Duration
Environ 30 minutes

Target group
Ages 12 and upwards

Description
What are the similarities and differences between the starting position of a runner in the ancient Olympic Games and one today? Can you copy the athletes’ positions?

Equipment
• Images of sprint starts today and in Ancient Greece (reconstruction)
• Information sheet on races at the ancient Games
• If you can, get hold of some starting blocks (optional)

Activity leaders: 1 or 2

Preparation (activity leader)
• Print or photocopy the attached images.
• If you want to know more about the ancient Olympic Games, read the “Olympic Games in Antiquity” text from the document set (download here: http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Reports/FR/fr_report_658.pdf)

Instructions
1. Ask the group if and why the starting position for a 200 m (position, reaction time) is important (open discussion).
2. Quickly introduce the Olympic Games of Antiquity (cf. information sheet) and explain that, among the various competitions of the time, there were also sprint races (including a 192m-sprint – equivalent to the length of a stadium).
3. Ask if the participants think that the athletes’ positions at the start of a race at the time were similar to those of today (discussion). Show the images and identify the similarities and differences.
4. Ask the participants to copy the positions (Antiquity & today). Who is the best imitator in the group?
5. Organise a real race with the two starting positions (with or without starting blocks for modern races), so that the children can directly “test” the different positions.
Annex: information sheet

Sprint races at the Ancient Olympic Games

• Like today, the ancient Olympic Games comprised a wide variety of athletics events, such as long-distance running races, a race in armour and a pentathlon made up of a stadium race, a long jump, a discus throw, javelin throw and a wrestling event.

• All races were held in the Olympic Stadium.

• There were several types of race:
  – The stade or stadion covered one length of the stadium, roughly 192 m.
  – The diaulos two lengths, or a double stadium.
  – The dolichos was a long-distance race (from 7 to 24 laps).
  – The race in armour (in Olympia it was a diaulos), where the athletes wore a helmet and greaves, and carried a shield.

• The competitors took their place on a starting line marked out by white limestone slabs.

• Their position was standing, feet together, knees slightly bent and arms extended in front of them.

• A barrier was lowered to signal the start. The race was run in a straight line.

• For the longer races, the runners ran around a marker or post at each end of the stadium.

• The athletes always trained and competed naked – indeed, they had to reflect the ideal of a harmonious balance between the body and mind.

Sprinting at the modern Olympic Games

• Modern athletics is made up of a variety of races, jumps, throws, walks and combined events.

• Athletics was on the programme of the Games of the I Olympiad in Athens in 1896 and has featured on the programme ever since.

• The short and medium distance running races (up to 10,000 m) are held in the stadium.

• For the start of the 100 m, 200 m and 400 m races, the athlete is in a crouching position. He pushes off from a starting block, a piece of adjustable equipment made up of two blocks for the feet.
Ancient Games – Race starting position

Starting position of a race from Antiquity (reconstruction)

Modern Games – race starting position (sprint)

Carline Muir (Canada), Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, Athletics, women’s 400 m