Even in ancient times athletes were expected to thoroughly prepare themselves for the Olympic Games. Frequently the coaches were physicians at the same time. They were assisted by bath attendants and masseurs. Their probably most important representative was Herodicos of Selymbria. Originally a coach (Paidotribe) he created a new cure which made use of gymnastics. His written records on problems of dietetics and physical rehabilitation are probably connected with the special interest of Greek physicians in the care for athletes. Even Hippocrates (460 – 370 B.C.) was decisively influenced by him.

Excessive Demands on Youths Criticized
Contemporary writers complain about ambitious coaches who ask too much of young competitors preparing for the Games. Already Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.) had found it was harmful to demand of boys to perform in training like grown men. Thus it came about that young Olympic champions, who had been selected separately since the 37th Olympiad, were rarely successful in their prime of life.

Ancient Sex Check
Ancient Olympic athletes competed stark naked. In Greek everyday life nakedness was not the rule at all. Nor were competitions held naked in Homer’s time and during the first Olympiads. The Spartan long-distance champion of the 15th Olympiad Akanthos (720 B.C.) is supposed to have run naked for the first time. Shortly before a sprinter was said to have lost his loincloth and won. Since then nakedness of competitors had become common practice and a regulation. Later this rule (404 B.C.) was also applied to coaches in the arena after a young athlete’s mother, disguised as a male coach, was so overjoyed at her son’s first-fight win that she jumped over the fence enclosing the arena and was discovered as a woman.

Sports Injuries – Highly Important
In his epos from the 4th century B.C. Quintus of Smyrna describes the medical treatment of athletes. He informs about the therapy of a sprained ankle using blood-letting and ointment. The injuries of a boxer were sucked out, sutured and externally treated with medication. As boxers used to fight with their bare fists only covered with leather bands, serious injuries disfiguring the face seem to have been common. Documents even describe two fatal cases. Numerous accidents happened during pancreation, a brutal combination of boxing and wrestling. In these cruel and violent fights very serious injuries and even fatalities are conceivable. The Greek writer Philostratos nevertheless called these fights the most beautiful events in Olympia. Galen (129 – 199), a sports physician and surgeon with the gladiators, reports about injuries in runners outstraining themselves and points out that fast runs had already caused many deaths owing to vascular “rupture of a bloodvessel”. A long-distance runner is reported to have died on his way home after a successful competition.

As sports injuries were likely to happen regularly, physicians with a good knowledge of the subject were engaged early. It can be proved that an association of professional athletes had engaged a senior physician from Asia Minor (Archiatros) during the time of the Roman empire in the second century.

Decline and Ban of the Ancient Olympic Games
The decline of the Olympic Games was connected with the Roman rule over the defeated Greece, Christian resistance to the Zeus cult, beginning commercial interests into sports, professional sportmanship and corruption.

To be able to take part in the Olympic Games himself the infamous caesar Nero (37 – 68) ordered to postpone the 211th Olympic Games for two years in 65. He introduced completely new disciplines and had himself declared the winner in many events. He was also proclaimed winner in the colt race in teams of ten, a discipline he had introduced, and this although he had fallen from the cart and did not reach the finish post at all. Those responsible for the Games (Hellanodikes) later took these Games off the list of Olympiads.

In 393 the Roman caesar Theodosius I finally banned the Olympic Games for ever. Two years before all so-called heathen celebrations had already been banned.

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Literature