Olympics Essay, Research Paper

Were the ancient games better than ours? More fair and square? More about sports and less about money? Are modern games more sexist? More political? Have we strayed from the ancient Olympic ideal?

It’s easy to assume that the ancient Olympic Games were different, that ancient Greek athletes were pure in mind and body, that they trained and competed for no other reason than the love of physical exercise, fair competition and to honor their gods.

In fact, politics, nationalism, commercialism and athletics were intimately related in the ancient Olympic games.

We may not realize it, but in today’s games we recreate –with surprising accuracy — the climate and circumstances surrounding the ancient Olympic games.

From the ancient Mount Olympus, home of the Greek gods, to Salt Lake City’s Mt. Olympus, the Olympic games may have come full circle.

The ancient Games began as part of a religious festival, and in 2002 they will play out in Utah, a land founded as a religious sanctuary.

The original physical contests — conducted in the nude to display the athletes’ ideal bodies — were sandwiched between processions, sacrifices, altar rituals and banquets.

“There was no such thing as secular athletics,” said David Gilman Romano, who has written extensively about Olympic origins.

The revelries were held in a stadium near the temple of Zeus in Olympia southwest of Athens. The temple housed a 45-foot-high ivory and gold statue of the god that was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Feats of prowess and agility were meant to please Zeus, said Romano, senior research scientist at the University of Pennsylvania’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Soon games were held at several sacred spots in the Greek city-states, including Nemea, Delphi and Corinth, and honored their gods — Zeus, Apollo and Poseidon. They were open to all Greek free men.

Unmarried girls could watch the Olympic games, but married women could not. Both were allowed to participate in an alternative sport festival that honored the goddess Hera, a consort of Zeus.

The female athletes wore a short, knee-length tunic that covered one breast, and braided hair hanging down their backs, Romano said. They were divided into age groups for a single foot race of about 155 meters or 508 feet, five-sixths the length of the men’s race.

It was another kind of competition that put an end to Olympic games in A.D. 393 after more than 1,000 years: Christianity vs. paganism.

In a single edict, Holy Roman Emperor Theodosius, fearful of the continuing popularity of pagan festivals including the Olympics, abolished the games.

“They were too attractive to the populace,” Romano said.

Though some athletic competitions continued to exist, it would be 1,500 years before the concept of the Olympics as a peaceful competition among all nations was resurrected.

In 1894, a Frenchman named Baron Pierre de Coubertin promoted the reborn Olympics as “a new civil religion,” replete with symbols, traditions, rites and ceremonies.

Winners received a silver medal, a certificate and a “crown of olive branches,” while those finishing second earned a copper medal and “a crown of laurel,” both reminiscent of the ancient games.

De Coubertin drew on his Catholic education for the official Olympic motto — Faster, Higher, Stronger — first coined by Dominican Father Henri Didon in an 1891 speech to the members of a sports association.

The idea of the Olympic torch or “eternal flame” was launched in the 1932 Olympic games in Los Angeles. The modern torch relay was first instituted in the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin.

By contrast, today’s Games seem thoroughly secular.

“Michael Johnson is not running for Zeus, but for his country, his honor and himself,” Romano said.

And there’s not the same kind of “enthusiasm” among contemporary athletes as there was in ancient Greece, said William D. Cocorinis, who teaches Greek at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

The word “enthusiasm” comes from the Greek word meaning “possessed by a god,” Cocorinis said.

“The spirit of the Olympic Games was much higher than it is today,” he said.

Still, there remain quasi-religious elements: the torch relay, the lighting of the Olympic flame (which parallels the ritual performed by vestal virgins in the ancient altar to Hera in Olympia), the Olympic oath that all athletes and officials take in unison, the procession of countries that opens and closes the Games.

Religion — for good or ill — has touched the modern Olympics here and there.

During the Berlin Olympics, Adolf Hitler tried to tie his notion of Aryan superiority to ancient Greek idealism, Romano said. He barred Jewish athletes from competing for Germany during the 1936 Olympics. In 1972, 11 Israeli athletes were gunned during the Olympics in Munich.

Rome, home to Vatican City, headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church, played host to the 1960 Olympics, the first Games that were broadcast around the world on television. Catholic leaders did nothing to exploit the connection, but “they might today,” Romano, said.

More recently, Olympic co-chairman and Protestant minister Andrew Young said, “a higher power was at work” in the bid to get the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

A Buddhist temple formed the backdrop for the 1998 Olympics in Nagano, Japan. And for its bid for the 2006 Olympics, Torino, Italy, came up with a logo that included the illustration of a church that houses the famous Shroud of Turin, believed to bear the imprint of the face of Jesus.

And in Salt Lake City, religious forces already are marshaling troops of volunteers for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

Southern Baptists plan to minister to athletes and share their faith with visitors.

Many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, though not specifically mandated to proselytize during the Games, will no doubt try to do so.

Other Utah faiths, including Hindus, Muslims, Hare Krishnas, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs and many varieties of Christians, also may vie for worldwide attention, if not converts.

All these groups could take a cue from the ancient Greek city-states, which agreed to a “Sacred Truce” requiring warring factions to put down their arms for the duration of the Games.

Of course, even they broke the truce on occasion. In 342 B.C., a battle for control of the competition broke out between two cities. One side ran an army right through the middle of the sanctuary during a wrestling match, Romano said.