

## Introduction

# The Significance of Sport: Ancient Athletics and Ancient Society

In the second century of our era, Pausanias questioned whether a city named Panopeus, which lacked some basic amenities, really deserved to be called a city. One of the essential features whose absence Pausanias duly noted was a gymnasium. About a century earlier, an orthodox Jew in Alexandria, named Philo, had come to the conclusion that a gymnasium was simply a given in the plan of a city (On Creation 17). By Pausanias' day, there were almost 300 different athletic festivals, spread from one end of the Greek world to the next. Formal Greek contests found homes in remote Marseille, Africa, the Black Sea. Games sprang up to honor funerals, celebrate military victories, mark the foundations of cities, to pay homage to gods and heroes. The Greeks themselves saw athletic achievement as a distinguishing feature of their civilization: when the Spartan king Agesilaus wanted to hearten his troops, he stripped and exhibited naked captured soldiers of the enemy Persian forces in order to show how unathletic they were in comparison to Greek men and how easily they would fall in battle.

Athletics were clearly part of the heartbeat of the Greek world: an institution of such magnitude calls for careful analysis. Furthermore, since Greek sport is consistently (though at times, inaccurately) invoked as a model for the modern Olympic movement, no historian of sport can ignore the Classical roots of our athletics. These realizations are reflected in the growing number of college courses and publications on sport in the ancient world.

The articles in this volume were presented at a conference held on 13 November 1982 at Wellesley College. The title of the conference and this collection, "The Significance of Sport: Ancient Athletics and Ancient Society," reveals an orientation towards social history, and each of the essays attempts to study some of the notable features of Greek life as they surface in athletics.

In the first essay, Matthew Dickie explores the limits of Greek tolerance for competitiveness. It is customary to speak of the overwhelming emphasis that the Greeks placed upon winning. But in games, as in life, there were strong constraints imposed on the unbridled pursuit of success, and this forms the basis for Professor Dickie's study of the earliest piece of Greek sport literature, Homer's *Iliad* 23. This paper is a brief version of a major scholarly treat-

ment of Greek attitudes towards success, competition, and envy which will appear in his forthcoming book, *Winning and Losing*.

Mary Lefkowitz' paper studies the interaction of poet and athlete in Pindar's *Odes*. The alert reader of Classical literature consistently notes that the diction and metaphor of sport thoroughly penetrated Greek society at all levels, for the most refined genres of ancient poetry took for granted that even oblique allusions to the details of sport were comprehensible to the reader. In Pindar's poetic stance as athlete, moreover, one sees how deeply sport formed a part of self-identity for the Greeks of the early Classical period.

Erich Segal's essay, like the first paper, examines the nature of Greek competitiveness. Since the 19th century work of Curtius and Burckhardt, Classicists have tended to view Greece as a uniquely agonistic culture. The most recent works on Greek sport, however, particularly on the Continent, have demanded a thorough revision of this time-honored view. Comparison with the athletic systems of non-Greek cultures, ancient and modern, is indispensable, and it is on this basis that Segal raises the idea of a taxonomy of athletic ideologies.

Betty Spears, herself a leading figure in the women's sports movement in America, studies the participation of the women of ancient Greece in athletics. Dr. Spears stresses in addition the remarkable thinness of the ancient record as a reflection of the minor role of women's sport in antiquity. The limited athletic opportunities accorded to women correspond closely to general ancient mores and point out once again how accurate a mirror of social phenomena sport is.

In the last essay, Michael Poliakoff discusses Jewish and Christian adaptations of Greco-Roman athletic ideology. Both in metaphor and in actual practice, Classical notions of the spiritual benefits of physical education and contest lived on after Greece and Rome.

David Young spoke at the conference on the myth of amateur Greek athletics, calling for a revision of the view that Greek sport was primarily the preserve of the nobility: his insights into ancient sport lead to a reexamination of the fundamental principles of the modern Olympic movement. We are unable, unfortunately, to include Professor Young's paper in this collection, since the publication of his book length study of this topic has now appeared under the auspices of Ares Press.

It should be obvious that the authors' focus is on the larger context of ancient society rather than on antiquarian detail. We are publishing our papers in the hopes of stimulating thought about the Greek cultivation of sport, with the conviction that in coming to terms with antiquity, we can focus a little more clearly on our own attitudes and presuppositions—for this, after all, is one of the best reasons for studying the Classics.

The conference at which these papers appeared was jointly sponsored by the Departments of Greek and Latin and the Department of Physical Education of Wellesley College. It is the fruit of a long-standing cooperation between the athletic and academic departments of Wellesley College and is a

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sign of the College's deep conviction that athletics are a serious part of the education that should lie at the heart of an undergraduate institution.

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