

# Legends of Olympia<sup>1</sup> XVIII and XIX (end)

by *Cleanthis Paleologos* ©

## Hipposthenes and Etimokles Wrestlers

A father and son became renowned wrestlers in ancient times for the eleven victories which they won between them at Olympia. Hipposthenes, the father, was six times winner at Olympia while Etimokles, the son, won five wreaths.

The story starts with Hipposthenes, when still a boy in 632 BC, at the celebration of the 37th Olympiad. Then the stadion winner was Euriklidas, also a Lakonian. At this Olympiad two new games for boys had been announced for the first time, the stadion run and the wrestling game. When the sacred messengers of Elis<sup>2</sup> arrived at the city of Sparta, which never deigned to surround itself with walls, in order to announce the games of the 37th Olympiad, the new additions were made known. Year by year, the fame and brilliance of the games held in the Alpheus valley became greater and the people arrived in masses following the "Theories"—this was what the delegations were called—which the various cities used to send together with rich gifts to Olympia. In spite of the lengthy and arduous journey and the difficult living conditions at Olympia, the people gathered from every corner of the country, wishing to admire the well-formed men, the youths with their beautiful bodies and the swift horses who were to compete in the great games.

The cities received the envoys with every honour and from that day on all hostilities stopped, all roads leading to the sacred Alpheus valley were open and many a time on those same dusty paths men who till yesterday were lying in wait for each other clad in armour travelled together talking amiably to each other.

A little time before the messengers of Elis reached Sparta, Hipposthenes had just gone through the terrible ordeal as was the custom for all children of Sparta, the whipping by rods. In our days it is difficult to imagine such an unreasonable custom, which had become an unwritten law in severe and ancient Sparta. It was an incredibly hard trial, an almost inhuman torment, which turned the little Spartans into unflinching men in one day, if of course they managed to stay alive.

This tormenting of the children took the form of a ceremony which took place once a year in the gymnasium in front of the statue of the goddess Artemis of the withy-tree. This attribute they gave the goddess because of the withies which had been planted around her shrine. This savage custom of whipping the young had its origins in magic and was thought to transmit to the scourged youth the force and fertility of the vernal bough which was used in the scourging.

When the Archons and the children's parents had taken their place, one of the scourgers of the gymnasium cut a few fresh rods from the withies and made them into a bunch.

Then approached the temple's priestess holding a small bronze statue

<sup>1</sup> See "Olympic Review" from No. 64-65.

<sup>2</sup> Sent to announce that the Olympic Games would take place ten months later, before the waxing of the July moon.

of Artemis in her lap. Then one by one the children who were ready to receive the trial were led in. The parents advanced towards the front so that their sons could see them and receive some courage from them. The parents held votive offerings and gifts for the severe goddess and promised more if only she would grant their child force and endurance so that he could hold out, bear the pain and not only endure but not even flinch and show that he was in pain. The child who did not endure this trial, the youth who yielded to the terrible pain, was considered a terrible insult to his Spartan family. The Archon gave the sign and the impassive scourger began. The child received the whip calmly. Not even the shadow of a pain could be seen in his face. The priestess held up the small statue and watched that the rods were cutting into the naked flesh. When she thought that the scourger did not use sufficient force, she lowered her arms as if the statue became too heavy for her, thus showing the goddess's displeasure.

How long did the child's trial last? As long as the Archons thought it proper. Sometimes the trial lasted so long that the unfortunate child fell senseless to the ground without showing any sign of pain and without having lifted up his arm. But this happened very rarely. How often were the children lifted from where they fell and were taken in funeral to their grave! They preferred to die rather than offer their parents, who were present, such nameless shame. The parents, standing, offerings in hand, entreated the goddess that their child should hold out, that this trial should end making him a real Spartan. "Should he bend, then better, O goddess, for him to die here in front of us."

Hipposthenes had only a little while ago passed this trial. The Archons and the gymnast Dexandros had been very impressed. The priestess did not show once that the statue of the goddess had felt heavy in her arms, and from the

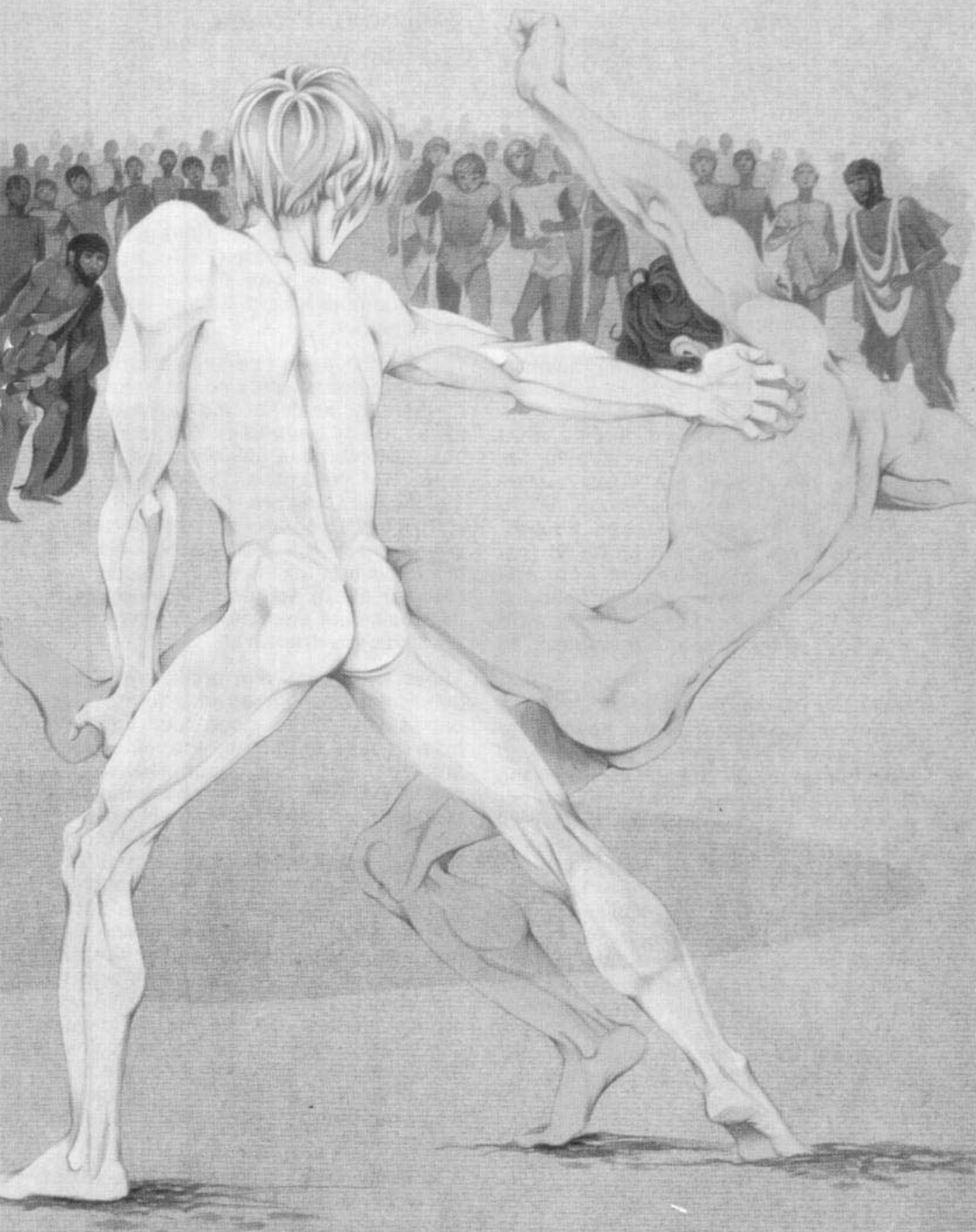
scourger's brow sweat was pouring heavily. Hipposthenes stood quite still, his body was streaked red and from the streaks blood was pouring. Hipposthenes stood quite unconcerned. With a faint smile playing on his face he stood there and waited. You would have thought that he was challenging the scourger. It was worth looking at that boy. His body though smeared with blood had lost nothing of its beauty, all its proportions were as if fashioned by a great sculptor.

They had started quite early and now the sun was reaching its highest point when the Archon lifted up his staff, the sign to stop the whipping, and, turning to Hipposthenes' parents, said: "Be proud of your boy, we are even prouder for you and for Sparta."

Dexandros the gymnast prophesied for him the glorious career of a great athlete and worked hard in order to confirm it. When after a little time the sacred envoys of Olympia arrived and the new games for boys were made known, Dexandros did not let the days pass idly. He started training Hipposthenes intensively and teaching him the various wrestling grips. The boy immediately distinguished himself at training in Olympia and showed remarkable resistance.

The day of the games arrived. Hipposthenes fought with his first adversaries with the greatest of ease and when the crucial moment of the last bout finally came he felt all his bodily forces still unspent and was impatient to come to grips with his last opponent an hour later. The spectators who had followed the previous wrestling games were all gathered round the place where the wrestling took place and were enjoying the sight of those strong boys contending for the first time, admiring their force and skill. They at once distinguished Hipposthenes from the others.

The wrestling started and the aggressiveness of the two adversaries was so



great that the people felt quite shaken. Hipposthenes was unrestrainable, his adversary measured and careful and quite violent. At one moment he managed a powerful grip on the Spartan's foot and pressed hard to twist it and make him fall on the ground. The crowd realised that Hipposthenes was having a difficult time. But the indomitable youth suddenly turned and, freeing his foot, rushed like lightening towards his opponent who found himself locked in a suffocating embrace. The change was so quick and sudden that the other youth found himself engulfed in two iron vices and his breathing became difficult the more he felt his opponent squeezing him tighter and tighter... His arms were glued to his sides, he tried to free them, but the Spartan's forces were so great and the vices closed even tighter. The unfortunate youth moved, turned, fought to free himself, but with every movement he found that he was suffocating more and more. His senses abandoned him and he slipped out of the untameable Spartan's wild embrace and crumpled breathless to the ground.

This was Hipposthenes' first Olympic victory in the wrestling for boys. After that he won the wrestling for men in five consecutive Olympiads. But the famed Hipposthenes achieved another great feat. He prepared and presented as an able successor his son Etimokles. The latter followed in his father's footsteps and was crowned at Olympia, for wrestling, with the Olympic wild olive for five consecutive years. On the advice of the oracle, the Spartans built a temple to Hipposthenes to honour him as they honoured Poseidon, and at Olympia the statutes of father and son could be seen standing side by side, telling the world their wonderful tale.



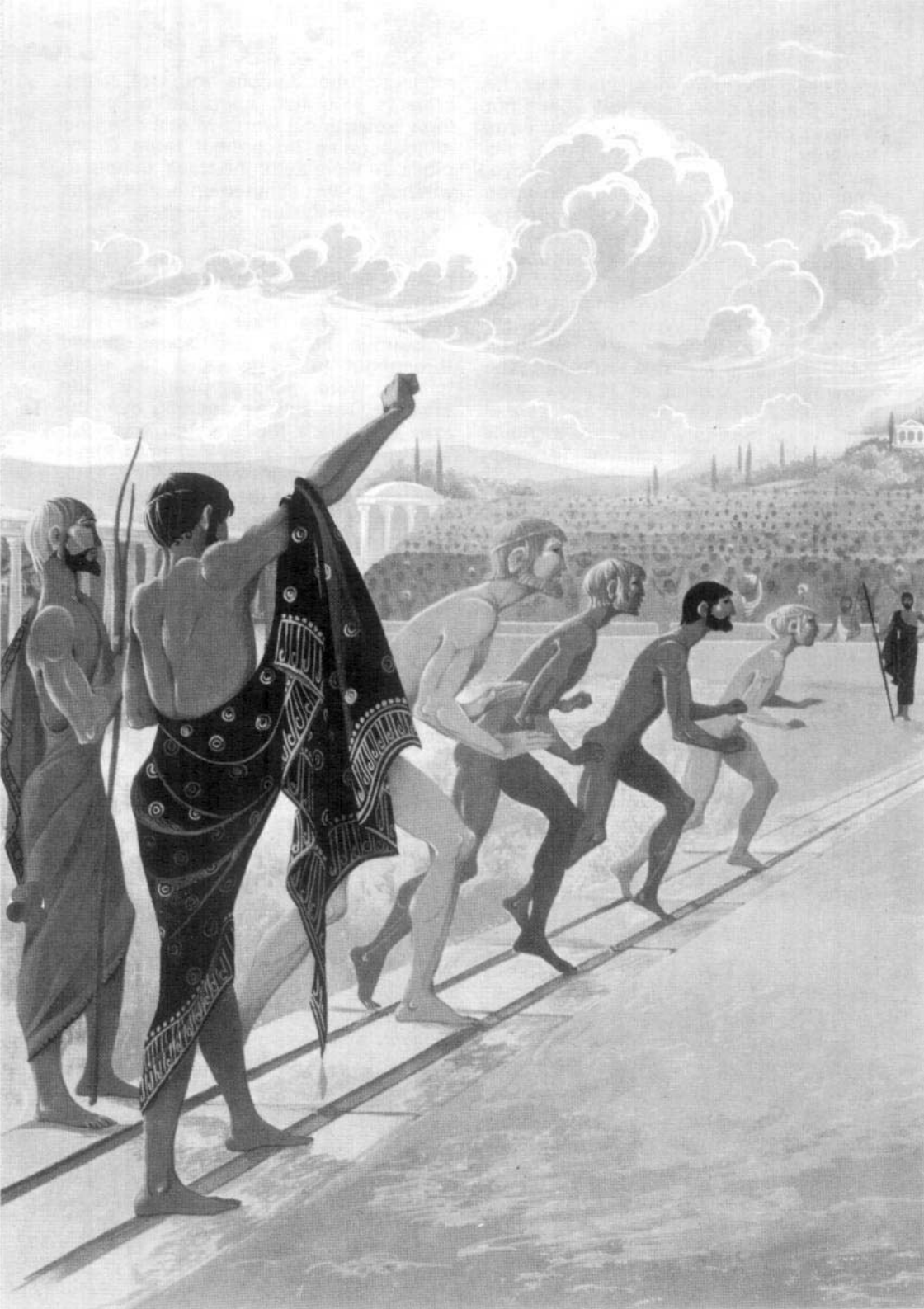
## **Krisson of Himera Stadion runner**

The fiery ball of the sun has just risen over the mountain tops of Arcadia and the dark mists with their unbearable cold dampness are lifting from the valley of Elis.

The Games have opened according to the traditional ceremonial and the preliminary heats of the stadion race have already been held. The four qualified athletes have given the judges the branch of wild olive, the sign of their qualification, before lining up at the start. They stand and place their toes in the grooves of the marble starting block, waiting for the signal. Suddenly a clamour and great commotion amongst the masses of spectators can be heard, "Krisson, it's Krisson!"

Those who know him break out in turbulent applause, those who do not keep on asking. Fame goes like lightning from mouth to mouth, the din grows stronger and excitement shakes the whole stadium. Yes, amongst the four athletes is Krisson from Himera in Sicily, the winner of the stadion run at the two previous Olympiads. And now here he is again at the start, to claim victory for the third time, fleetfooted, unattainable, like the arrow which flies away from the overstretched bowstring of a mighty archer. Four years ago he won the stadion, which he had also won eight years ago. Now he intends to wear the Olympic wreath for the third time! What courage! What force both in body and soul! The people, now that he has been recognised, are frantic. "Krisson, Krisson win!"

The noise in the stadium grows, whilst the athletes lean forward with arms half stretched out and the left knee slightly



bent, awaiting the signal for a forceful start. But the deafening noise does not want to die down. So the starter turns towards the spectators, lifting his hands, and at once, as if by royal command, complete silence falls upon the great stadium up to the slopes of Kronos. The signal is given. The four athletes disappear into the open arena. Four arrows have been shot, four bodies are no longer treading the earth, they are flying. They are like resplendent statues which have left their pedestals and are now running. The crowds shift and move in one great mass, they all lean forward, but cannot see the runners any more. Loud shouts cover and shake the stadium. "Krisson, Krisson, Krisson!"

The clamour has passed the waters of Alpheus to carry the celebrated and happy name.

The spectators near the track try to distinguish who that lightning-swift athlete is, who escaped his competitors from the very first few metres, who passed in front of them as if in a dream and has almost reached the goal. They turn round to ask, but it isn't necessary. The herald's voice booms above the noisy crowd: "Krisson of Himera wins the stadion."

The crowd did not only applaud his stadion victory alone, but also because he had won three times in the same game and was taking his place

amongst the famous "triests", the athletes who had managed to prove their exceptional worth in this fine and difficult game throughout three Olympiads. At the side of the track, unable to withhold their unlimited enthusiasm, his fellow countrymen of Himera lifted Krisson up and, with songs and acclamations, paraded him triumphantly amongst the people who in their turn were singing hymns to victory. And so great was their joy that their boisterous shouts and songs lasted throughout the day whilst the other games were taking place in the stadium. The sun was setting over the low hills when the stadium was gradually emptying, when the tired spectators were withdrawing to their tents where their slaves were already lighting the fires and were preparing the great cauldrons for the evening meal. Then the citizens from Himera went from tent to tent, inviting the strangers as follows: "We the Himereans, happy because of the great victory which Zeus deigned to bestow on us, we invite you all to come to our fires. We can treat you all to red Sicilian wine and grilled meat. May the gods one day also favour your renowned countries with a victory like Krisson's, our triast!" The Himereans and their guests spent the moonlit night feasting round the fires.

C. P.

END

*We would again like to thank Mr. Cleanthis Paleologos for very kindly allowing us to publish his work on the Legends of Olympia in the Olympic Review.*

*For those of our readers who are interested, we list below the numbers of the Olympic Review containing these extracts:*

*64-65, 66-67, 68-69, 70-71, 72-73, 74-75, 76-77, 78-79, 80-81, 82-83, 85-86, 87-88, 89-90, 91-92, 93-94, 95-96, 97-98, 99-100.*