

Legends of Olympia¹ VI

by *Cleanthis Paleologos* ©

Philombrotos of Sparta the Pentathlist

The ancient Greeks considered the Pentathlon to be created as a game by the mythical hero Jason. The Argonauts, while voyaging on the Argo, put in at the island of Lemnos where queen Hypsipyle held games in their honour. Amongst the many renowned heroes, who had followed Jason on his campaign, there was Telamon, the brother of Peleus and father of the Homeric hero Ajax, who won the discus. Further Lykeas, brother of Idas, won the spear throwing. Zetes and Kalais, Boreas' two children, won the running and jumping and finally Peleas, the founder of the Myrmidon colony at Pythia and father of the Homeric hero Achilles, won the wrestling game, whilst being second at all other games. Jason, wanting to do special honour to Peleas, thought of combining the five games into one. They had all won one victory, but Peleas apart from his one victory had come second in all the four games. Jason therefore decided to give him a separate prize, acknowledging him thus as the most warlike amongst his men.

The Pentathlon was introduced to Olympia for the first time in 708 BC in the 18th Games, since the first were held in 776 BC.

It was considered an important and difficult event, because the athlete who wished to take part had to be well

trained in many games, which obviously needed special qualifications and of the kind which other athletes have to have only for the event in which they specialize. It is different to run the Stadion and quite different again to run the Dolichon, which is an endurance race. Your body has to be trained differently for wrestling and you are given a different training for jumping or throwing the spear. But the Pentathlist had to be an athlete who could command over force, technique, speed and dexterity for all these events.

The general interest in the game was considerable when it was first performed at Olympia. The discus and spear throwing, as well as jumping, had never been performed in the arenas of Olympia. These games were of course not unknown as youngsters and adults used to jump, and throw flexible javelins either for distance or target in the gymnasiums. But this competition, composite as it was, they had never watched before. It was the year of the 18th Olympiad in 708 BC and Lampias of Sparta, the first happy winner, was shown great honour and was loaded with flowers.

After a few years when the games for boys were coming more and more into notice, and these highly trained boys with their impressive achievements were rousing the interest of the public, the people of Elis decided to award prizes for boys also for the Pentathlon. This was proclaimed in the 38th Olympiad for the first and also the last time. The latter because the judges realized that the boys were making such enormous efforts to win each game,

¹ See «Olympic Review» since No. 64-65.

and these efforts in fact were disproportionate to their age and strength. The agony also of the spectators for all that the boys were going through was so great, that the Elians decided in the same year to abolish this game for boys, which proved to be far too tiring for them and to strike it off the Olympic programme. Thus the game of the Pentathlon for boys only took place once and the precious wreath was won by a young boy named Eutalidas who came again from Sparta.

We now find ourselves in the very olden days of the Olympic games, in the 8th and 7th century, where the Spartan athletes dominate and carry off most of the victories in all games. From 776 BC, the year in which the Olympic games become historical, to 580 BC, that is in two centuries, the lists of the Olympic games compiled by the ancient authors, whose manuscripts have survived to this day, we can see how numerous the participation of the Spartans was and how many of them were fortunate enough to offer their country those celebrated Olympic wreaths. Also it must be noted that most of the authors then were only recording the name of the Stadion winner and only on rare occasions were the winners of other games mentioned, unless they happened to perform a remarkable feat.

The Dolichos (an endurance race) took place for the first time in the 15th Olympiad and the first winner was the Spartan Akanthos. The Spartan Pythagoras won the Stadion in the 16th Olympiad. Euribatos won the wrestling when this game was performed for the first time, Lampias won the Pentathlon in the 18th Olympiad, Atheradas the Stadion in the 20th, Kleoptolemos the Stadion in the 24th and in the same Olympiad and also in the two following ones, Philombrotos won the Pentathlon. In these two centuries of Olympian games all glory goes to the Lakonian athletes. Thalpios, Karmis, the invincible Chionis who was three consecutive times winner in the Stadion, Lygis, Sphairos, Eurikleidas, the astonishing wrestler Hipposthenes, winner

of six Olympiads, his son Etimokles, winner of five Olympiads, Olyntheus, Eurikles, Epitelidas and many more. We mention the Lakonian of Olympia who distinguished themselves in the period of two centuries in order to underline the great feat of the Spartan Philombrotos.

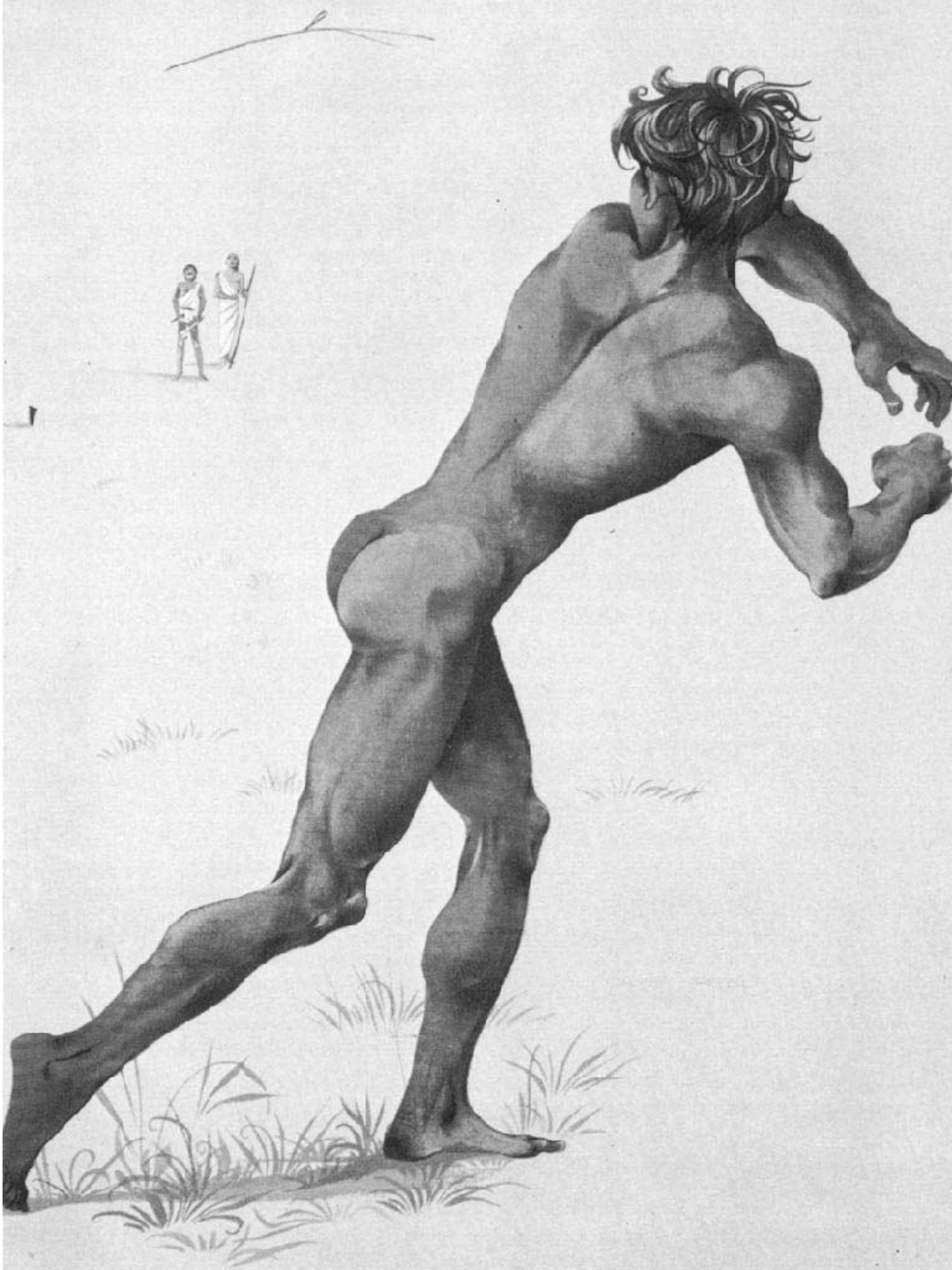
It was in the 24th Olympiad, when the Spartan Kleoptolemos won the much desired victory in running the Stadion. The Pentathlon appeared at the Games for the seventh time. Among other contestants present, was also Philombrotos, a youth who came accompanied by his father to Olympia. But he was well prepared for this very tiring game.

In the previous years he had distinguished himself as the leader of a troop of boys, he was always first at the heavier games and in all the other tough games of his fellow playmates, untamable and always a winner amongst his contemporaries. After having finished his service with the Ephebes, a grown man of eighteen, he started going to the gymnasium. One of the Archons who had noticed him and realized his abilities, advised his father to place him into the hands of a good trainer. He foresaw that very soon he would distinguish himself and become famous.

Philombrotos, like all men, spent his time at the gymnasium. He showed great attention and trained hard. He showed great ability in every event, but the trainer realized that this great ability posed a problem difficult to solve.

He was a hard wrestler, very strong in spear throwing, very agile in jumping, very skilful in throwing the discus and incomparable at running. The trainer very much admired this talented youth, but he could not make up his mind in what game to specialize him finally, so as to produce him at the great games for the glory of Sparta. Philombrotos' father, when he heard the trainer's dilemma, solved the difficulty.

— "But surely the Pentathlon, Kratis-tos, the Pentathlon."



Excellently prepared and feeling all his powers stirring inside him like a bubbling volcano, Philombrotos arrived at Olympia, where according to the laws of Elis, he had to stay a month and train under the supervision of the Elian judges with all the other athletes who were taking part in the Olympics. His father attended him and he was obedient and dedicated in his training, his diet and orderly life, as every decent athlete should be and especially one who came from Sparta.

It was the first time that Philombrotos was taking part in such significant games. He studied his adversaries with great care, studied all their tricks and ruses, their holds and repulses, the "keys" as they called them and whatever had to be done to fend off an attacking hold. He studied their good points but was also aware of their weaknesses. Every night under the tent where the Lakonians lived and when the men sat round the fire burning fresh leaves in order to discourage the tiresome mosquitos, he studied his opponents one by one with his father, their good and bad points, their force and their weaknesses so that if one of them became his adversary he would know how to fight him.

The games of the 24th Olympiad were a real triumph for the dedicated Philombrotos. When the Spartan jumped, his jumping was that of a bird in flight. His imprints, which the judges had marked, remained unsurpassed to the end and the herald cried out with a ringing voice;

— "Philombrotos the Lakonian wins the Pentathlon jumping."

After this the athletes gathered for the discus throwing. Each of them grabbed the heavy iron disc, moved his arm up and down and threw the broad discus making it spin in the air. Finally Philombrotos' turn came. In the first throw the discus escaped him and fell very near. In the second throw the heavy iron whistled through the air and passing many markings fell far, but there was one other marking still further away. His

father who had not left his side approached him saying:

— "This is the second game, there are three more to come. Do not let this worry you... Have courage."

They were summoned for the running game. Philombrotos, uneasy, because of his failure in the discus throwing, had concentrated his attention on the minutest details. He ran with such force that rarely had a cleaner victory been won in speed running. Normally all runners arrived together at the finishing post making it difficult for the judges to distinguish the winner.

Then followed spear throwing. Philombrotos after his two victories had regained his confidence and was seeking his third victory which would ensure him the final wreath. Because when an athlete wins a third victory, most times the opponents withdraw from the other games seeing no point in taking part in the wrestling which is the most trying game of all the Pentathlon games. An Argive was the winner of the discus throwing. He was a strong and well-put together athlete who would now try to win his second victory at the spear throwing. Should he win, he and Philombrotos would then contest for the great prize in the exhausting wrestling game.

Thus almost fanatically they grabbed their spears and placed themselves behind the line drawn by the judges and took a good start. Philombrotos' first spear tore the air and fell two pikes away. The youth of Argos had surpassed all his opponents and his markings were well ahead. Philombrotos made a great effort and reckoned that with his throw he would secure his victory, but he did not succeed. His spear, making a curve in the air, fell far ahead but just short of the Argive's marking.

So while the other athletes withdrew crest-fallen from the game, Philombrotos, with his strong and deserving opponent, advanced towards the judges for the final event. From the outcome of the tough wrestling game the Olympic Pentathlon winner would finally be judged.

Either the Spartans or the Argives would soon be celebrating in the Altis of Olympia and in their quarters around the fire.

They began. The youth of Argos, strong that he was, went immediately into attack, but Philombrotos with a body made of steel remained wary. The bout was tough and almost savage, attack following attack the grips becoming looser, tightened again and both adversaries were almost fanatical and angry in their perseverance. However, wisdom and force decided the outcome of the combat. Philombrotos without making himself available to his opponent's grips made cautious attacks. He studied him carefully trying to find his weak points. He had trained with him various times in the Palaestra outside the Altis and he remembered, yes, that was it, his waist. He had to grab him by the waist. This would ensure him victory. He fought with caution leaving his adversary time to hope to get bolder and lay himself open. A spectator knowing something about the art of wrestling could by now definitely see which of the two astonishing youths had the greater chance to win. Philombrotos just then was like the lion cub, which could have, had it wanted to, dealt the final blow, but he preferred to try the waist grip to secure the final victory and succeed.

Getting hold of the Argive with both hands he squeezed his opponent's waist.

Voices were heard from the crowd of spectators who followed every movement with the utmost attention. Some were voices of distress and agony and others joyful for the certain victory.

— "He has the waist... he has the waist."

Philombrotos squeezed his adversary, and squeezed him tighter and tighter. The Argive's distress showed in his face which had gone white. With one move, the Spartan lifted him high off the ground, then bending over threw him down, fell heavily on top of him,

pinning his shoulder blades to the ground. After that the judge walked up to them and smiling tapped Philombrotos on the shoulder bidding him to rise. Thus he became the winner of the Pentathlon in the 24th Olympiad of the year 684 BC.

Philombrotos and his father returned proud and happy to Sparta, where their fellow countrymen feasted them and offered sacrifices to their patron gods.

But the young Spartan did not rest on the laurels of his great victory. He continued to train with the same great care and returned again to Olympia after four years, for the games of the 25th Olympiad. In this Olympiad Thalpios, a Lakonian, won again the Stadion and for the second time Philombrotos gained a victory in the Pentathlon. The tireless Spartan closed his athletic career only after having won the Pentathlon for a third time. He came to Olympia for the games of the 26th Olympiad and returned home covered with glory, bringing with him the much desired wreath for the Pentathlon from the greatest games of the country.

In these consecutive Olympiads he managed to be the winner in the most difficult and exhausting game, for which an athlete had to develop and sharpen all his bodily and moral forces to the utmost. For this event, continuous, intense and devoted daily training was required. The athlete had also to lead such a restrained life, to renounce even the simplest of joys, in fact to live an ascetic life almost away from people.

Philombrotos was able to keep his bodily forces in good shape for about twelve years, since he won three Olympiads one after the other in one of the most difficult of the Olympic games, the Pentathlon. He thus managed to set a high example to mankind, proving that with will, power, dedication, insistence, patience and belief in God, man can always succeed in great and wonderful deeds.

C.P.