

The Ancient Pentathlon

SELECTION OF THE OVER-ALL WINNER AND METHOD OF JUMPING

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When 150 years ago research began into the ancient pentathlon and related questions, it was not even clear what events this included. Today there is no longer any doubt that this pentathlon included discus and javelin throwing, running, leaping, and wrestling. Many other details have since been clarified, but investigations in this field are not yet concluded. Two problems still await solution: how the over-all winner was selected, and the method of jumping with dumb-bells.

While numerous attempts in the past to solve the problem of selecting the winner have contributed to a correct understanding of several historical facts they have not brought about a fully satisfying system. The same holds true of some recently elaborated theories which would stand up to critical examination. Nevertheless this old but lasting problem does not seem to be incapable of solution if one examines the existing material thoroughly.

The following is a survey of the most important sources taking one problem at a time as dealt with by each author.

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According to a Scholium commenting on *Aelius Aristides*, a rhetor of the second century A.D. over-all victory was ensured by winning three out of the five disciplines. Other documents from different centuries of Ancient Times corroborate this: *Bacchylides* in his Nemeic victory song for the pentathlete, *Automedes* from Phleius, mentions

only three sports in which he succeeded — discus and javelin throwing, and wrestling. *Herodotus*' (IX 33) and *Pausanias*' (III 11,6) reports on the Olympic Pentathlon between *Hieronymus* from Andrus and *Teisamenus* from Elis which, according to the latest suppositions, took place in 492 B.C. both state that on this occasion, too, a triple-win meant victory. We can draw the same conclusion from an inscription to a Lydic victor of about 200 A.D. It is in honour of an athlete who won 'the pentathlon in the first Triad'. From this one can only conclude that the over-all victory was already achieved after the first three disciplines.

Resides these documents on triple wins by pentathletes there is a report on the first pentathlon competition which the sophist *Philostratus* described about 200 A.D. in his work *On Gymnastics*. Five heroes of the Argonautic myth gain one victory each, but *Pelias*, best in wrestling, becomes over-all winner. How far this fact tallies with the granting of victory after three events, we shall see as we go on.

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The question now arises whether the pentathlon was broken-off as soon as the over-all winner became known. The answer to this question is very probably in the affirmative because all arguments against this possibility have proved unfounded. The above mentioned remark on a victory 'in the first Triad' has been justly interpreted in this way. This remark can only mean that the competition came to a swift and glorious end for the winner. All his opponents had been defeated by the winner in the majority of events so that the breaking-off would seem justified.

In connection with the breaking-off of pentathlon competitions we can also quote a Kilic inscription from the first half of the third century A.D. An athlete referred to at the beginning as 'pentathlus' (pent-athlete) is honoured in this inscription for numerous victories, for winning; among others, a 5-stadium-race in the provincial games in the Asian province. But nothing has been handed down to us about a special race over this distance. Since there is great doubt on the distance run in the pentathlon we can suppose — because also at the beginning of the inscription the athlete is named 'pentathlus' — that all this refers to a victory in the pentathlon race. If this is correct, we have another proof of an early break-off. From the reference to the victory in the running competition we may infer that in this way — of course together with all the performances made in the preceding events — the whole pentathlon had been decided.

To sum up, we can unhesitatingly count on pentathlon victories by break-offs.

We also find in the sources that even when the pentathlon has been carried through in all its five parts an elimination of individual competitors before wrestling, the last event, has been possible. *Xenophon*, for instance, called pentathlon wrestlers 'persons, having advanced to wrestling.' We find a hint on the manner of elimination in *Plutarch's Symposiaca* (IS 2). Here the letter alpha is compared with the pentathletes. As the latter surpass their opponents alpha surpasses the other letters in three things: first alpha surpasses the consonant being a vowel; it is superior to the short or long vowels because it can be both, and it surpasses the other still 'withstanding competitors', iota and ypsilon, because in the diphthongs ai and ay both always stand behind alpha. The supposition of the American scientist, E.G. *Bean*, may be right; he says that we can deduce from this a reduction of the number of participants in the pentathlon in three phases, i. e. in the third, fourth and fifth phase. As we shall see, this is also substantiated by other factors. However, the above mentioned report from *Philostratus* on the Argonauts' pentathlon says that athletes had not been eliminated before wrestling in all pentathlon competitions. In this report *Pelias*, the winner, is said 'to have beaten all in wrestling'.

As to the order of events, the only significant fact revealed by historical documents is that wrestling was the last of the five pentathlon events. The order of the four events preceding wrestling, however, is doubtful. The most probable order was discus throwing, leaping and javelin throwing carried out only in their pentathlon form and followed by running and wrestling. This conjecture seems more likely when we consider that, as we have seen, a judgement was already possible after three events. From

this it is quite obvious that only within the framework of the pentathlon was pre-victory conceded after the 'first triad' in which all the competitors still took part.

Let us summarize the most important results of this interpretation:

Victory in three events decided the over-all victory.

Under certain conditions an athlete who won, for instance, only in one event could also become the over-all winner.

As soon as the over-all winner was selected the pentathlon was broken off.

An elimination of competitors was already possible in the third and fourth event.

It was possible for all competitors to reach the wrestling contest.

On the question of the pentathlon system to which we now turn we would stress immediately that only a system which considers all the above mentioned historical facts and which can bring them into a reasonable association without foundering on apparent divergences can be entertained. Though some of the historical documents are widely separated in time, it seems that, in the track and field events (at any rate we know nothing in history to the contrary), the matchless traditions of the cult of the great Hellenic National Games, namely those of Olympia, were maintained in all their essentials.

We cannot describe in details the various systems put forward in the past. We should only like to say that none of these systems seem wholly credible.

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In my opinion the 'principle of three comparative victories' elaborated in 1925 by the English scholar, E. N. *Gardiner*, in co-operation with the Finnish sportsman, L. *Pihkala*, was a useful first step towards a solution. This basic principle — one could call it the principle of three relative victories — has, however, been put forward within the framework of a system false as a whole. The supposition, right in itself, that elimination was carried out after an exact comparison of the performances of those athletes who had been beaten three times was, according to *Gardiner/Pihkala* only carried out after the fourth event. This is not logical. It could lead to the strange result that after four events all participants without exception had been beaten three times and had therefore to be eliminated.

The proper application of this principle is shown by the above mentioned Lydic inscription (among others) which says that the over-all victory had already been decided after three events had been won. We concluded that the pentathlon ended here because the winner was successful against all other competitors in the majority of events. One could expect therefore that

each of the athletes had to fall out as soon as he had been beaten three times. Using the principle of 'three relative victories' consistently -this is the simplest explanation of the system under discussion — the following rules may be established.

1. The first in three events was, ipso facto, over-all winner.
2. A pentathlete was out of the competition after having been beaten in three, i. e. the majority of events. The elimination was thus already possible at least after the third event. It could also happen that all competitors reached the last event, the wrestling contest.
3. The pentathlon could be finished before its fifth event. Where one athlete won the first three events the pentathlon finished immediately after the third event by elimination of all other opponents. In the same way, a victory of an athlete for instance in the first, second, and fourth; first third, and fourth, or second, third, and fourth event was followed by the immediate breaking-off of the pentathlon after the fourth event.
4. If no athlete won three events, the pentathlete who beat each of his opponents in three events became the winner. As in elimination wrestling, those athletes were considered to having been beaten three times by the final winner who were virtually beaten by another competitor three times, leading their elimination. Such an over-all victory was possible only after the fourth or fifth event.
5. The last event whether it was the third, fourth or fifth always found the over-all winner in first place. Thus the highlight of the pentathlon was also maintained in case of an early break-off.

In favour of accepting this as the system we may cite its simplicity and the uniformity of criteria for victory or defeat, for further qualification and for early elimination, and also the fact that it leads to complete congruity of all the apparently contradictory historical documents.

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Just as the opinions of historians diverge on the way of deciding the winner so do they as to the style of leaping in the pentathlon. Recent investigation into all the materials has shown that here, too, none of the results reached so far can be regarded as real solutions.

There are two hindrances to an interpretation : On the one hand different sources report jumping lengths of more than 50 feet, i. e. about 16 metres, and on the other hand the fact that the jumpers hold pieces of metal or stones, similar to dumb-bells, in their hands with an estimated average weight of about 5 pounds, to judge from those we have found.

Older hypotheses by which great lengths had been explained only by postulating the use of dumb-bells, or by supposing a downward jump, or some other mechanical catapult-like installations have since long been disproved. Today two main opinions face each other : Some historians think the jumping lengths to be incredible and hold the opinion that the dumb-bell jump of the Ancient Greeks was only a simple running long-jump or standing long-jump ; others think these lengths to have been reached by a hop, step, and jump. Both opinions are based on false interpretation of sources.

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We know of a jumping performance by *Phayllos* of Kroton who is mentioned by *Herodot* (VIII 47) and *Pausanias* (X 9.2) as a participant in the naval battle of Salamis and as triple winner in the Pythian Games. Although *Phayllos* is thus proved to have been a historical character and a successful athlete, the well-known distich — which has come down to us among others in a scholium commenting on *Aristophanes* ascribing a 53-foot-jump to him is written off as a late invention. The epigram was obviously known to *Zenobius*, a paroemiographer living at the beginning of the 2nd century A.D., who probably plagiarized predecessors who, on their part, had copied their knowledge from older sources. One may well infer, therefore, that the historic documents extend over a longer period and credit may be given to several scholiae from which we may conclude that the epigram was an authentic, contemporary one. The fact that, in the epigram, neither the father nor the home of *Phayllos* are mentioned, is no convincing counter-argument. Neither are the patronymic and ethnologic origins mentioned in another inscription to *Phayllos* from the early 5th century, B.C.. The reason for these omissions may be the fact that *Phayllos* was familiar to most people or that originally the dry personal data were also listed side by side with the poems. However that may be, there is nothing to prevent us considering the distich to *Phayllos* as an epigram of the 5th century. We need not doubt the jumping length of 55 feet because the discus result of 95 feet (less than 30 m.) which is simultaneously given in the epigram seems quite credible.

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A second jumping result has come down to us in the chronicle compiled in about 300 A.D. by Bishop *Eusebius*. Here we encounter the statement, quoted from *Sextus Iulius Africanus*, that *Chionis* from Lakedaimon had achieved a jump of 52 feet in the Games of the 20th Olympiad (664 B.C.). In an Armenian translation of *Eusebius's* chronicle the length of the jump is given as 22 feet. Just a few years ago, the Hungarian scholar, *F. Mezö*, by referring to a passage (III/40) in the history book of the Armenian, *Moses of Chore* (his dates are variously given as

somewhat between the 7th and 9th century A.D.). tried to prove that the distance in the Armenian chronicle was a deliberate correction of an inaccurate one in the Greek original. In light of the surprising factual ignorance of the Armenian translator one must object to this opinion. But apart from this it can be established that Mezō wrongly interpreted or translated the text of Moses of Chore. Since in the Armenian chronicle, immediately after the jumping length of 22 feet, the number 22 is mentioned again in another context, credit should be given to the Italian scholar L. Moretti who thinks that the jumping length of 22 feet is an error and should read 52 feet.

Two factors speak in favour of jumps of about 50 feet : not only the undeniable historical fact that in preparation for the long jump in ancient times an area of 50 feet in length was dug up and loosened, but there is also the fragment of a Delic inscription from the 6th century B.C. which, according to a highly probable supplementation by W. Peek reports a 50-foot-jump.

When trying to establish the method of jumping in antiquity an explanation has to be obtained for the use of dumb-bells described as advantageous by Aristotle, Theophrastus, and Philostratus. Practical tests with dumb-bells of 2.5 kg have demonstrated that these additional weights only proved advantageous in the standing long jump. When swinging the dumb-bells forwards and upwards a noticeably increased pressure against the ground was caused by countering the weight, by the centrifugal force produced by the swinging action and by the recoil. This resulted in a more intense take-off. In these standing long jump experiments an increase of 15 to 20 cm per jump was recorded.

From pictorial illustrations too, it becomes largely clear that the standing jump had been adopted. The prevailing position of the legs of the jumpers represented on vases is to be attributed to the artist's feeling for composition. On a bowl preserved in Graz, a preliminary drawing is discernible, in which both feet of the jumper are placed closely together. Apparently, this preliminary drawing which is more in keeping with actual jumping technique was later altered to enhance the composition of the whole picture. A Greek bronze statuette of a jumper with dumb-bells from the early 5th century B.C. showing both feet placed closely together, is a further indication.

From what has been said above, on the credibility of the jumping lengths of some 50 feet reported from antiquity? all hypotheses advocating a simple long jump are ruled out. If, after the jumping experiments with dumb-bells and after examining the pictorial material, we are also only able to draw the conclusion that a standing long jump was the custom, it must be said at once that this alone

does not explain the enigma of the ancient pentathlon.

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One passage in the commentary of the later Greek sophist, Themistios (4th century A.D.), on *Physica* by Aristotle brings us much nearer to our objective. According to Themistios the jump of the pentathlete is a non-continuous movement, because, as he explains at first, the jumping action, i.e. the flight, is interrupted. It was believed that this would prove the correctness of the triple-lump hypothesis. However, upon closer interpretation, this turns out to be an error. Further on, Themistios makes more precise his definition given at the beginning, because according to this, there would be no apparent difference between the non-continuous jumping action in the pentathlon and the continuous jumping action of galloping horses. The time factor had to be the criterion to determine whether such a movement was continuous or non-continuous. This is as far as Themistios goes in hinting at the necessary modification of the definition with which at first he had substantiated the discontinuity of the pentathlon jump. This can, however, be derived from the context, as follows : The jumpers in the pentathlon not only interrupt the flight but also let a gap intervene, i. e. they persist a bit, and therein lies the discontinuity of the movement.

This shows without doubt that the pentathlon jump consisted of several standing jumps. With this method of jumping the dumb-bells allowed, firstly, a greater length of jump and secondly a firm landing. This was especially important for a multiple jump, as foul jumps were not counted.

According to the data obtained from practical experiments, jumping lengths of some 50 feet would seem quite feasible if we suppose a quintuple standing jump. Individual jumps whose lengths have been handed down to us work out at between 3.25 metres and 3.40 metres.

A quintuple jump is all the more probable since the number 5 played in general a certain part in the pentathlon. There were five attempts at throwing the discus and also the javelin ; the running track probably 5 stadiae and in wrestling 5 rounds at most were possible.