



By Sharyn Alden

Athens 2004? Even Better!

Best-selling author Margaret George time travels to the site of the first Olympics ... and WINS!

It wasn't a gold medal that Margaret George won after crossing the finish line first in her sprint event July 31 in Nemea, Greece. But her prizes — a victory palm branch and a crown of wild celery — were no less coveted.

Nemea, site of the original Olympic games and about two hours from Athens, was buzzing in mid-summer. Hundreds of people from around the globe gathered to recreate the ancient games and bring them back from whence they came.

George, who won the 100-meter race for her age group, was one of 700 runners — from ages 10 to 97, and from 20 countries — who participated in the third Nemean Games. The games are supported by the Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games, an international group of "who's who" in academia and athletics. These are people who traveled back in time to keep the spirit of the ancient games alive. And they succeeded by recreating the famous "crown" races, the most famous of which took place at Nemea.

The road to victory

Who knew that Margaret George, international bestselling author, with subjects including *Mary Queen of Scots*, *Cleopatra*, and *Mary, Called Magdalene*; (her next book



Margaret George is ready to race! Here, she's at the starting point of the 100-meter sprint she went on to win.

about Helen of Troy is due out in 2006) was interested in running? It turns out she had been training for the Nemea games for some time without consciously knowing it. George has participated in Madison's Crazylegs races and Badger State Games, and last year, started actively sprinting.

"I had been a good sprinter in high school, and about a year ago I got back into it by joining the Wisconsin Track Club," she says.

As a history buff and runner, going to Nemea was a natural. "When I read about the Nemea Games in the *New York Times* last January," she says, "I knew I had to go to Greece." Her interest was also piqued when she learned that the original Olympics was comprised of one event, the 150-meter sprint, and that the 2004 Nemea Games would honor that tradition. The sprint, after all, was George's forte.

And so she went, and win she did. The victory was sweet, although the perks had lessened over time. "When athletes won their events in the original games," she says, "they received the same awards I received but they were treated like heroes in the true sense of the word. The winner had a poem written in their honor by a prestigious poet, they received free meals for the rest of their life, and the honor was so great, a plaque commemorating their valor was put on their tombstones."

Although George won't be eating free for life, the thrill of victory was plenty satisfying.

A faithful reenactment with a nod to modern times

The Nemea games were created to faithfully reenact the original Olympics, but there were concessions to modern times. "I wouldn't have been able to run as a participant in 776 B.C., when the Olympic Games began, because women athletes weren't allowed to participate," George says. Interestingly, married women weren't even allowed in the stadium to watch the games. If married women tried to watch, the punishment was brutal. The ones who got caught would be flung to death off a nearby cliff.

On the flip side, unmarried "maidens" were encouraged to come to the games because (gasp!) the men ran naked. In fact, the maidens' fathers would take their daughters in hopes of doing some on-site matchmaking. "The real prize might be the arrangement of marriage with the champion Olympian," George says.

Held at a different time of year than the Olympics, 16 virgins ran the Heraia, or games of Hera, at Olympia.

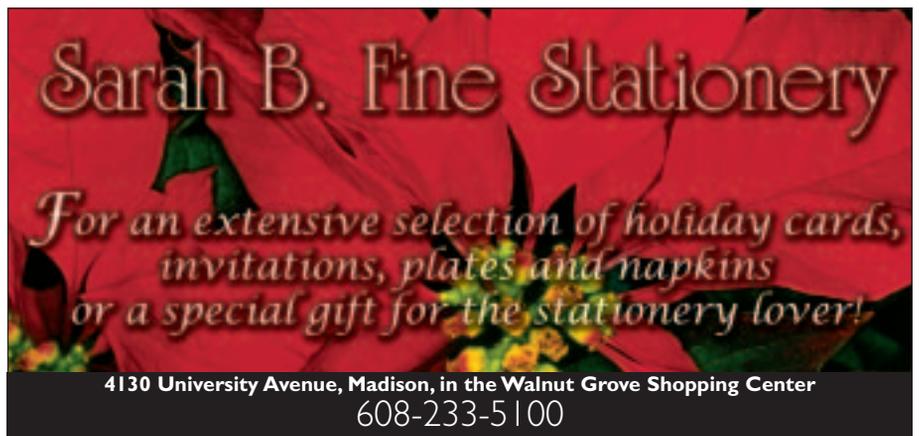
So why did male competitors run in the nude? When NBC's *Today Show* came to film the games George participated in, Tom Brokaw said the original games started out with men running in loin cloths (this was before Lycra, remember). During one race the champion's loin cloth fell off and a new tradition was started. Acting on the idea that nakedness might induce speed, naked running took off. Streaking aside, let's hope the trend doesn't catch on again.

History of the Nemea Games

The recreation of the Nemea Games started in 1974 when Stephen Miller, a University of California professor, began directing the Nemea archaeological digs. His excavations have uncovered the ancient Nemea stadium, ruins of a locker room, a rope and wood starting gate and many other clues to the past.

But Miller wasn't content to have his findings published in academic journals; he wanted people to be able to connect with the ancient games on an intimate level. His belief is that the modern games have become increasingly removed from the average person.

Consequently, the Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games was born. Its mission was to give people of all ages and athletic abilities a chance to participate in a reenactment of history. Participants paid their own way to and from the games. ➤



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George poses after her victory.

In 1996, the first Modern Nemea Games were held with 650 participants from 30 nations. The second gathering took place in the year 2000, and the third event happened this past summer.

Perusing the members of the Honorary Committee of the Society for the Revival of the Nemea Games is an interesting read. In fact, it's so fascinating that if you stumbled upon the list without knowing much about the Society, you would immediately realize you'd come upon something quite profound.

Among the dozens on the Committee are Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, Robert Berdahl; Walter Cronkite; U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein; President of the International Olympic Academy Nikow Filaretos; Olympic gold medalist Rafer Johnson and many others. An impressive group, indeed!

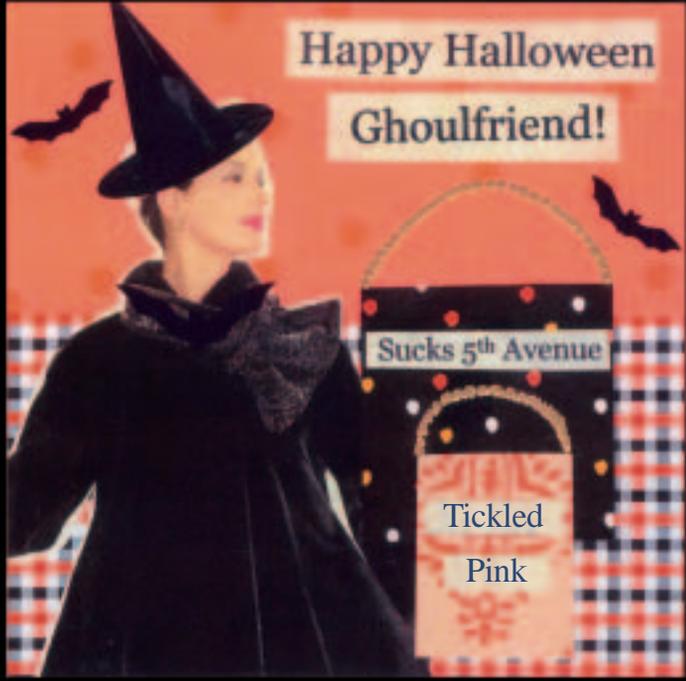
An inside look at the Ancient Games

And so it was that George decided to join more than 700 runners from 20-plus countries. Runners included U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, the British ambassador to Greece, and La Grand Nielsen, a 97-year-old retired dentist from California.

When she arrived at the excavated ruins of Nemea, George was reminded of a scene in *Helen of Troy* she recently wrote.

"In the book, Helen runs a 'maidens race,' a special race for unmarried women, and here I was running a race just like Helen would have done." (The difference? Margaret is married to UW School of Medicine professor and physician Paul Kaufman.)

At the site of the Nemean Games, in the excavated remains of the ancient locker rooms (it was covered by a modern tent), George donned a white toga, or chiton, a loose garment tied with a belt.



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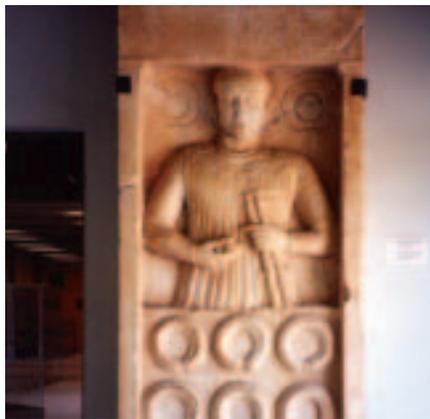
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There she found vials of olive oil in the apodyterion, or locker room; part of the reenactment of when Olympic athletes rubbed olive oil over their bodies. Runners were told to adhere to all the official rules of the original games, including strict track regulations, which meant everyone was to run barefoot. She walked out to the track with 11 other women in her age group, through the ancient tunnel where athletes became heroes or has-beens, and emerged into the brilliant white light of the Nemean track.

This competition was very different from a modern track and field event. There were no bleachers, no public address system, the officials wore black, and the "slaves" (volunteers), in keeping with tradition, wore yellow. Approaching the starting line, George knew she had to "toe the



Ancient art made the setting especially meaningful.

mark," or fit her toes into designated grooves. "If you were over the line, an official in a green tunic would 'switch' people with a stick, a nasty but authentic part of the original games."

Then, the trumpeter blew his trumpets, the athletes assumed their positions while the words "poda para poda" (foot by foot), "ettime" (ready) and "apite" (go) rang out. They were the same words shouted out at the Greek games 2,000 years ago.

And they're off

George ran fast. She was ahead almost all the way to the finish line. The original stadium track was 600 feet long (interestingly, the word "stadion" originally meant length), but in the Byzantine period, part of the track had eroded away. So the Nemean races were half the stadion, or 300 feet. In keeping with ancient tradition, the hard clay track had been picked clean of debris, the surface was rolled, and it had been softened by watering two days before — all in the

name of having as smooth a course as possible for the barefoot runners.

After the race, wearing her victory crown, George returned through the ancient tunnel to the apodyterion to change from her toga to modern dress.

As instructed by the officials of the race, all the athletes wrote their names on large photographs on the old tunnel wall. It was a way of permanently recording their participation in the games, an imitation of the graffiti that had been inscribed on the wall itself.

What did the hundreds of "Footsteps of Herakles" runners do after they left the finish line? They partied and received a celebratory T-shirt, of course. At the closing ceremony, all the participants, clad in their new T-shirts, assembled at the north end of the track in front of the Altar of Zeus, where they received a "Nemea 2004" pin.

Then, in keeping with traditions of old, the winners were crowned with wild celery crowns while admirers threw flowers and sprigs of greenery at them.

A nod to ancient times

Zeus, for those of you not quite up on your Greek history, sat on Mount Olympus and

was worshipped by ancient Greeks. They gathered in late summer (thus the modern Olympics in late summer) and held a five-day festival honoring the god through a celebration of athleticism. Zeus was said to have sent a thunderbolt down to earth creating the Temple of Zeus, which once contained a 43-foot ornate statue of the god, and was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

How did the Nemean game help Margaret George as writer of novels involving plots, characters and settings from long ago?

"The experience helped me think about what was important to people in ancient Greece and connect with some of my characters like Cleopatra. The Olympics were very important in these people's lives because they didn't have a lot of diversions. The games were spectacular venues for athletics, politics, and entertainment."

Will she go again, in 2008? "Absolutely," George says. And so will Nielsen, the 97-year-old runner. "He'll be 101 then, and he said he'll be back running the Nemea track again."

Let the games begin!

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