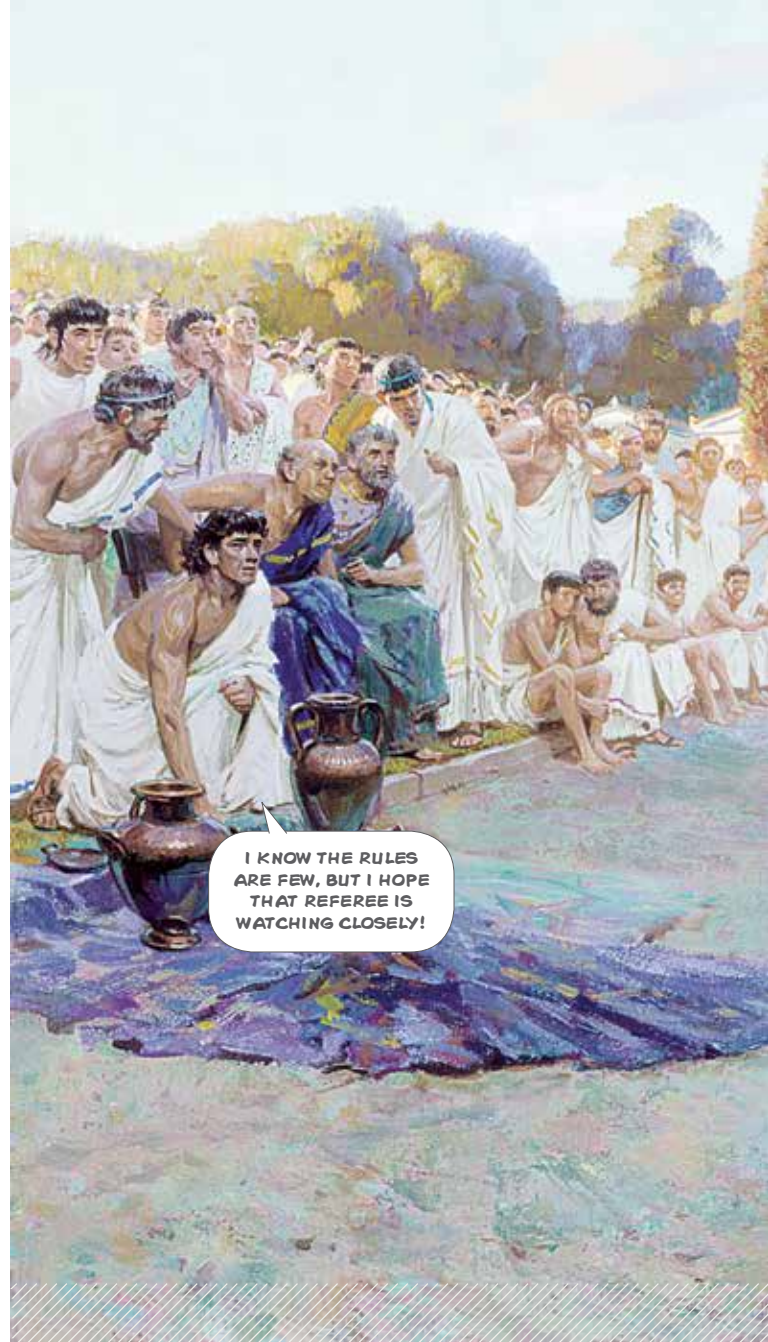
I think about a story my father once told me about Sparta. It happened many years ago. Sparta chose to declare war on a city near Olympia and attacked, breaking the sacred truce that was in effect. The Spartans claimed that the messengers had not yet arrived when the fighting began, but everyone knew better. As punishment, Sparta was banned from the games and its athletes disqualified. In addition, the city had to pay a heavy fine. For every soldier that they sent into the battle, they were charged two **drachmas**! Since then, no one has ever repeated Sparta's foolish actions.

### **1 MONTH BEFORE THE OLYMPICS**

The journey from Rhodes to Olympia has been long. It took us more than a week over land and sea to get here, but now we have arrived. As I said, there is no formal city here as we have in Rhodes. Olympia is a sanctuary with racetracks and an arena. We are actually living in tents at Elis, with each person setting up his own camp. This is where I will stay for the next month and train with those who think they can beat me. While anyone can compete here, very few can afford the trip or the expense of living here for a month without pay. Participating in the Olympics is a labor of love. Athletes who lose go home in disgrace. No city in Greece cares about second place. But, for winners, the rewards and honors are beyond imagination.

### **1 WEEK BEFORE THE OLYMPICS**

Training has become much more intense, and all 10 of the *Hellanodikai* are getting nervous. They are the organizers, as well as the judges for the events, and they see what we all see: There are



still too many of us here. Only 20 sprinters can compete in the race. To force some of us to leave, they have been making life difficult by demanding that we do more training or by judging our moral characters. Several have asked me if I have taken any bribes. Some athletes will accept bribes and cheat, but if they are caught, the punishment is forever! The *Hellanodikai* will go so far as to erect statues of the cheaters, then turn those statues to face away from Olympia and Zeus. No dishonor could be greater than having

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**Drachmas** were silver coins that were commonly used in ancient Greece.



your name and face in stone with the word “cheater” written below for all generations to see.

### **DAY 1 OF THE GAMES**

Let the games begin! We have been escorted to the sacred grounds and have sworn not to cheat. There are so many people here, but I only see men everywhere. No women. I have been told that only one woman, the priestess of Demeter, is allowed to watch the games. Because it is the oldest competition, I would have thought there

would have been seats or benches for the spectators. Everyone is standing around the tracks watching us, as we march through with the sacrifices that the priests will make to Zeus.

### **DAY 2 OF THE GAMES**

Today, we returned to the stadium to honor the boys, especially those who will be part of future games. They competed in boxing and wrestling. Some were very good and hope to be Olympic victors when they are older. This evening, the

young men were honored at a feast and celebration. Tomorrow is the first big day for the athletes. Some are getting very nervous, especially the charioteers. That will be the main event tomorrow. Tonight they will keep a watchful eye on their horses and chariots. This will be the night that their rivals might try to poison their horses or sabotage their chariots.

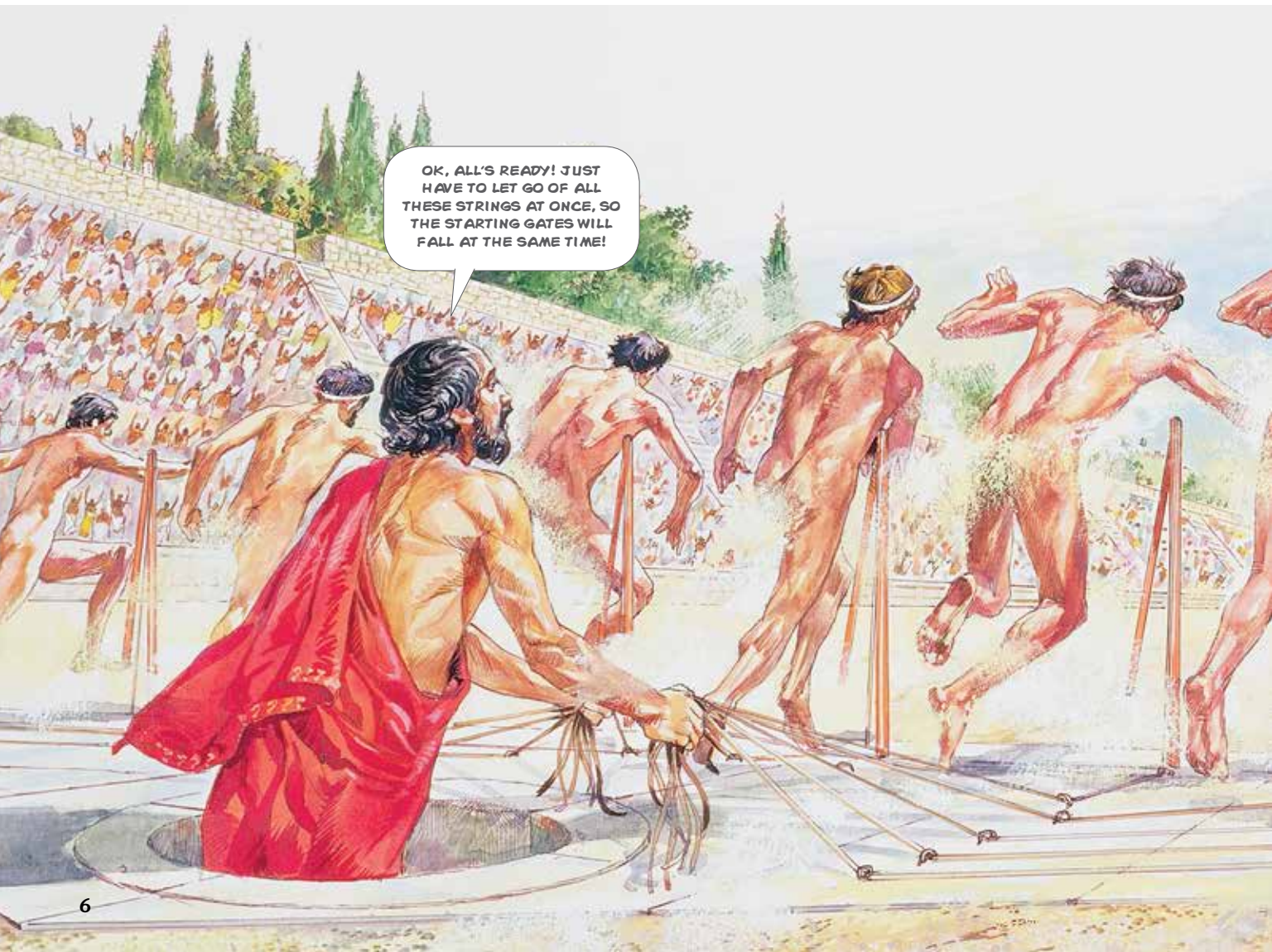
### **DAY 3 OF THE GAMES**

What an exciting day! I watched with the others as the chariots raced around the **hippodrome**.

The charioteers have their own stadium, and we runners are thankful. I would not want to step in anything! The first was the *tethrippon*, the race with four horses. I do not know how anyone can control four horses while racing around the track 12 times. Thankfully, there were no collisions, but I think some people came to see one. The two-horse chariot races, what they call the *synoris*, came next. It is half as long, but twice as fast! In the afternoon, we walked over to the stadium for the pentathlon. This event actually includes five different competitions—sprint, long jump, discus,

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**A hippodrome was the arena or stadium that had a course for chariot and horse races.**



OK, ALL'S READY! JUST HAVE TO LET GO OF ALL THESE STRINGS AT ONCE, SO THE STARTING GATES WILL FALL AT THE SAME TIME!

javelin, and wrestling. The sprinters here are not as fast as I am, but I am not very good at the javelin. I will wait for my events tomorrow.

### **DAY 4 OF THE GAMES**

This was the day I had been training for. My event is the *stadion*—the oldest and noblest of the Olympic events. My rivals looked fast, but when the rope dropped and we took off, it was clear that I was the fastest person in the world! No one came close. I reached the finish line to cheering crowds and to the honor I have wanted all my life, an

olive wreath being placed on my head. The boxing and wrestling events followed. Tomorrow, after the awards ceremonies, we will feast on the sacrificed oxen and go home. My name, Leonidas of Rhodes, will be remembered forever (see page 24). My country will honor me and my descendants, and Zeus will know who I am.

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