



Nelson's day left in ruins

Foul costs shot-putter gold

ANCIENT OLYMPIA, Greece — At 5:06 yesterday afternoon, beneath a grove of olive and pine trees, Adam Nelson of Atlanta, Ga., walked by the ancient ruins of the temple of Zeus, beneath a stone arch and into the stadium where the Olympics began, in 776 B.C.

He was leading a procession of Olympic shot-putters, thick-bodied, thick-necked men who were about to enter a dirt-floored den of antiquity, and be immersed in history that was as palpable as the crumbling columns and fading marble slabs.

Two rivers converge in this valley in southern Greece, just as the past converged with the present on a sweltering mid-week afternoon. A little more

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than 200 miles from the gleaming tumult and new construction of the Games, Olympic competition returned here after a 1,600-year layoff. There were no chariots racing, no naked men wrestling or boxing. There were just 12 large men throwing a 16-pound ball, and 12 women throwing their own ball, 8.8 pounds, in a stadium adjacent to a vast sanctuary with acres of dirt paths beneath towering trees, and stone relics of statues and altars and temples, all to the glory of Zeus.

There were no women competing in antiquity, and none in the stands either. Otherwise, the set-



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Adam Nelson finds fault with foul call on final throw.

ting had much more to do with then than now. Twenty thousand fans sat on a hillside at the base of Kronio Hill. The athletes competed in a 200-meter by 28-meter dirt rectangle, the perimeter rimmed in 2,700 year-old marble, wind periodically kicking up dust. There were no luxury suites, no signage, no concessions. The scoreboard was manually operated, a white board not far from the throwing ring. When Athens Olympic officials decided to stage an event at the birthplace of the games, they didn't want to muck it up with modern-day crassness, or amenities.

"The Greeks have exceeded all my expectations," said Nelson, the silver medalist four years ago in Sydney. "This is better than anything I could have dreamed of. This facility is absolutely world-class. It has been for 3,500 years, so why would it change now?"

Cleopatra Borel of Trinidad and Tobago finished in

11th place in the women's competition, won by Irina Korzhanenko of Russia, who has flaming pink-red hair and had a winning throw of 69 feet, 1 1/4 inches (21.06 meters).

"Usually when I am out of a competition I am angry," Borel said. "This time I'm not. This time I'm really happy to be here and competing."

It was that sort of day here, the mood as bright as the sun, the complaints few, the concerns about empty seats and missed drug tests and exiled national heroes left behind. It was 776 B.C. when the Olympics were born in Olympia, and they were held every four years right up until A.D. 393, when a Roman Emperor and Christian named Theodosius abolished them, believed the games were a pagan ritual.

The Games did not get revived until 1896. The U.S. team held out hope for a sweep here, but did not come close to that. Ryan Hoffa didn't get out of qualifying and John Godina, a three-time Olympian and two-time medalist, didn't make the final eight. He was profoundly moved by the experience of being so connected to history, but his mood wasn't pretty when he walked back through the archway, toward the sanctuary.

"I should've won it. I screwed up," Godina said.



Competitors in women's shot put make their way through ruins

Before each of his six throws, Nelson performed his usual ritual, walking out to the landing area, exhorting the crowd by clapping his hands over his head, then dramatically ripping off his shirt and strutting into the ring. He reached 69 feet, 5 1/4 inches (21.16 meters) on his first throw of the day. For six rounds, everyone took their shot at him. Yuriy Bilonog of Ukraine twice threw 21.15, but that didn't do it. On his sixth and final throw, Bilonog spun and heaved and let fly, and when the measurement was made, he had thrown 21.16.

Nelson fouled on his next four attempts after his first throw. Everything had come down to the last throw of the competition. Nelson went through his routine, took to the ring, got off a strong throw. The official's red flag went up, meaning he had fouled. Nelson strenuously objected, pointing to his footprint,

as if to say he had stayed within the circle.

By one throw and a fraction of an inch, Nelson had lost his gold, and gone silver again. He looked at a replay and realized the judge was right. He had fouled.

"It's very hard to lose like this," he said.

During the victory ceremony, young women in white dresses formed a circle in the stadium. Olive wreaths were placed on Bilonog, Nelson and bronze medalist Joachim Olsen of Denmark, just like the ones the ancient Greeks were awarded. Nelson hugged his wife, Laci, and they cried together. It hurt to be so close, hurt a lot, but even as Adam Nelson left the stadium and passed through the arch, antiquity all around him, you had the sense that the day the Olympics celebrated their history, and the past converged with the present, was one he would remember for a long, long time.



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Fans brave heat and dust to see history repeated among ruins of Olympia.