

Legends of Olympia¹ XIV

by *Cleanthis Paleologos* ©

Lygdamis of Syracuse Pancratist

Philostratos, who lived around 200 A. D., has gone down in history for his well known book "The Art of Gymnastics", which is devoted to athletics in antiquity. With nostalgic admiration, he compares those times to the decadence of his own day. "The athletics of our forefathers gave us athletes like Milon and Hippothenes, Polydamos, Promachos and Glaukos, and even earlier heroes like Peleas, Theseus and the famous Hercules. The athletics of our fathers gave us sportsmen who were inferior to those I have just mentioned, but were nevertheless admirable and worth remembering. Our contemporary athletics have changed so much and the standard of the athletes has lowered to such an extent that most amateur athletes are unworthy"².

Lygdamis the pancratist, who came from Syracuse, the city of Ares the god of war, is one of the great athletes who distinguished himself in the arena of Olympia in that ideal period that Philostratos compared bitterly to his own decadent era.

Pindar, the Olympian poet, reported that this town eclipsed all other Greek cities with its brilliance, just as the

daytime sun screens all the stars of the night. "Olympia has given us the most famous of all Games"³.

This hallowed ground which inspired religious awe was protected by Zeus the Thunderer, whilst Apollo set the shrines and the stadium on fire with his golden rays. There gathered all men endowed with beauty, strength and courage who longed to give the greatest honours to their family and country. This glory was the prize for victory which they would bring back from Olympia.

In those former days, Philostratos⁴ writes, gymnastics and training had the one purpose of developing man's natural power which he had inherited from his ancestors, since they were the direct descendants of the heroes and demi-gods.

At that time, all those who presented themselves at the Games to contest for prizes had already to have great natural strength, as the art of training and the preparation of the body for each individual sport, according to its particular qualities, was then unknown. The men went into the arena, bursting with strength, but without any training, and their fights were like the contests of Titans. Their exercises were primitive to say the least: they lifted great weights which were alarming to normal men; they outran horses and deer; they

¹ See "Olympic Review" since No. 64-65.

² Philostr. *Gymn.* 1, 261.

³Pind. 01. 1, 5-7.

⁴Philostr. *Gymn.* 42, 285.

twisted and straightened heavy sheets of iron; they pulled carts or ploughs under the same yoke as strong oxen; they shouldered bulls, fought among themselves, transported huge tree trunks and some even hunted lions armed simply with clubs.

There is a story about a young shepherd called Agathion, whom Herod Atticus admired for his unbelievable strength. Asked one day what he thought of the athletes, he replied quite naturally: "I am amazed and it makes me smile when I see these men competing in the pancration, boxing, running and wrestling, and being crowned for their victory. I would attach more importance to a wreath won by a runner capable of outpacing a stag or horse, or by an athlete fighting with a bull or bear, things which I do every day for fun, and I'm sorry that there are no more lions in Acarnania for me to fight." ⁵

These hardy men bathed in the cold mountain springs and in rivers, and slept on dry leaves or animal hides in the open air. Their whole life was an unending trial and real hardship, a constant striving for the unobtainable.

They were heavy eaters and drinkers like the Cyclopes, eating grilled and dried beef, goat's meat or venison which they hunted in the big dark forests. Their bread was made of wheat or barley containing the bran and baked without any yeast. They also ate fresh cheese, figs and dried fruit so that they would not put on weight and to make their flesh as tough as leather.

Without training they were not any the less indefatigable and protected from

illness. They had no other preoccupation but to go round the country from town to town, taking part in festivals and competitions and collecting wreaths and prizes. This is why we read that they were victors at five or six Olympic Games and also more often at the Pythian and Isthmus Games, because these latter occurred every two years whereas the Olympic Games were every four years. However, when their country was in need they went to war with the other citizens, and showed themselves to be incomparable soldiers; they looked upon war as an exceptional chance for training, and added wartime exploits to their athletic prizes. They became an example to youth for their valour, prowess and integrity shown in battle.

One of the most famous athletes of that period, which Philostratos recalled with such nostalgia, was the pancratist Lygdamis of Syracuse. Lygdamis was the athlete to win the pancration at Olympia when the event was first contested. This was at the 33rd Games, while Olympia's fame was growing, when only bravery was considered as a unique virtue in the athletic arenas.

Lygdamis owes his fame to his large frame. He was a real giant. His countrymen, the Syracusans, who were very proud of him, said that he resembled Heracles. Julius Africanus writes⁶: "The huge Lygdamis of Syracuse measured out the Olympic stadium in 600 strides." Tradition has it that the stadium at Olympia was indeed 600 feet long, but that it was Hercules himself who had measured it ⁷. But Pausanias does not confirm Lygdamis' reputed huge stature because he writes⁸:

⁶ Eus. Pamf. Chronical book A.

⁷ Paus. V, 8, 7.

⁸ Paus. V, 8, 7.

⁵ Philostr. "Sophists' Lives". 60, 18.



“Whether Lygdamis resembled Hercules in size I have no idea, but the Syracusans say so.” It is natural that Pausanias could not settle this matter concerning Lygdamis as they lived eight centuries apart! However, Pausanias has written his history and compares the descriptions to what he sees in the sacred grove of Olympia, what he reads on the inscriptions of the votive offerings and even what he hears.

Although he expresses doubt about Lygdamis, yet on another huge athlete, the famous Polydamus from Skotoussa in Thessaly, he states with certainty that he considers him the greatest mortal as, obviously, here we are not talking about the heroes. This may be because Pausanias saw Polydamas’ statue on the Altis whereas there was none of Lygdamis at Olympia. The Syracusans worshipped their athlete as a god and a bronze statue, which was the work of a great sculptor, also Syracusan, was put up in the main square of the town. It was said that the artist had fashioned it in such a way as to show up the grace of Polydamas’ superb proportions.

All contests were believed to have been founded by a demi-god or a hero. Thus, with the help of the pancration, Attica’s hero Theseus managed to conquer the fierce Minotaur in the labyrinth with the combination of wrestling and boxing. In the pancration you can simply wrestle with your adversary or even strike him, (the hands are not bound as in boxing), so that it is possible to strike blows or grapple with one another. Only biting and scratching are forbidden.

Plutarch⁹ tells of an incident in the life of Alcibiades, a very intelligent man, who was taking part in a pancration bout. He bit his adversary who became angry and shouted scornfully:

— You bite like a woman, Alcibiades.

But the sharp-witted Alcibiades promptly replied:

— Not like a woman, but like a lion!

In the pancration the fight continues even when the adversaries fall and roll on the ground, trying to pin down the opponent. To force him to give up, they can use all means: twisting the arms and legs, the most dangerous wrestling holds or hard boxing blows.

Lygdamis arrived at Olympia in the spring of 648 B. C. to take part in the 33rd Olympic Games, when the Archons of Elis had for the first time included a new event, the pancration, which was to become a hard, violent and dangerous contest. When the huge athlete entered the stadium and advanced towards the pit close to where the judges were waiting to draw his lot, the crowd marvelled. A dense mass of spectators started gathering towards the area in the stadium where the new event was going to take place. It was not only out of interest in the sensational clashes which the unknown fight would offer, but also to admire this giant, whose like they had never seen before. Many wres-

⁹ Plut. Alcib. 2.

tlers had enlisted and all had brought along their followers, family, friends and fellow-countrymen to support and encourage them with cheers. Lygdamis, too, had his crowd because Syracuse always used to send large delegations to Olympia. His compatriots were creating so much noise in the stadium and were shouting so loudly that one would have thought they were celebrating the victory of their athlete before the contest had even started: so sure were they of Lygdamis the giant.

Each athlete took a shell marked with a number, then raised his hand without looking at it. Having read the number, the judge assigned his position. Lygdamis, smiling, calmly follows the wrestlers. His friends shout away, tell each other about the young man's exploits and praise his moral qualities as well as his great strength. The more the crowds gather round, the louder grow the cheers and encouragements from new admirers.

The first couple start to fight. In the stadium there is absolute silence. But curiously enough, either because the public is not yet aware of the rules of the pancration, or because the first contestants are not demonstrating enough skill when parts of the contest are uninteresting, the crowd keeps looking at Lygdamis, who, standing on the edge of the ring, towers impressively above the rest.

After the first contest, it is the turn of the second pair to fight. This time the adversaries are better prepared; they

fight with concentration and caution. They try to find each other's weaknesses, whether they are weaker at wrestling or take blows badly. The start of any fight is particularly useful for establishing the opponent's strong or weak points. In the end, the winner is a well built youth. Then Lygdamis enters the arena. The shouts of admiration reach their highest pitch. His opponent, a young athlete, advances courageously and when the judge gives the signal, attacks impetuously, perhaps to test the giant's reaction. The huge Lygdamis stands slightly bent as if he were ashamed of his height and with an alert eye watches his adversary. He has learned that a wise athlete must never underestimate any opponent and must never be absolutely sure of victory. Lygdamis is completely god-fearing. The night before, he went down to the Alpheus with his relations. He offered the ritual libations and begged the hero to intercede with Ares, the patron god of Syracuse, to come to his aid. In spite of his immeasurable strength, Lygdamis is modest. He knows that only what the god wants will happen.

He is careful now as his opponent seems to be in good form physically, as proved by the intelligence and ability of his attacks. From all corners of the stadium the crowd has gathered. This is a real pancration contest with worthy combatants. The one is as tall as a tower, the other lithe as a panther and sharp both in attack and defence. The attentive spectators have observed the tactics pursued by each fighter. Lygdamis with his majestic stature wants to draw his opponent into his arms and to

overcome him with a wrestling hold. The other, with well distributed strength, avoids falling into this trap and tries to use boxing blows which do not bring him too close to the giant. It is an outstanding contest. The crowd breaks out into applause after each attempt by Lygdamis and after each blow that the Syracusan receives on his chest or ribs. Thus an hour passes, and less and less spectators expect Lygdamis to lose. His superiority grows stronger by the minute. The one leans on one side and dodges to avoid being taken, while the other tries to pull him closer. Then the young athlete throws himself backwards and thus frees his arm from the vice-like grip in which it was caught. But Lygdamis approaches with hands stretched out like claws. He bends over him and the other "lashes out fiercely with his arms and legs, like the fox which defends itself by turning onto its back when attacked by a long clawed beast."¹⁰ But he cannot keep up this desperate position for long. The huge Lygdamis falls on the youth with all his might, immobilises him and pins him to the ground while the whole stadium vibrates with applause.

When the herald announced that the first winner of the pancration was Lygdamis of Syracuse, everyone surrounded the athlete, shouting enthusiastically and singing praises to the marvellous Hercules.

Late into the night the pancratist's friends and many competitors in the

Games acclaimed him with improvised songs which praised his herculean strength, virtues and above all his modesty, not forgetting to include Syracuse in this tribute.

The greatest celebrations marked Lygdamis' homecoming. With great ceremony, the inhabitants escorted the winner when he went to lay his wreath at the shrine of Syracuse's patron god. All through the night, relatives, friends and Syracusans entertained Lygdamis who had bestowed such a great honour on his country.

For years Lygdamis contested in the arenas of Greece. When he died his fellow-countrymen offered sacrifices, decorated his statue and proclaimed him a national hero.

C. P.

(To be continued)



Lake Placid 1980

Reverend J. Bernard Fell, Executive Director of the Organizing Committee, will fulfil the functions of Secretary General. We assure him of our support in his absorbing yet difficult mission.

¹⁰ Pind. Isth. 4, 54-56.