

Sport in ancient times

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*“Ὁ νικῶν δὲ λοιπὸν ἀμφὶ βίωτον ἔχει μιλιτόεσσαν εὐδία ἀέθλων γ’ ἔνεκεν”**

Two important landmarks stand out in the long path of sport in ancient Greece : first of all the great moments of glory sung by the sublime Pindar in his famous lines :

“Just as no other heavenly orb outshines the sun, so no victory is more brilliant than that at Olympia won”.

(Pindar, Olympic Games I, 1-7)

followed by the decline, the decadence and the scorn, as described by Philostratos :

“... for gymnastics used to create athletes like Milo, Hippothenes and Promachos, Polydamas and Glaucos, while contemporary gymnastics has so transformed the morals and lowered the esteem in which athletes are held that many of its adepts are indignant”.

(Philostratos, Gymn. I, 261)**

Below we give a brief account of this long evolution of sport in ancient Greece.

We know neither the exact date nor the origin of the creation of the Olympic Games, but we feel that only a civilised people with highly developed minds and customs could have created them.

Realising the natural instincts of man such as his competitiveness, his desire to succeed and shine, the ancients perceived that sports competitions and contests could satisfy these instincts and sublimate them. From the early contests the refined Hellenic mind succeeded in extracting the elements of culture and the seeds of education from which developed what is known today as civilisation.

The Games thus acquired a higher significance, unimaginable for lesser peoples, for the latter were unable to understand how it was possible for men to remain friends

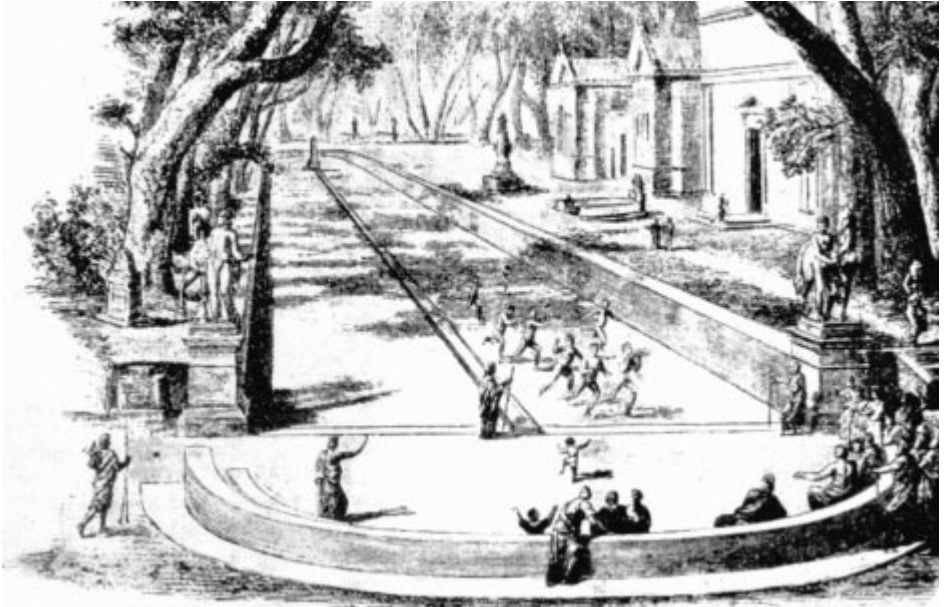
while fighting and competing with one another.

The Greeks competed within the bounds of their pride and self-respect (“filotimo”), that is to say striving after victory, but with duly correct behaviour. They submitted to an ascetic way of life in order to win a simple crown of laurels. But more than this crown, they knew that they were going to win—more precious than all the gold on earth—honour, dignity and glory for their household gods, their country, ancestors, parents and children. The prize being without the slightest material value, victory was therefore revered in the minds of the people uniquely for its moral and spiritual worth. The winner thus became a semi-sacred person. For this reason, the honours rendered the winners at the Games were equivalent to those paid to the demi-gods. For all believed that the winner had won virtue through the perfection of his body, the superiority of his mind and the goodness of his soul.

From all corners of the known world, from Thrace, Macedonia and the countries of the Danube, from the East and Egypt, from Sicily, Crete, the coast of Africa and the

* Pindar, Olymp. I, 97, 98. And the victor enjoys the rest of his life to the full owing to his great exploits.

** Philostratos lived in the 6th century A.D.



The stadium at Olympia in its heyday.

whole of Greece, people made the pilgrimage to Olympia to admire the men whose strong supple bodies roused the admiration of the crowds.

All free Greeks were eligible to compete, that is to say both rich and poor, nobles and kings, peasants and simple citizens, with the exception of those who had been condemned for any criminal act. Non-Greek slaves and foreigners were not entitled to take part in these Games.

Orsippos, the runner, a victor at Olympia and the first athlete to run naked (15th Olympic Games, 720 B.C.), became a general of the Megarians. Polymnestor, a victor in the junior stadion race was a shepherd. Eurybatus of Argos, a pentathlon athlete, was a general. The famous Glaucos of Carystos was a farmer. Amissinas was a keeper of oxen. Chilon, three times a victor at Olympia, was the head of a colony at Cyrene. Milo of Crotona belonged to the Pythagorians. Archesilas, another Olympic victor, was King of Cyrene. Phaïllos, famous for his extraordinary 55-foot leap, took part in the naval battle of Salamis with his own warship. Diagoras, a nobleman of Rhodes, was a King's son. Kylon, an Olympic victor,

almost became tyrant of Athens. Alexander of Amyntos, King of the Macedonians, also competed at Olympia.

Many centuries before the Olympic Games were founded, Homer mentioned the perfect organisation of the games held outside the walls of Troy under siege. The hero Achilles was the organiser and founder, and the games were held to honour the memory of his friend Patrocles. The heads of the army of the Hellenes were the athletes : the commander-in-chief Agamemnon, the enormous Ajax of Aegina, the all-powerful Ulysses, King of Ithaca, the son of the wise King Nestor, Antilochos, brother of the chief Menelaus, the leader of the Cretans Idomeneus, Crateros Diomedes of Argos and several others. And it is remarkable that, even at the time of these prehistoric games, the real Olympic ideology seemed to prevail. Thus, in the chariot race, Antilochos strayed from the right path, was thought to have won and was awarded the prize. But he realised his mistake and returned the crown in order not to tarnish his image in the minds of his rivals. How beautiful is the justification given by Menelaus :

"ἄνδρες ἄνδρες νίκης ἔσθ' ἔστιν"

The fact that he admitted his mistake is of great value in itself, for it excludes a spirit governed by the base desire for profit. Thus, the Olympic idea can be considered as the natural development of the spirit of youth, the flower of valour, the fruit of human dignity. It is the pursuit of virtue and the desire for victory without any thought of material gain, it is the recognition of the harmony of body, soul and mind. The athlete is the image of the common good and his strength becomes a moral success for society. The Olympic spirit then symbolises the strength of the human character and the triumph of truth.

The full extent of this altruism on the part of the victors at Olympia *can* be measured when one realises the superhuman efforts to which athletes submitted in order to obtain the so eagerly sought after victory. As Dion Chrysostom said :

*“Τοὺς ἀγωνιστὰς τοῦτους ὁρᾶτε ὅσα πύσχοι
γυμναζόμενοι δαπακῶντες, τὸ τελευταῖον
ἀποθνήσκουσιν αἰρούμενοι ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἄλλοις”***

The ancient Games survived as a pan-Hellenic institution for nearly 1200 years. More than anything, they taught that any base material aim must be destroyed not only in athletics but also in life, and that the major efforts of man must all strive towards the acquisition of immaterial, immaculate purity of spirit.

Great minds and great athletes possessing extraordinary strength were nourished on this culture : Plato and Theagen of Thassos, Socrates and Milo of Crotona, Aristotle and Clitomachus of Thebes, Sophocles and Diagoras of Rhodes, Thalys of Milo and Lygdamis of Syracuse, Euripides and Glaucos of Carystos. Others were the fruits of it, such as Pindar, Simonides, Aeschylus, Phidias, Praxiteles, Scopas, Archimedes, Euclis, Zeno and Plutarch, as well as many that became famous in the sciences and the arts.

It was in the stadium and on the playing field that the ancient Greeks gained an awareness of their national unity and that Greece became HELLAS.

C.P.

* Youth has once again triumphed over mind (Homer, Iliad, 4, 604).

** You see how these athletes suffer and submit to all in training, prepared even to die in order to obtain the supreme reward (Dion Chrysostom, 31, 32).