

Legends of Olympia¹ III

by *Cleanthis Paleologos* ©

PHILINOS OF KOS, STADION RUNNER

We are in the gymnasium of the rich town of Kos, which was situated near the sea shore. Big poplars and plane trees surround it on three sides. On the fourth it is flanked by the road and further on from the road, stretching in a long band for some distance, is a piece of flat land covered with fine and shiny yellow sand which finally disappears in a thin line behind a soft hillock, making the road bend. In the summer the sea plays full of kindness and friendship around the sandy shores, licking and lapping. But during the cloudy winter months, the frothing wave tries frantically to cover the road, but its wrath expires before it has time to reach it, rolling and ebbing on the passive sands. On its two long sides, the gymnasium has been planted with two beautiful alleys of two rows of very handsome pine trees each, which keep the broad passage ways always cool and in deep shade. On these shady paths the philosophers, debaters and students take their daily walk and everybody is in a hurry to join them, to finish training, leave the wide spaces of the gymnasium and enjoy witty and spirited sparring of the wise. Inside the gymnasium, on the broad and well beaten trail the runners are running. Further away they throw the discus and the spear and in a corner there are two pits, a hard one of clay and the other of sand. Finally to the left of the great entrance are some low roofed rooms which house the cloak room, the room where the oil was kept, the room where they kept the dust, the anointing room.

They leave their clothes in the cloak room then proceed to the oil room, where the oil is kept in small pitchers and choose from various kinds of oils. There are various oils: thick or thin, or acrid, heavy or light. After this they proceed to the anointing room, to lie down and be rubbed by the anointer and afterwards they take the powdery dust, sprinkle it on their oiled bodies and are ready to enter the gymnasium and start training.

This is a very famous gymnasium. In Kos, many wise and well read men foregather from all over the land. They come to the much famed Asklepeion to consult its famous doctors, soothsayers and priests and then stay on the green island of Kos in order to relax. Their whole day is spent conversing in the gymnasium and in the evening they go down to the port where all sorts of craft, big and small come and go. There, round the embers, where the tavern keepers roast crabs and fresh fish, our wise men finish their discourses with great earthenware cups of red wine.

Here we meet Philinos the son of Hegepolis, for the first time. And the great impression that this youth makes from the very first moment we meet him, fully justifies us in telling his interesting story. I think that the great sculptor Polykleitos must have used this youth for his prototype in order to lay down the foundation for his golden rules, when proud among sculptors of his period, he set up his statue of the spear bearer, a statue with divine proportions and so alive that you expected in to speak.

Anybody seeing the young Philinos for the first time became quite ecstatic. His athletic body was tightly put together, his shoulders square, his hands strong and his

¹ See *Olympic Review* since N° 64-65.

thighs well developed. All this was coupled with a lightness and an improbable freedom, so that at one moment you thought this youth much lighter than a runner and seeing him next in a different pose you reckoned he was stronger than a boxer and heavier than a wrestler.

He had just entered the eighteenth year and his life history had already started with a shining Olympic victory in the Stadion run for boys. He ran then with the abundant enthusiasm of the beardless boy and the precious wreath, which he brought back to his home country, was the greatest gift that his island countrymen could wish for. Now he is considered a man. He continues to live the life of the gymnasium but he does not hide the fact that he is greatly attracted by conversations with older men of learning. He has become the faithful follower of Nikandros, who at that time had the reputation of being the wisest and most sensible of teachers of Kos.

But recently between teacher and pupil a difficulty had arisen.

The sacred envoys of Elis "offering bearers" as they called them, had passed through the island bringing the invitation of the Archons of Elis to the games of the 129th Olympiad. The notables of the island received them with great honours and on leaving gave them rich presents. At the beginning of the coming summer everybody in the whole wide country would be craving to take part in the greatest festival of Greece.

Thus Nikandros, one day, asked his pupil quite naturally and simply.

— "Well, Philinos, you did not tell me what you intend doing. Will you be going to the valley of the Alpheus for the great games?"

The youth replied at once.

— "Just the last time, naturally, honoured Nikandros. I do not see that there is anything special for me to do..."

— "This is a boy's answer. But you seem to forget that you are a man now".

— "By Asklepeios, Nikandros you always answer in riddles. I think that you harbour other thoughts in your wise head".

The teacher let a thin smile play round his lips. He felt a keen satisfaction from the sharp perspicacity of the youth.

"It will be good for you to know, Philinos, that for Olympia the inaccessible, it is not enough to be the owner of a strong body if this is not coupled with a mature mind".

This discussion they had been pursuing for days now. Philinos believed that with his enthusiasm he could easily win again, as he did three years ago in the boy Stadion run, whilst wise Nikandros tried to put to him the various difficulties which had to be faced and also the responsibilities which he would have to shoulder. He had to develop a whole theory to prove to him that in order to present oneself at the Olympian games, one had to be perfect.

— "What is 'perfect' Nikandros?"

— "The body, Philinos, is cultivated with gymnastics, the soul with music, the mind with learning. This is the only way to create beauty. Within the term 'beauty' lies the idea of man. Man is not he who only owns a beautiful body, but he who is in possession of a beautiful soul and mind. Beauty, therefore, is the expression of this wholeness and this perfection is merit. He who has merit can consider himself perfect".

The youth listened carefully and eagerly, absorbed in the teacher's wisdom but at

the same time continued with his training. The teacher's aim was to guide him on those lines and to transmit to him his own beliefs.

— “The strong man, Philinos, should be able with each day to surpass himself. Only a very strong man has the chance to win in the celebrated arenas of Olympia.” One day the discourse between teacher and pupil became quite heated when Philinos said that his desire to obtain the glorious Olympic prize of the Stadion winner was very great, that not only was this desire unrestrained, but that he wished it with all his being.

— “It is easy and simple to say: I wish to win at Olympia. But believe me, words are not enough neither is desire, however strong it is”, said the master looking very grave.

— “Proceed Nikandros and make yourself clear. I will listen to you.”

— “Man's wishes and desires, Philinos, are like jars which never fill and are like hopes which do not materialise easily. And you know that only very few of those wishes ripen into deeds”.

— “To the point wise Nikandros, to the point. As I told you, I aspire to the much desired Olympic wreath and have asked your advice about it”.

— “Great is the task which you have undertaken and you have my admiration for it. But let the victory of your boyhood-days not deceive you and do not let yourself be carried away by the training you are doing now, which is rather light. I applaud your decision and feel happy about it. I only hope that you have taken this decision with the full knowledge of the responsibilities which you are undertaking and of the great toil which lies in store for you. The golden tentacled Phœbus heats and inflames the athletes. Only a few return to their home countries joyously and with their heads high. Do not ever forget this”.

— “I am waiting to hear, my wise master”.

— “Go and stand in front of your mirror and try to study yourself carefully. Look at your chest and shoulders, your waist, your thighs. Then look at your face and take a good look at your inner self.”

— “I have thought of all this”.

— “Then hear me carefully and pay attention to all that I have to say. If you find all this feasible and possible to undertake and accomplish, then proceed to the task with courage and faith, but if you have even the slightest doubt then continue your training in the gymnasium and do not aspire to high and incredible flights”.

— “Explain it all to me, please, oh Nikandros”.

The teacher was pleased at seeing the youth's interest roused.

— “Before anything else my good Philinos, you must believe that this strife bears no comparison to the boyish games which you won at Olympia, some three years ago, from your fellow boys. Also it will be necessary to start leading a regular and sensible life, the kind where everything is thought out and outlined in advance. You food will be measured and as for wine you won't even be allowed to smell it again. Your training will have to be intense. At sunrise you will have to enter the gymnasium and at sunset you will gather up your clothes and will go straight home. You will on no account interrupt your programme which your gymnastic teacher will have compiled for you. Neither during the unbearable heat nor when the dry frost sets in. Many a time will you be faced with tough and trying opponents. Only he, whose mind is well trained and indomitable becomes unconquerable. Your hands will get twisted, your fingers may get broken, your waist may get injured, you will have to swallow a great deal of dust every day and all sorts of misfortunes may befall you. There will be times when you will rejoice after a small victory and other times when you will feel bitter about a defeat. Exhausted you will be going to sleep and you will hear the trainer's harsh voice calling: rise and continue ... rise and wrestle ... You will deliver and receive blows, you will injure and be injured in turn, you will feel thirst, you will feel the shivers and heat of a fever, you will collapse and rise again. Often will you feel these thin rods of the willow biting into your sides and back and smarting on your skin. The stone dumbbells will feel heavy in your hands and your legs will feel weak from running, the sun will bear down mercilessly upon you, sweat



will be pouring down and will be streaming into your eyes, but nevertheless, you will have to carry out your daily programme. Because you must know that intensive training and heavy toil do not bring about exhaustion, they only increase your force and will give you greater records.”

— “You seem to me very hard Nikandros”.

— “Reality is always hard and so is truth, my good Philinos, and the task that you have set yourself is the hardest of all. My respect for you is great and that is the reason why I am speaking without exaggeration.

Your days will be dedicated to training and your nights to resting. You will not enter a hot bath again. These things are only for weak women. For you it will be cold water which you will draw from the well in the palaestra and the bronze scraper with which you will cleanse your body from the tart oil and the thick dust which you will have powdered yourself before you start training.

But do not worry ... I wish I too could be like you ... you will shine in the sun like a bronze god”.

— “A very trying and ascetic life, oh Nikandros”.

— “You speak rightly. But the prize that stems from this life is a gift from the gods. Olympia’s wreath is splendid and golden like the rays of the sun. You know that each man’s life knows nothing more precious and that there are no greater and more splendid games than the games of Olympia. And when some day, honoured and crowned, you will return to the city of your fathers, you will be received with sweet sounding lyres and lutes and dancing and revels will follow you everywhere until you will feel full of the sweetness of your god-sent victory. Thus you will be-

come the pride of your country and generation, the Archons will honour you and the children will be pointing you out in the street like the deserving man that you will be, whom they will be striving to imitate. This path is a difficult one, it is no use denying it, it is full of toil and hardship and sweat, but it is the only one which can bring man to unlimited glory and happiness. Fortunate the man, oh Philinos, who can acquire the respect of his fellow countrymen and can leave so great a heritage to his children and grandchildren.

This is what I had to say Philinos my boy, you can choose and decide since you are free and ... a man.”

— “By the thunderbolt of the venerable Zeus, Nikandros my good teacher, I have decided.”

— “Yes, but you do not make it clear what your decision is? Will you be walking in the arcades following the words of the Sophists with a tired-out mind, or do you still dream being crowned with a wreath?”

— “First, I will do my best to be crowned in the great and divine Olympia, to do honour to my dear country which I so dearly love, wise Nikandros and after, if it pleases the gods there will be all the time to enjoy the spiritual contest of the wise”.

— “May the gods be with you, dear Philinos, and let us hope that your body will become as sharp as your mind”.

This is how the youth from Kos, Philinos son of Hegepolis, with the beautiful body, started his athletic career. As we have said before he had already won the Stadion run¹ for boys in the 128th Olympiad.² After that he followed the difficult path that his good tutor Nikandros had pre-

¹ About 200 meters (192 m 27).

² 268 b.Chr.

scribed. Following his trainer's wise council he tried his forces that same autumn at the Isthmian games and won the Stadion. After this with his morale heightened by careful preparation and careful training, he presented himself at Olympia for the 129th Olympiad. He was still very young, having just passed into manhood. His beauty shone as he entered the stadium and so did his force. He won two wreaths in the Stadion and the Diaulos runs¹ and returned overjoyed and happy to his evergreen island. But he was not in a hurry to join the circles of the wise. He insisted in going to the gymnasium to train and continued leading an ascetic life. He left his island again to appear in the great Pythian games. There, at the sacred games of Apollo he was crowned with laurels for the Diaulos run. He travelled to Nemea and won the Stadion run and made his appearance again at Olympia for the 130th Olympiad.

Stronger than ever and rich in experience from the great games in which he had taken part he won the Stadion and the Diaulos. Two more precious wreaths to glorify his home country. Philinos, from the time when he was still a boy and won his first victory, continued accumulating others and became famous during a period of twenty-two years. He has won five important victories in three Olympiads in the Stadion and the Diaulos runs. Four victories at the Pythian games, four at the Nemean games and eleven at the Isthmian games,² in the Stadion or the Diaulos runs and at times in both games. Brilliant and with a beautiful body, strong and with feet endowed with the speed of lightning, a noble and honest athlete, both modest and devout, never lacking his duty to the gods, Philinos, for many years toured the Greek states and took part in the various games. Nikandros had taught him that man required valour, so that he could surpass himself. And Philinos, the son of Hegepolis from Kos, the strong and modest youth, with the guidance of his teacher succeeded in merit, thus fulfilling the ideal of beauty.

K. P.

¹ For the Diaulos run, the athlete must run both lengths of the Stadium.

² Paus. VI, 17, 2.