

Sport in Antiquity

From the fields of Olympia to the arenas of Rome

[Antiikin urheilu: Olympian kentiltä Rooman areenoille]

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Introduction

A man is considered fortunate, and wise poets sing his praises,
if he wins victory with his hands or the excellence of his feet,
and takes the greatest prizes through his courage and strength,
and lives to see his young son
duly winning Pythian garlands.

He can never set foot in the bronze heavens;
but whatever splendour we mortals can attain,
he reaches the limit of that voyage.

(Pindar: Pythian Ode 10)

The sporting field appears to be an excellent miniature of Greek society. The ideals are high, the attitudes devout, but the competition is stiff. The rules are the same for all, although some succeed in stretching their limits better than others. Cunning is admired, just as are strength or speed. Champions become heroes—glorified individuals in the midst of a communal culture. They are immortalized in statues and poetic verse, and their reputations endure through the millennia.

Religion is also strongly manifest in ancient sport. The gods cannot help but interfere in humanity's affairs. No one can best their favourite, and the competition of the ungodly is cut short. The audience loves unexpected plot twists. But even if the gods and goddesses of Olympus do follow the contests, women and slaves are not seen on the field or on the sidelines.

The stadiums where the Hellenes competed give modern humanity an idea about the importance of sport in the world of antiquity. Their silence makes these shrines to sport imposing. The gravel does not tell its memories, nor do the stone benches of the stands speak. But even barren and empty they convey the feeling that drew people to follow the games year after year. It is left to the imagination to contemplate what the mood must have been in the glory age 2,500 years ago, when an audience of thousands goaded the best athletes of their time with their shouts.

Records of ancient sport have been preserved, besides the monumental places of performance, in archaeological artefacts and in literature. Admired athletes were a popular subject in art. Archaeologists have found hundreds of items of pottery that depict the different sports. Rich Greeks and Romans often had their homes decorated with sport-themed statues or mosaics. The athletic sculptures of Myron, Polykleitos and Lysippos, which belong to the pearls of ancient sculpture, were copied enthusiastically even centuries later.

In Greek and Roman literature one encounters sport in the most surprising contexts. The great philosophers of Athens appear to have spent a great deal of their time near the sporting grounds. In lyric, hymns of praise to athletes were considered a natural part of high literature. In geographical guidebooks each city's stadium and sporting history is bestowed much attention. Nevertheless, it is good for the reader to keep in mind that parts of the history of sport in antiquity are also made up of myths and oral tradition. Events have been coloured by those telling them, and not everything written can be considered absolutely true.

Temporally, antiquity extends from the birth of the Greek city-states in the second millennium B.C. to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 A.D. Geographically, the culture of antiquity comprehends half of Europe in addition to the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Our purpose is not to offer an inclusive account of ancient sport in this one volume. In this work we will concentrate on basic questions: How did sport begin? Why did people engage in sport? How did the nature of sport change over the centuries? What sports and competitions were there in antiquity? What sort of foundation has antiquity created for modern sport?

Sport is not just about centimetres and seconds. Especially in antiquity sport was a central part of the popular culture of the time. Simple lists of victors or descriptions of events are just the outward surface. The concept of sport deepens considerably when it is considered as a part of society. Points of contact can be found with ancient national history as well as social, economic and cultural history and a significant number of stories, myths, beliefs and religions.

Next to cultural interconnectedness, another basic idea of our book is the broadest possible use of original sources. The conception of sport in antiquity is conveyed to the reader most authentically through pictures and text fragments. There is nevertheless reason to remember that the literature that has been preserved reflects only the view of the male upper class. We know the ideas of women, children and slaves about sport in only a very limited fashion.

Our book is divided into three sections: In the first part we investigate sport as a part of Greek and Roman society. In the second part we tell about the different sports and training methods. In the third part we present sporting events from traditional competitions all the way up to the most spectacular chariot races. A look into the continuation of the sporting tradition of antiquity is also included. Those seeking additional information may find it using the bibliography at the end.

We wish you all a phenomenal trip from the fields of Olympia to the arenas of Rome!

5.3.2004
The Authors

Sport as a Part of Society

Sports were a matter of fact to the Greeks of antiquity, in which for all practical purposes every healthy free man – and in Sparta each woman as well – participated, at least when young. The Greek ideal of beauty included a well-proportioned musculature hardened by exercise, which was to be veiled by skin toughened by wind and sun. The upbringing of a free citizen aimed at not only a sufficient general education but also the acquisition of good physical conditioning.

The Greek enthusiasm for sport was not just a result of aesthetic or educational motivations. The small city-states of Hellas fought constantly either amongst themselves or against common enemies. The success of the *polis* society, even its very existence, depended on the physical performance of its conscripts. Sport also had a religious dimension. The Greek served his gods by keeping himself in good shape and by being ready to present himself and his skills at festivals held in honour of the gods. Because sports were a normal activity for the free citizen of the Greek city-state, the vocabulary and concepts connected to sport were established and known to all. Plato often placed his conversants on the sidelines of the sporting field to ponder important questions, and in the Bible the apostle Paul wrote about the footrace as a metaphor for life.

The Birth of Sport

Early history

According to many ancient sources the first Olympics were held in the year 776 B.C. However, nothing indicates that there were no earlier competitions. It is likely that many kinds of competitions had been organized over a long period of time. There is no certainty about how organized they were, but based on paintings and stories, people were playing sports in Greece centuries before the first Olympics. We must also remember that sport was not a Greek invention. Evidence of different kinds of sports can be found elsewhere as well.

One of the first forms of sport was hunting, which was also a means of livelihood. Food was obtained by hunting wild animals. The terrain could be demanding and the animals being hunted quick and strong, thus those leaving on the

hunt had to be in good physical condition. In addition to other skills, the hunter had to be able to use a spear and later on also how to run. When people settled into cultivating the earth, the importance of hunting for maintaining life decreased. The skills were nevertheless kept up, and hunting was still practiced. Competing to measure physical prowess became an important pastime and a way to form rankings between individuals.

The first evidence of playing sports for entertainment or religious purposes is to be found elsewhere than the areas of Greece and Rome. By the third and second millennia B.C. different kinds of sport were popular in Egypt. Wall paintings and reliefs tell of Egyptians, both commoners and aristocrats, having trained their bodies. Popular pursuits included wrestling and weight lifting. They also played ball games, practiced archery, rode horses and sailed. Gymnastic exhibitions enjoyed particularly great popularity. By all accounts bodily conditioning was already valued at that time as the basis for human beauty.

The first evidence of sporting in what is now the area of Europe is to be found in Crete. The advanced Minoan civilization that developed on the island gave birth to a developed municipal system, architecture and body culture. This civilization, named after the fabled king Minos, engaged in commerce over a large area and because of this received influences from the East and from Egypt. In the cultivation of body culture the Minoans did not significantly deviate from the Egyptians. Nevertheless, the Minoans are thought to have developed their sports into more competitive and regulated ways to measure themselves against one another.

Following the example of the Egyptians, gymnastics were a popular sport. The decorative dress and acrobatic tricks of the gymnasts can be discerned from the many decorative signets that have been found on Crete. Sometimes gymnasts stood on their hands and did different movements. Sometimes they also made quick movements amongst erect sword blades. Another sport popular in the pictorial motifs, but which later vanished, was bull jumping. This agility-demanding sport was dangerous for the athlete, but obviously popular among the spectators. The jumper's object was to take the attacking bull by the horns. When the bull then instinctively reacted by throwing its head upwards, the gymnast jumped onto the bull's back and onward to the ground behind the bull. The sport sounds dangerous – and it certainly was at that – and accidents were not always avoided. Based on the pictures, the jumpers are known to have been both men and women. The dress of these gymnasts was generally very

decorative, on the basis of which the jumpers are assumed to be aristocrats. The ornamental dress may also indicate the religious significance and ritual nature of the sport. It is possible that after this sort of spectacle the bull was sacrificed.

In addition to gymnastic sports the Minoans practiced at least boxing and wrestling, the practice and form of which have been preserved almost unchanged through the classical Greek period and on to our own times.

During the latter half of the second millennium before Christ, the Minoan civilization was ruled by the more bellicose Mycenaean civilization. Typical of this civilization which arose in mainland Greece and spread to the islands of the Mediterranean were activities that maintained military prowess, such as the boxing and wrestling they adopted from the Minoans. By contrast, evidence of gymnastics is scant, and new sports practiced by the Mycenaeans were running and horse racing. The first evidence of foot racing is a Mycenaean-era vase painting from the thirteenth century B.C. found on Cyprus.

The years 1100-800 B.C. were the so-called Dark Age in Greece. There are few archaeological finds, and written culture had yet to be born. Most likely sporting activities nevertheless held their ground and developed throughout that time as well, for in the year 776 B.C. the first known Olympics were organized. This marked the beginning of a new boom for sport.

The First Written Accounts of Sport

Although pictures on vases and walls tell about the practice of sport thousands of years ago, written evidence is also important for researchers.

The first written references to sport in Western culture are found in the epics of Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey. These epic tales recorded in the eighth century B.C. tell of a much earlier time period, the Mycenaean era. It is nevertheless a different matter to what degree the poems are actually talking about the Mycenaean era and to what degree the stories have been coloured by life in the reciters' own era.

Both the Iliad and the Odyssey recount the history of the mythical Trojan War, which according to tradition was fought between the years 1194-1184 B.C. The Iliad is an account of events that transpired while the Greeks besieged the city of Troy for ten years, as well as battles and heroic deeds during that time. The Odyssey, on the other hand, tells of the eventful and excruciating return of the hero Odysseus to his

home island of Ithaca when the war had finally ended. Both works also include sports. One of the climaxes of the Iliad is the funeral of Patroclus, the best friend of Achilles, which was accompanied by games organized in honour of the deceased. After covering Patroclus' pyre-burnt bones with a burial mound, Achilles commands his men to fetch tripods and other vessels, horses, mules, bulls, iron and even women, "the fair-girdled," from the ships as prizes.

In the competitions organized in connection with Patroclus' funeral, the contestants measured their strength in eight different events: chariot racing, boxing, wrestling, food racing, armed combat, discus, archery and javelin. However, competitions were organized for only seven of these, for the prizes for the javelin throw were bestowed without throwing: everyone present knew Agamemnon, the Greek high commander, to be unbeatable in this event. In addition, the wrestling ended in an undecided draw between Odysseus and Ajax. Likewise in the armed combat the others decided to interrupt the contest before either of the soldiers, Ajax or Diomedes, could be seriously injured.

The boxing on the other hand ended in a knockout:

Their crackling jaws re-echo to the blows,
And painful sweat from all their members flows.
At length Epeus dealt a weighty blow
Full on the cheek of his unwary foe;
Beneath that ponderous arm's resistless sway
Down dropp'd he, nerveless, and extended lay.
As a large fish, when winds and waters roar,
By some huge billow dash'd against the shore,
Lies panting; not less batter'd with his wound,
The bleeding hero pants upon the ground.
To rear his fallen foe, the victor lends,
Scornful, his hand; and gives him to his friends;
Whose arms support him, reeling through the throng,
And dragging his disabled legs along;
Nodding, his head hangs down his shoulder o'er;
His mouth and nostrils pour the clotted gore;
(trans. Alexander Pope)

The Odyssey also contains many sports scenes. The most famous of these is the story's final climax in which the disguised Odysseus wins an archery contest and reveals his true identity to the competing suitors. It is not a question of an actual contest however, since none of the suitors succeeds in stringing the bow. Odysseus is the only one who is even able to attempt the accuracy-demanding shot. The arrow had

to be shot through the holes in twelve axe-blades set up in a row, which Odysseus succeeds in doing with ease.

However, the first time Odysseus competes in a sport is much earlier, when Odysseus is still on his long and difficult journey home. After sailing 17 days on a board, Odysseus is thrown into the sea during a storm, and after swimming two days he washes up on the shore of the land of the Phaeacians. The exhausted Odysseus falls asleep in the shelter of the vegetation on the shore and awakes the next day to the shouts of girls playing a ball game. The game described by Homer is simple: the ball is passed from player to player in a ring. One of the players is Nausicaa, the daughter of the Phaeacian king Alcinous, who takes Odysseus to her father's court.

Later on, games are organized in the court to honour Odysseus. The events are running, wrestling, long jump and discus. The guest is also asked to join in, but the hero, nursing his homesickness and tired from his nautical adventures, declines. One of the Phaeacians starts to mock Odysseus, suggesting he may be weaker of body than the others. Irritated by the insult, Odysseus snatches from the ground a discus which is much heavier than that thrown by the others. He hurls it past all of the others' throwing marks. The defiant Odysseus now promises to measure his strength in any event they wish, but the Phaeacians believe Odysseus is better than them without competing. The atmosphere calms and as a finale to the games they all watch a dance and rhythmic gymnastic performance, in which two youths throw a ball while bounding in the air and while others beat time around them.