

Book Reviews

Poliakoff, Michael B. *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. Pp. xviii, 202. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.50.

Since the first words I ever wrote for *The Journal of Sport History* were in reply to a communication that questioned my competence to write about medieval sports, I hesitated before I accepted the invitation to review Poliakoff's new book. Although I have attempted to read what nineteenth- and twentieth-century classicists have written and are writing about ancient sports, I cannot claim to be a specialist about the sports of antiquity. My resolve to attempt the review was strengthened by Poliakoff's own statement of purpose: "I have attempted as far as possible to keep the text unencumbered with obscure names, scholarly apparatus, and jargon, either academic or athletic. It serves no purpose to make antiquity inaccessible to the nonspecialist, least of all here, where the subject is one which raises so many issues of general interest" (p. 2). Taking Poliakoff at his word, I assume that someone to whom the book is addressed can legitimately comment on the success of the endeavor.

After a candid introduction acknowledging the staggering problems of evidence that confront everyone who does research into ancient sports, Poliakoff devotes sixteen pages to "general aspects." Obviously, he cannot enter into the scholarly quarrels over such matters as the sequence of events at the Olympic Games. In fact, Poliakoff is quite scrupulous (some might say overly scrupulous) in his attempt to avoid quibbles. Where disagreements are too important to be overlooked, they are relegated to the appendix or to the footnotes (which are quite detailed). Poliakoff does make his work somewhat easier than it might have been by excluding gladiatorial combats on the grounds that a "gladiator fighting to kill or disable his opponent and save himself in any manner possible is not participating in a sport but in a form of warfare for spectators" (p. 7). Most historians disagree. If one adopts Poliakoff's stipulation that the criteria for determining victory in sports must be "different from those that mark success in everyday life" (p. 7), one can nonetheless assert that the rules of *the munera* were sufficiently different from the rules of war, such as they were, to allow us to distinguish the two forms of combat. Each of us has the right to define the scope of our research, but I think Poliakoff might have done better simply to have admitted that the gladiatorial games are too large a topic for summary treatment. He might then have limited himself to Greek combat sports and to a comparison of Greek combats with those of other ancient cultures.

The special merit of this study lies in Chapters II, III, and V, which are detailed and well illustrated discussions of the techniques of ancient wrestlers, boxers, and pankration contestants. These chapters comprise roughly one half

of the book. I am not aware that any other scholar has given us a clearer idea of what went on in Greek combat sports and how their holds, throws, and punches compared to those of modern wrestlers and boxers. That Poliakoff excels here was to be expected because his previous work, *Studies in the Terminology of the Greek Combat Sports* (2nd ed., 1986) is considered to be authoritative.

Almost as fine is Chapter VI, "The Nature and Purpose of Combat Sport," which analyzes criticisms of athletics, mainly the complaint that athletes were relatively useless for military purposes. Poliakoff defends the notion, made famous by Jacob Burckhardt in *Griechische Kufurgeschichte*, that the agon played a more significant role in Hellenic culture than in the cultures of other ancient peoples. Sports were serious activities that brought honor and status; athletic victory and defeat were momentarily important; Greek sports were almost always individual rather than team competitions; all social classes participated in the agon. The first two points are, in my opinion, enough to make the case. In the footnotes, Poliakoff takes on Ingomar Weiler, the most determined critic of Burckhardt's thesis. Weiler is an extraordinary scholar to whom every sports historian is or ought to be indebted, but I agree with Poliakoff that "Weiler's zeal to combat a large body of racist scholarship . . . has prevented him from focusing on the distinctive features of sport in historical Greek times" (p. 179n).

Chapter VII, "The Participants in Greek Combat Sport," is the least satisfactory. The lively biographical sketches of eleven ancient athletes are fun to read, but the very brief discussion of the social background of ancient athletes is rather a disappointment. "Looking over the athletic scene in later antiquity," writes Poliakoff,

one encounters many signs of a full-blown professional world of sport: subsidies for athletes, slaves competing, massive numbers of festivals. . . . But for all this, the world of sport—at least in its ideology and vocabulary—remains ennobled (p. 132).

Poliakoff does not list Horst Buhmann's *Der Sieg in Olympia und in den anderen panhellenischen Spielen* (1975) in his bibliography, but he does include H. W. Pleket's *Stadion* (1975) essay, "Games, Prizes, Athletes and Ideology," in comparison to which Poliakoff's four pages on the social background of the athletes seem inadequate.

The last chapter, "Metaphor, Myth, and Reality," is based upon Poliakoff's *Journal of Sport History* essay, "Jacob, Job, and Other Wrestlers: Reception of Greek Athletics by Jews and Christians in Antiquity" (1984). The appendix, "Combat Sport, Funeral Cult and Human Sacrifice," is a fascinating and persuasive refutation of Karl Meuli's thesis, in *Der griechische Agon* (1968), that the combat sports at Greek funeral games, like those for Patroklos in Book *XXIII* of the *Iliad*, derived from human sacrifices carried out to appease the spirits of the dead or to identify human malefactors. Poliakoff argues that sport, "an activity that appears in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in nonfuneral contexts, is a fitting offering to the memory of a dead warrior . . ." (p. 157). We need no further explanation.

Specialists will doubtless have much to say about Poliakoff's interpretation of ancient literary and visual sources. In the meantime, sports historians—no matter what their field of expertise—will want to read *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* and to recommend it to their students as a fine introduction to an awesomely complex topic.

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Donald G. Kyle, *Athletics in Ancient Athens*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987. Pp. xvi, 240. Illustrations, maps, index, notes.

Donald Kyle concludes this fine book by stating that “it should now be clear that the interrelationship between the histories of Athens and its athletics is significant and continuous . . . Athletics were a public, integral, and potentially unifying or disruptive element in the civic experience of the Athenians” (p. 177). Among the many strong points of this study is its steady focus on the historical and cultural significance of athletics: this book is no mere exercise in antiquarianism, but a carefully documented analysis of the prosopography and politics of athletics in Athens.

At the core of the book is a catalogue of known and possible Athenian athletes. Each athlete receives a separate biographical entry in Appendix II with the relevant ancient testimonia and bibliographical notes: classicists and ancient historians will find this sober and detailed catalogue a valuable research tool. The background of Lysis, known to us from Plato's dialogue, is nicely illuminated, as is that of the charismatic Autolykos, whom Xenophon, among others, described. Taking to heart the importance of the work of H. W. Pleket and David C. Young, Kyle uses his catalogue to address in chapter 4 the question of the athletes' socio-economic background: who are the participants? Does the personnel change over the centuries of Athenian history? Kyle correctly distinguishes between “elitism of birth” and the “elitism of wealth” to which it increasingly yielded in the fifth century BC. What is problematic is the difficulty in determining whether the socio-economic status of a given athlete was the result of athletic achievement or the prerequisite for it, and there are few cases where the hereditary nobility of the athletes, or its absence can be proven. It is daunting to consider how few of Athens' archons, strategoi, choregoi and other notables are known to us at all, to say nothing of their interests (or lack thereof) in athletics. Kyle is careful to warn the reader repeatedly that the trends he points out are based on very fragmentary evidence, and he wisely refrains from computing percentages or otherwise giving a misleading positivism; the trends he does point out are sensible and sound deductions from the evidence that has come down to us.

Having shown in chapter 4 “historical developments more in line with changes in Greek society than with the oft lamented ‘decline of Greek athletics’ ” (p. 121), Kyle examines in chapter 5 the testimony of ancient critics of