

Young, David C. *The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics*. Chicago: Ares Publishers, 1984. Pp. x + 202. Paper U.S. \$10.00.

In a book intended for anyone interested in ancient sport or the Olympic Movement, Young is ready for a fight and he pulls no punches in discussing the ideology and scholarship of others:

From Homer on, as we hear of large athletic winnings, the concept of amateurism in any sense is wholly foreign, often even antithetical, to the nature and vocabulary of Greek athletics. Yet our own interest in this matter—our legacy from the modern Olympics and nineteenth-century British elitism—leads us to exaggerate its importance. In classical studies “amateurism” is an irrelevant distraction. (164)

This study of the “Olympic” myth of Greek amateurism and of Greek athletic profit covers the periods of 776-350 B.C. (regarded by popular view to be an age of amateur athletics) and 1866-1913 A.D. (when the amateurist movement had its strongest formative influence on modern sport). Young declares that previous standard works on these topics, due to the distorting influence of the modern Olympics and the status of the study of ancient sport, are flatly wrong or worse. His intention is to debunk the popular notion of Greek amateurism, a notion pushed by the Olympic movement and aided by traditional classical scholarship. The conventional interpretation (cf. my “Directions in Ancient Sport History,” *Journal of Sport History*, 10 no. 1 (Spring 1983): 7-34) is that early Greek athletes were all idealistically motivated noble amateurs down to the fifth century before professionalism and money brought decline and degeneration. Young shows this to be a modern myth without ancient foundation. He asserts that the Greeks lacked both the ideology and the vocabulary of amateurism: ancient athletes earned wealth and they did not demonstrate aristocratic exclusiveness or IOC-style idealism, a set of values which Young sees as an imposition of nineteenth-century Victorian amateurism upon Greek history.

The book is in two parts. “The Myth” and “The Reality,” the former is a history of the myth and the latter an exercise in demythologizing. Part One treats the development of the popular notion of Greek amateurism from nineteenth-century roots, and shows that various elements in the myth can be traced to modern and unsatisfactory rather than ancient and reliable works. Part Two discusses ancient prizes (their sources and ancient and modern equivalent worth), training and performances; despite a disclaimer by Young he affirms that Greek athletes were professionals in a financial sense. Throughout, the book shows industry and enthusiasm as Young covers diverse areas and evidence, from Victorian England to ancient Greek colonies, from ancient inscriptions to modern memoirs. Writing in a lively and clear style, Young tries to reach both the scholar and the general reader (adding maps and a chronology in the appendices).

Part One is a fascinating and convincing unravelling of a tale of intrigues, manipulations and misinformation concerning our perception of ancient Greek sport and the earliest modern Olympics, a perception largely shaped by the elitist views of leading figures of the early Olympic Movement. Rejecting usual accounts of the early modern Olympics, Young uses old Greek newspapers, modern biographies and memoirs to show that a pre-Coubertin modern Greek Olympic revival was ignored and misrepresented by amateurists and Olympists. Young depicts Coubertin himself not as the revered founder of the

modern Olympics but as a man who consciously used amateurism as well as fanciful writings about the ancient Olympics to achieve his personal goal of a refounded amateur Olympics.

Part Two amounts to a study of non-amateur Greek athletics, including discussions of the variety and value of athletic rewards as well as the careers of several known athletes. Young undermines traditional notions by showing evidence to be contrary or inadequate and by pointing to chronological flaws and anachronistic biases. Ancient athletes earned large amounts, profit and training were not seen as negative, participation did not count more than victory, and athletics were a serious adult activity rather than youthful games or play. Young argues that ancient aristocrats did not have a monopoly on athletics because athletic prizes opened the games up to non-nobles. Young demonstrates how a boy of moderate means could not only enter athletics but become very wealthy from his winnings.

Young admits that he fears his book may not be welcome in some classrooms and locker rooms. His depictions of Coubertin and A. Brundage may discomfort supporters of the Olympic Movement, and classicists may not welcome his evaluations of the works of E. N. Gardiner and others. H. W. Pleket, a leading classical scholar, is sure to respond to Young's argument that he only "almost" escaped the influence of the myth and so allowed flaws in his own works. Historians of modern sport and classical athletics with differing viewpoints must test Young's assertions, and the general reader must decide for himself whether Olympic history and ideals are compatible. Even if some people may not enjoy it, this book should be read. Young himself, as he declares, is in fact a supporter of the modern Olympics and his sincere love for sport and ancient Greece becomes apparent. He simply has little tolerance for outdated elitism and weak scholarship. The myth is well rooted and deeply cherished but this book should and will draw the attention of those who tend to overlook the area or wish to remain content with the old clichés.

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