Reviving the Games

Twenty athletes line up for a foot-race. Around them, the smell of cheap food fills the summer air. Watching expectantly on a hillside, a huge crowd cheers as the race begins. This is no modern scene. It's an ancient race at Olympia, in Greece. The Olympic Games began here as a simple running race, in 776 BCE, to honour the Greek god Zeus. It grew into a huge attraction in which rival Greek cities competed in athletics, fighting and chariot-racing every fourth year.

Victorious athletes win a crown of olive leaves but no precious gold or silver medals.

the Olympia track is 180km from the Greek capital, Athens

spectators watch from a low hill

the Games attract hordes of seedy pedlars, gamblers and good-time girls

spectators from warring Greek states vow not to fight during the events

only judges and celebrities have seats in a special enclosure

It was not uncommon for judges to accept bribes from athletes

interest in the Olympics fades, but the contest is not forgotten. There are 'revival' games in France, Britain and Greece. Then, in 1894, wealthy French scholar Baron de Coubertin starts the International Olympic Committee. He wants to recreate the Olympics to encourage sportsmen worldwide.
Two years later, the first modern Olympic Games begin in Athens. It's just a small event in which 241 athletes compete. It is largely ignored by the world's press. But it achieves Baron de Coubertin's aim of using sport to bring rival nations together. As the competitors leave Athens at the end, they say "See you in Paris in four years!"