

## A SPARK OF HOPE



“I was in the fourth race. Standing in the original stone starting blocks and waiting for the signal to run – barefoot, and clad in a white tunic – the adrenaline really began to flow. . . . I’ll never forget the day and the sheer excitement of the whole event. What a wonderful way to celebrate the excavation of this superb site.” *Noel UK*



“The 7.5km was fantastic, even though it was uphill! Great way to see the scenery and locals and.... to run through the tunnel one last time, a truly memorable experience.” *Michelle USA*



“We participated, we laughed, we cried and we definitely sweated (in 37C heat) as we replicated the efforts of the ancient athletes to be true to the real spirit of the Games, supported by Greek volunteers and local villagers. People lined the streets as we pounded through the streets, they applauded, cheered and sprayed us with water and "bravos" of encouragement: they did this for the joy of life; for the pride we took in (trying) to recreate some of the glory of ancient times.” *Hugh Scotland, Kathimerini 25/6/12*



“ . . . chatting with a young woman from Iceland, where the record high temperature, & hottest she’d ever experienced previously, was 79 degrees (as we jogged together in 98 degrees), to helping the Japanese who were having trouble understanding where they were to go & when, to any number of Greeks, Americans, Brits, & others with whom we had engaging conversations – it was indeed a day of international fellowship and camaraderie” *Wendy USA*



“Entering through the restored tunnel into the ancient stadium, in 6th century BC running kit – bare feet and a sweaty tunic – to complete the race with a lap round the same track that athletes ran on in 573BC, was a genuinely unique experience. It highlighted the strength of Greece’s directly accessible link with the past and the many lessons the ancient world has to offer contemporary societies.” *Ed UK*



“This, for me, is the great moment: In the dark tunnel there are no cameras, no phones, nothing of the modern world, there are only my feet slapping the same rough hard earth that ancient athletes experienced.” *Kevin UK, The Guardian 7/7/12*



“This was truly a spiritual revival and something that, despite the physical weariness, I shall do again and again as long as I am able.” *Lambis* GREECE



“We wish to thank you for allowing us to hope in the future of Hellas and its people and to experience something so different and special” *Marina* GREECE



These are only a few of the comments by people from around the world who participated in the Fifth Modern Revival of the Nemean Games on June 22-24, 2012. This event has been held every four years in the ancient stadium of Nemea by the Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games which has two guiding principles: authenticity and participation. The revival will be as true as possible to ancient practices and available to everyone to participate.

My personal goal is to give as many people as possible the opportunity to learn about ancient Greece by living it. Passing from the ancient locker room through the tunnel, barefoot and clad in simple white tunics, many of the participants have reported a sensation of travelling back in time, of making direct contact with ancient Greece. But it takes effort and help to provide that opportunity.

There was intense discussion two years ago about whether we should even try to have the Fifth Nemead. The Society was not in good shape with more than a thousand lapsed members, no office, no staff, and in the midst of an international economic crisis. Even more discouraging was the prospect of cleaning up the stadium which, after several years without maintenance, needed pruning of trees, clearing of the drainage system, and replacement of rotted benches in addition to the normal preparation of the track surface. Finally, the ancient entrance tunnel had to be conserved so that it could be open for the games. The tunnel plays a central role in the revival - the transition from the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. takes place as the modern athlete passes through the tunnel - and the estimated cost of the work was €190,000. But thanks to the hard work and generosity of hundreds of people, the Fifth Nemead was the best ever.



That fact is represented by many details. The number of country flags of the participants at the end of the track was dramatically increased. There were 1,016 runners from 87 countries (out of 1,297 registrations from 106 countries), more than

twice as many as in 2008. The non-Greek participants were nearly a third (32%) of the total. Some 240 volunteers, mostly from Nemea, plus others from around Greece and around the world, helped with the preparations - sweeping the stadium floor,



painting the benches around the stadium, erecting the tent over the locker room,



gathering wild celery for the victory crowns - and as duty staff during the games.



It was anticipated that finances would be a problem - about €250,000 had to be found for the games and the tunnel conservation, all from private sources. For the latter project support came from the Niarchos Foundation, the Opheltes Association, the Canellopoulos Foundation, and the Latsis Foundation. The actual game costs were provided by smaller amounts from members and friends of the Society, and here was an interesting phenomenon. The average donation was reduced in size from previous years, but many more people made donations. Further, there were contributions in kind. One supporter supplied the unexpected extra flags, a local shop keeper donated brooms and paint for the stadium preparations, yet another made a tripod cauldron to ancient specifications. It was used to light the torch at the Altar of Nemean Zeus.



And the city of Nemea helped with office space and gravel for the drainage system, and the removal of 35 truck loads of pruned debris from the stadium slopes. All of this made it very clear that people were resolved that the Nemean Games should be revived once again; that the Society's goals were too precious to allow any interruption in their pursuit; that in order to preserve this special event, people would roll up their sleeves and dip into their own pockets and not wait for the State or the EU or somebody else. And their efforts and support were crowned with success beyond our hopes.

The festival began on the afternoon of June 22 at the Temple of Nemean Zeus which was the religious center of the Nemean Games. There "Nemea" awaited the arrival of "Ekecheiria", the Sacred Truce that was observed in ancient Greece at the time of each of the four games of the Panhellenic cycle: Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea. Ekecheiria arrived in the company of heralds and "spondophoroi", the truce-bearers who travelled through the ancient world to announce the games.





Now Ekecheiria crowned Nemea, and the two led the procession with the flame lighted at the Altar of Zeus to the stadium.



As they passed by, a corps of soldiers laid down their spears and rested their shields in silent respect for the Truce - Ekecheiria means “restraint of arms.”



Once at the stadium, and after the newly restored tunnel had been officially opened by representatives of the Hellenic National Committee of UNESCO - under

whose aegis the Fifth Nemead took place - and of the Niarchos foundation, Nemea and Ekecheiria and the Nemea Flame were the first to enter through the tunnel.



The stadium altar was lighted and the Regional Governor, Petros Tatoulis, announced the beginning of the Fifth Nemead.

June 23 was the day of the races beginning at 8 a.m. The twelve positions on the ancient starting line dictate the number in each group and the grooves for the runners' toes dictate their starting stance. Once again the ancient *hysplex* starting mechanism functioned perfectly. There were no false starts, and no flogging, although the judges were prepared with their authentic *lygos* sticks.



There were many highlights from the races. In the first race with the group of the most senior men. (photograph above), the sixth runner on the line is Andreas Potamianos. He was victorious, as he was also victorious in the First Nemead in 1996.



In the fourth race, the Treasurer of the Society (second lane) was not the quickest to start, but he did win. He assures us that there was no favoritism.



The winner in the fifth race for men holds the traditional palm branch and wears the ribbon which were the preliminary tokens of victory at the ancient Games. He stands with his arm around his son who will win his race in the afternoon.



Meanwhile, wife and mother will win at midday. In 2004 the husband and wife also won, as did a daughter. She came in second this year. This formidable California family was not alone. A grandmother and a granddaughter won their races, and a



mother (foreground, photograph above) and each of her two daughters were winners.



World families also ran. Here are young men in one race from Jordan (the winner with his ribbon), Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Ecuador, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy (2), Norway, and Chinese Taipei.



Another race had competitors from Switzerland (the winner), Armenia, Canada, Georgia (2), Greece (2), Hungary, Malta, Singapore, Spain, and USA. The white chitons (tunics) worn by each emphasize their shared humanity.



Many non-Greeks came to Nemea thanks to the co-operation of the International Olympic Academy which has come to believe that the revived Nemean Games make a contribution to the Olympic movement. But others came by themselves, such as a group of young men from France whose “team” shirts proudly proclaimed them to be “Les Lions de Némée.”



At the ancient games, *mastigophoroi* (cudgel-bearers) with sticks of *lygos* (chaste tree) kept order while a trumpeter called for the attention of the crowd.



A herald could then make announcements to an attentive audience without any artificial voice amplification.



A judge offers a helmet filled with marble lots marked with lane numbers . . .



. . . and tiny toes fit into the same grooves as did the toes of older athletes a few hours, and several thousand years, earlier.



With bare feet on the track, contact with antiquity is not restricted by age or gender.



Nor has the urge to win been lost through the millennia.



Victory can be an uplifting experience, even for the judge . . .



. . . . and to have victory in hand is satisfying for all ages.



The return to the locker room brings everyone back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but with a fresh perspective on our world.



While the youngest boys are running in the stadium, long-distance runners assemble at the ancient temple of Herakles in neighboring Kleonai. This was the traditional starting point associated with the first labor of Herakles, and here the athletes swear to do nothing to bring shame to the games or to themselves. Then they



are off to retrace the Footsteps of Herakles just as he set out against the Nemean Lion.



The 7.5 kilometer course takes the runners through vineyards and olive groves, and



up the streets of the town where locals hand out water to the runners, including the



Ukrainian Ambassador, Volodymyr Shkurov



Although shoes may be worn on the Footsteps race, a few disdain them, but



. . . the final lap through the tunnel and around the stadium must be done barefooted, and so the locker room is filled with shoes.



The winner is a Greek from Syria who also won in 2008. As then, he celebrates with a handstand race of his own.



The women's winner of the Footsteps of Herakles is from Costa Rica seen here as she comes out of the tunnel for her victory lap to the cheers of the crowd.



As more runners come into the stadium, those who have already finished congratulate one another and themselves while the winner makes a phone call.



Now it is time to return to the locker room to wash feet and reclaim shoes.



The closing ceremonies begin with the entrance of the heralds leading a procession of Priestesses of Zeus and Judges.



The Priestesses were Ambassadors from Cuba, Hungary, Austria, and the Consul of the Czech Republic.



The Judges were Ambassadors from Norway and France, the Second Secretary of the British Embassy, and Ambassadors of Greece, India, Ukraine, and Japan. Kakhi Kakhiashvili, Olympic Victor from Georgia and Greece (not pictured), also served.



There followed the entrance procession of the victors with palm branches and ribbons.



A table awaited with crowns of wild celery, the final victory symbol of the ancient Nemean Games.



The winners came one-by-one to be crowned by a Judge or a Priestess. Here a former student at the University of California is crowned by the Ambassador of India while his teacher looks on.



A young Greek victor is crowned by the Austrian ambassador.



Kakhi Kakhiashvili places the wild celery crown on the head of a winner, the daughter of the Mayor of Nemea, a two-time Nemean victor. At the right is the granddaughter of a woman who won her own race earlier in the day.



A young Greek victor gets a crown of wild celery, and a Czech kiss.



The shortest victor is congratulated by the tallest judge, the Norwegian ambassador.



The Footsteps of Herakles victor receives his crown from the French Ambassador.



The Prayer to Nemean Earth is offered while the Judges and Priestesses prepare to extinguish the flame on the altar.

## Προσευχή στη Γη - Prayer to Earth

Oh Sacred Earth of Ancient Greece,  
 Ιερή Γη της Αρχαίας Ελλάδος,  
 Dear Mother Earth,  
 Μητέρα Γη αγαπημένη,  
 Mother of every people ever born,  
 Μητέρα κάθε λαού που γεννήθηκε ποτέ,  
 Mother of this flame,  
 Μητέρα αυτής της φλόγας,  
 We entrust this flame,  
 Εμπιστευόμαστε τη φλόγα αυτή,  
 Back to your care,  
 Πάλι στη δική σου φροντίδα,  
 Guard this flame,  
 Φύλαξε τη φλόγα αυτή,  
 Guard the hope,  
 Φύλαξε την ελπίδα,  
 That burns bright within it,  
 Που καίει λαμπρά μέσα της,

That all peoples of your planet,  
Ότι όλοι οι λαοί του πλανήτη σου,  
All of us who are your children,  
Ότι όλοι εμείς που είμαστε παιδιά σου,  
Will live in peace,  
Θα ζήσουμε με ειρήνη,  
And love,  
Και αγάπη,  
Until we meet again,  
Μέχρι να συναντηθούμε πάλι,  
On Nemean Earth,  
Στη Γη της Νεμέας.



The Ukrainian Ambassador deposits Nemean Earth on the flame while the Japanese Ambassador waits his turn.



A trumpet call, echoed by another at the rim of the stadium, signals the end of the fifth revival of the Nemean Games



The locker room awaits the clean-up crew tomorrow . . .



. . . and on the altar, beneath Nemean Earth, a spark glows, awaiting the next games.

Stephen G. Miller

### About the author

Miller has a special interest in the stadium at Nemea. As a Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of California at Berkeley and Director of the Nemea Excavations he discovered the stadium in 1974 and the entrance tunnel four years later. In 1991, he uncovered the locker room, and opened the site to the public in 1994. Now retired from the University of California at Berkeley, he is currently serving as the President of the Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games which is based in Nemea, but has more than 2,000 active members world-wide. In that capacity he led the stadium clean-up and the conservation of the tunnel in preparation for the 2012 Nemean Games.

The opening day of the Fifth Nemead, June 22, 2012, was his seventieth birthday.