

Title: Nico's Gym & Time Jump™

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Synopsis: In an age where biomechanical enhancements have permeated every level of life, all-natural athletes have gone out of style. For those who long for the days when competitions were fueled by no more than human sweat, Nico Barnes, proprietor of Nico's Gym & Time Jump™, is happy to be of service.

“Someone to see you, boss.” Troy poked his head into my office. The sounds of weights and gym chatter floated in. “And we’ve got Mr. Wade incoming in 10.”

“Potential?”

“Scrawny, with a determined look. Shoes nicer than my flat.” See, this is why I keep a real, live assistant. AI’s don’t pick up on details like that.

“Excellent. I’ll see him. Anything out of the ordinary with Mr. Wade’s beacon?” He shook his head. I knew he’d checked before coming in. “Go ahead and handle the intake, and keep whatever ecstatic tip he gives you.” Mr. Wade was a regular and always came back hyped on adrenaline. “Oh, and if he feels the need to thank me personally and gush about his trip while I’m with the potential, don’t try too hard to dissuade him.” Troy grinned and ducked back out.

A few seconds later, a blonde scarecrow filled my door. “Mr. Barnes? Thank you for agreeing to see me without an appointment. I know you must be busy.” He looked nervous but determined, and dressed impeccably. Points to Troy.

I stood, offering my hand. “Not at all, Mr.?”

He took it with a surprisingly firm grip. “Koroibos. Ben Koroibos.”

I gestured to a chair. “Pleased to meet you. What can I do for you, Ben?” I couldn’t call him Mr. Koroibos. It was too weighty a name for this string of a kid. “Ninja training in Japan? Ulama with Aztecs? Dueling during the Regency? Tell me what you’re looking for, and I can match you with a trainer.”

“Well, actually, I was hoping *you* could train me. For the Olympics.”

I sighed. Every few months I got one of these. I’d made a name for myself before starting the Gym & Time Jump™. My purist parents, while completely against biomechanical enhancements, had no problem with gene manipulation. My body was completely incompatible with any and all biomech - their little ‘gift’ to help me lead a ‘natural’ life. In my angst-driven youth, I had trained and actually qualified for the Olympics. And then been utterly crushed by my enhancement-riddled opponents, of course, equally crushing my youthful idealism. But the act had resonated with a certain segment of society, and when time travel had become more common, there was a niche market waiting to be tapped. And so with a healthy dose of cynicism and a business degree, I started my current enterprise. Nico’s Gym & Time Jump™: Training and Expeditions for the Great Sporting Traditions of History. But I still got requests to train modern athletes. They figured since I managed to qualify ‘naturally’ I could give them an edge, on top of what biomechanics provided.

“Sorry, kid. I don’t do modern. Or bio gadgets. There are plenty of trainers out there who do, so best of luck.” I stood to usher him out.

“Oh, I know. I mean, I looked you up on iNet. I’m incompatible, too, so that’s why I thought...” My look must’ve conveyed this was not a topic I wanted to discuss. “But anyway I didn’t mean our Olympics. I meant the original ones. In ancient Greece. The more ancient the better.” This last with vehemence.

I considered him. The ancient Olympics package was one we had researched, of course, but so far any interested parties had been put off by the prerequisites. I sat back down, folding my hands over my stomach. It was my patriarch pose, and had discouraged many a rash time jump.

“Jumping to ancient Greece isn’t one of our quick packages, you know. It’s not like the Regency package, where you learn a few words of French and some sword strokes, jump back and insult someone’s honor, have a duel, and return. There’s quite a bit of prep work, both here and back in time. You couldn’t just show up to Olympia and compete.”

“Yes, I realize that. I’ve researched it some myself, already. I know that I would have to stay there long enough to establish my Greek heritage and my free status, and about the qualifying rounds, and all that. I even know how to speak Greek already, thanks to my family.”

I snorted, eyeing his blonde hair. “The Greek that your family speaks and the Greek that the ancients spoke are probably as different as English and Chinese. You’d need intensive dialect and culture lessons, on top of the physical training. You’d have to be back there for *several years* to establish your eligibility. Even if your return time were minutes after you left on this end, you’d be years older when you got back.”

He’d just opened his mouth to reply when there was a brisk knock on the door, followed by Mr. Wade’s enthusiastic entrance. He was wearing the standard scrubs we gave customers after they passed through decontamination, and they swished crisply as he strode to my desk.

“Nico, you’ve done it again! That was my best jump yet. Invigorating!” He pumped my hand. “Biggest damn cats I’ve ever seen, and the landscape! Breathtaking. I can’t thank you enough.” He was still shaking my hand.

I smiled politely. “Not at all, Mr. Wade. I’m happy to be of service, and to see you safe and sound back in the present.”

“Back, yes, hmph. I tell you, I almost didn’t want to come back this time!” He looked ready to launch into a lengthy anecdote, but Troy popped his head in just then, a spotted fur in his arms.

“Mr. Wade, if you could just sign these last few papers, we can get you home and hanging trophies in no time.” Troy is the master of timely intervention.

Mr. Wade shook my hand again and hustled out. I turned to Mr. Koroibos, who looked bemused. “Mr. Wade is a big game hunter. He’s just returned from hunting sabre tooth tigers with spears in prehistoric times. Tough cracker, that one.”

“Would it be possible, what he said? Not coming back?”

“We’re not in the habit of selling one-way tickets, if that’s what you mean. All of our equipment is state-of-the-art, with about a million safety features built in. Obviously, we can’t really control things on the other end of a jump, which is why we have clients sign an impressively high stack of waivers and get all their affairs in order, just as a precaution. Part of the training also includes how to deal with any life-threatening scenarios that are likely to come up. But the longer a client remains in the jump time, the greater the danger. Especially if the jump area is in a near-constant state of war, like the ancient Greek city-states.” I gave him a pointed look.

He nodded thoughtfully, and then met my eyes. “Mr. Barnes, I know you must get a lot of young men in here, ready to rush off into time without really thinking. Let me assure you I am not that type. I’m very serious. I’ve done my research, I’m willing to put in the time and training, and I can make it worth your while, above and beyond your normal pricing. What do you say we start on that mountain of paperwork you mentioned? I’d love to see the jump machinery as well.”

He chose the very first Olympic games, to narrow the course of training. They only had the one event back then, the stadion – a short sprint. It was lucky, since he had much closer to a runner’s build than, say, a wrestler. I could make him a champion sprinter. The 100 and 200 had been my events back in the day, so I was overseeing his training personally. Also, I couldn’t help feeling for the kid. He was living in an age of amazing enhanced physicality, while being genetically unable to take part – a birth defect, rather than the ‘gift’ mine had been. He was determined to win the Olympics, as I had been, but was smart enough (and rich enough) to make sure it was an Olympics where he had a chance. I found myself hoping he actually did it and came back with the blasted olive wreath.

The only odd bit came when we were working out his travel schedule. We had the course of training set, and the date of departure. I asked him when he’d like to arrive back. Most clients pick within a few days, so they don’t miss out on too much in the present, regardless of how much time elapses in the past. But Ben was reluctant to nail down that date, said he had some personal matters to work out and would let me know closer to go time. I didn’t think much of it, and we moved on to his hair re-coloration and fitting for era-appropriate garb. Yes, we’re very thorough here at Nico’s™.

It turned out he was a natural born runner. His wiry build was already light, and with training became impressively fast as well. Close to the launch date, he was matching my

times from the Olympic qualifiers. His accent was as close as the experts could determine to what ancient Greek had sounded like. He'd even had classes in age-old cooking techniques, since he'd be setting up as a cook of some sort, while he established residency and got a feel for the time. Yeah, kid loved to cook, who'd have guessed? I thought rich kids had people to do that for them. Anyway, he was as ready as we could make him when launch day arrived.

He showed up that morning, cheerful as all get out. I was surprised; most clients, excited as they are, get nervous facing a stint this long. I frowned, remembering something. I flipped through the paperwork while he was going through launch prep.

"Hey, Ben!" I waved him over, and pointed to the conspicuously blank lines next to Time to Elapse and Time of Return. "I thought you told me Troy filled this out for you."

He shrugged.

"Well, damn it, we need to fill it out before you go. When do you want to be back?"

He sighed and squared his shoulders. "I don't want to be back."

I gaped. And then I scowled. "That's not an option, kid. I don't send people on suicide trips. Give me a date."

His jaw got a stubborn look. "Fine. Time to Elapse: 150 years. Time of Return: May 31st, 3150 AD." He rushed on before I could start in on him. "And I've been over every word of the contract; you are legally obligated to use the dates of my choosing, regardless of what they are. So don't waste time arguing with me."

700 years from now. And even if that wasn't a problem, an elapsed time of 150 years meant he'd be long dead. Kid was right, though – nowhere in the contract did it set a limit on the dates. A loophole we have since closed.

I gave him a long, hard look. Clearly, he was not going to change his mind. Legally, I had no choice. He stared me down. Finally, I nodded, entering the information. The look he gave me before turning away was pure gratitude.

That was the last I saw of Ben Koroibos.

Troy iNetted him after. He was from a ridiculously wealthy family who dealt in biomechanics. Yeah. Talk about salt in the wound. His whole family was a walking ad campaign for the gizmos. I could only imagine how much of an outsider and failure they must have made him feel, to drive him to this. He'd taken running away from home to a new extreme.

But I didn't feel too bad. He may have thrown this life away, but he built a new one. Turns out those ancient Greeks kept pretty good records, especially for important events. And if you look up famous athletes from the ancient Games, you'll come across one entry: Koroibos of Elis, humble baker, the very first Olympic champion.