

# Olympic Games

*Athletics, ancient and modern.*

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Ancient Greek Athletics

by Stephen G. Miller

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THE MODERN OLYMPIC MARATHON derives its name, of course, from the famous victory of the Greeks over the invading Persians in 490 B.C. at the town of Marathon, about twenty-six-and-a-half miles from Athens--which is the distance the runner Pheidippides covered to bring home the news of the victory, after which he dropped dead. As it happens, the story is a myth. Even the distance between Athens and Marathon isn't accurate. The modern race actually duplicates the distance from Windsor Castle to the Olympic stadium, established at the London games in 1908.

The truth about the marathon is just one of many debunking facts that Stephen G. Miller presents in *Ancient Greek Athletics*, his well-researched, comprehensive survey of ancient sports. A professor of archaeology at the University of California at Berkeley, Miller directs the excavations at Nemea, a site of one of the major ancient games. In *Ancient Greek Athletics* he combines evidence from archaeology, art, and literature into a detailed panorama, from the origins of ancient athletics in Homer to its professionalization in the Roman period. Along the way Miller gives an entertaining survey of everything from the mechanics of starting blocks to the layout of the festival sites--all aimed toward demonstrating the central place of athletics in the culture of the Greeks.

Then as now, sports conjures up within us all sorts of mythic longings and meanings that cry out for analysis. Unfortunately, the current interpretation of athletics--both classical and modern--reflects the anticapitalist prejudices of a worn-out Marxist cultural criticism.

This received wisdom tells us that competition and hyper-masculinity are really nothing more than a training-program for the shock troops of capitalist and imperialist hegemony--although sports also provide a distracting and profitable spectacle for the oafish middle classes. Remember that old 1970s antiwar documentary *Hearts and Minds*, which juxtaposed scenes of jungle carnage with a hysterical high-school football coach slapping his players' heads? The atrocities of Vietnam, so the claim goes, were born on the playing fields of America.

YET THE LARGER SIGNIFICANCE of sports is much more interesting than these tired clichés, and as Stephen Miller's knowledgeable and entertaining book shows, that meaning will be found among the ancient Greeks, the inventors of athletic competition. All the goods and evils, all the contradictions and values associated with our athletic obsessions, existed among the Greeks as well.

WHEN THE FIRST MODERN Olympic games were held in Athens in 1896, various legends and pseudo-classicisms were ginned up to claim a continuity with the ancient games, held from 776 B.C. until the Emperor Theodosius abolished them in A.D. 393. Debunking all this is great fun, but it obscures the parallels the modern games actually have with the ancient. The idea that the ancient games were apolitical celebrations of amateurism, for instance, is an invention of the late Victorians, who projected their idealizations of the Greeks back onto a reality that was as obsessed with money and prestige as our own times. To be sure, athletes in the *stephanitic* ("crown") games like the Olympics received only a crown made of olive leaves or celery, but the prestige attending victory in these games often produced more practical benefits, such as free meals for life at public expense, gifts from the city, and exemptions from taxes and civic duties: rewards as profitable as today's endorsement contracts for Olympic victors.

Then there were the "money" games, numerous competitions besides those held every four years at Olympia, in which the value of prizes could reach as high as what today would be half a million dollars. Theagenes of Thasos, active in the early fifth century B.C., earned what translates as around \$44 million from his fourteen-hundred athletic victories. The late-sixth-century trainer Demokedes earned the equivalent of a quarter-million dollars a year after rival city-states twice lured him away with better offers.

SUCH LUCRATIVE PAYOUTS encouraged a professionalization of training and competition that by the Roman period had turned athletes into full-blown professionals who earned their living solely from sports. (Pliny the Younger, for instance, records the complaints of athletes who felt their free room and board provided by the emperor during training wasn't generous enough.) And this professionalization was attended with the same evils--fixing, bribery, trade unions, and raiding athletes and trainers--that characterize the modern world with its greedy, peripatetic free agents.

The "Panhellenic" nature of the ancient games--the idea that differences among city-states would be forgotten and war suspended in recognition of a common Greek heritage--also influences modern conceptions of the Olympics as international and apolitical, a venue for transcending toxic nationalism and ethnocentrism and promoting world government. Of course, this myth is true of neither the ancient nor the modern games. Both then and now, gathering peoples from different cities and countries and pitting their athletes against each other provide as much opportunity for asserting superiority and fomenting divisiveness as opportunity for multicultural fraternizing and mutual tolerance.

Commemorative offerings at festival sanctuaries, for example, were often used for crowing about military victories over rival city-states. The international crowds that frequented the games made them convenient venues for such nationalist propaganda. During the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian pretty-boy Alcibiades defended his ostentatious participation in the chariot races--he

entered seven teams--by asserting that his "magnificent embassy at Olympia" would intimidate Athens' enemies. The Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries had a similar aim, which is why they poured so much of their scant resources into producing Olympic victors.

Political rivalries between city-states frequently tainted the games, just as geopolitics does in our times. In 420 B.C. the Spartans were excluded from the Olympics for refusing to pay a fine for breaking the Olympic Truce, and a Spartan who went ahead and won a chariot race was publicly flogged. There were some tense days as everyone waited for the Spartans to attack, but they showed restraint, waiting until the next year to invade Elis, the city-state that managed the games. In 364 B.C. the Olympic site saw a full-blown armed battle between the Arcadians, who had seized control of the site from Elis, and the Eleans, who struck back during the pentathlon.

But the master of the political use of the games was Philip II of Macedon, who brilliantly manipulated the various leagues and city-states in control of the festivals in order to increase his power and influence in Greece. By ruling the festival sites, he turned the games into the instruments of Macedonian hegemony, and after his defeat of the Greek coalition at Chaironeia in 338 B.C., he built at Olympia the Philippeion, a circular temple strategically located so that every visitor and athlete would see it and be reminded of who now was really in charge of Greece. The American boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the Russians' revenge boycott of the 1984 games in Los Angeles are small political beer in comparison.

STILL, there was something special going on in Greek athletics that we need to be reminded of. It is no accident that the same culture that invented athletics also invented tragedy and democracy.

None of the ancient competitive events involved team sports. Only individuals competed against other individuals, the athlete depending solely on his own ability and drive to win the crown that would be denied to all the rest--which is, one recalls, the universal condition of the leading characters

in the tragic plays that filled the Greek stage. Greek tragedy always presents the isolated protagonist who must bear alone the burden of trying to achieve and then living with the unforeseen consequences of that success and the high cost of his aspirations.

In both instances we see a harsh, unforgiving world that resists and thwarts human desire, that requires immense efforts in order for men to achieve excellence in the teeth of those limits, and that distributes sparingly the scanty rewards for that achievement. Both tragedy and sports create losers, and both demand that we acknowledge losing as a nonnegotiable reality against which we must necessarily strive in our attempts to win.

THE FREQUENT BRUTALITY of ancient sports reinforced this vision of life's hard limits. Important functionaries of the games were the *rabdoi*: judges armed with willow switches who punished fouls and false starts with a flogging. Even more indicative of the Greek acceptance of life's brutal limits were events like boxing and the *pankration*, a fierce combination of wrestling and boxing, with strangulation, finger-breaking, and eye-gouging (ostensibly forbidden) thrown in. Boxers fought with hard leather strips wrapped around their fists and pounded each other's heads until somebody gave up. Blood flowed freely, and fighters died, none more spectacularly than a certain Kreugas, who had his guts torn out by his sharp-nailed opponent.

Unlike tragedy, however, the games had winners. Yet the victory was merely a transitory respite from the relentless forces of existence that ultimately defeat everyone. Pindar, the fifth-century celebrator of aristocratic athletic prowess, makes explicit this link of the tragic view of life and athletic competition: *The happiness of man grows only for a short time / and then falls to the ground, / cut down by the grim reaper.* Victory in the games is like a ray of sunshine, a *gift of the gods, / a brilliant light* that settles on men, then fades, leaving only memory behind.

But we live these days in a therapeutic world, rather than a tragic one, a world in which, as in the Caucus Race in *Alice in Wonderland*, "everybody has won, and all must have prizes." We reject the notion of permanent limits, and expect the world to cater to our whims and feelings and to answer our desires. Competition is hurtful, creating losers and wounded self-esteem, and highlighting the differences in talent and hard work that contradict our notions of equality. But here, too, the ancient Greeks are instructive. As Plato and Aristotle both observed, the radical democracy in Athens, where all citizens had equal access to nearly every office in the state, promoted a radical egalitarianism, for as Aristotle noted, democracy promotes the notion that "those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects." A consequence of egalitarianism is a leveling of the citizens, a reduction of the distinctions based on talent and ability that give the lie to absolute equality. So relentless is this process that in Athens, Plato only half-joked, "horses and asses have a way of marching along with all the rights and dignities of freemen."

Here arises the paradox, for the Greeks and for us: How can competitive athletics, which creates winners and losers and thus a hierarchy ranking the better over the worse, coexist with the radical egalitarianism promoted by democracy?

IN *ANCIENT GREEK ATHLETICS*, Miller claims the ancient games, apart from events like the very expensive chariot races, were an expression of democracy's equal access. This is superficially true, but misses the deeper Greek conflict between the aristocratic and democratic sensibilities, a clash also evident in tragedy, comedy, and political philosophy. The games always retained a strong aristocratic flavor, for they highlighted the *arête*—excellence—the manly virtue that was the hallmark of the aristocratic hero. This is particularly so in Homer, where athletic events are the purview of the nobility and function, as does war, to express the aristocrat's innate superiority, what Pindar called *the splendor in the blood*.

In ancient Athens, athletic competition embodied the conflicted feelings the non-nobles had for the aristocrats. On the one hand, the nobles, though possessing no more political power than the masses, nonetheless retained the glamour and allure of unique achievement and excellence owed not to law or procedure but to sheer superiority.

Yet at the same time, that achievement threatened the fundamental premise of democracy, that all are equal and equally capable of ruling. The games provided the masses opportunities for being "noble," at least for a while, and for showing the nobles that the ordinary citizens were as good as they—even as deep inside they suspected that they weren't. Why else would they try to imitate the nobles in all those ways Aristophanes relentlessly mocks in his comedies?

OUR ATHLETES have a similar meaning for us. At some level we know that therapeutic egalitarianism is a lie—that differences of talent and achievement are real, that losing and failure are a defining part of human life. Excellence and achievement are rare, and the cost of both is objective proof of mediocrity and defeat. We all aren't winners, and we all don't deserve prizes. That tragic truth is what sports both ancient and modern is all about.

*Bruce Thornton is author of Greek Ways: How the Greeks Created Western Civilization.*

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