

Wrestling in the Repêchage of the Ancient Pentathlon

Hugh M. Lee

Department of Classics

University of Maryland at College Park

In his article on the pentathlon published in this journal, D. G. Kyle generally supported the scoring system proposed by H. A. Harris, while differing from it in one important detail.¹ According to Harris, when there are three separate winners in the first three events, all three advance to the fourth event, the footrace. One of the athletes, A, wins and thus has two victories. The other two competitors, B and C, now wrestle in a preliminary match, or *repêchage*, for the right to challenge A for the pentathlon crown.² In Kyle's view, however, such a procedure places the challenger, either B or C, at a disadvantage against A, who will have to wrestle only once. Kyle explains: "In combat events proper, back-to-back matches are well attested, but it seems unlikely that this was expected of pentathletes, as non-specialists in combat sports and as men who had competed thrice already." Furthermore, he argues, a weary challenger, B or C, would create "a one-sided final and poor spectator sport." In place of wrestling, he thus proposes that B and C run another footrace to determine the right to wrestle A, stating that "an elimination run would be quick and would leave the new second double victor still in decent shape to offer an entertaining wrestling effort, one worthy of the gods and the crowd."³

Prior to Kyle, W. E. Sweet had also rejected wrestling for the *repêchage*. Sweet, however, believed that the *repêchage* should consist of a contest from

1. D. G. Kyle. "Winning and Watching the Greek Pentathlon." *Journal of Sport History* 17 (1990), 291-305. H. A. Harris wrote three times on the pentathlon scoring. In *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (Bloomington and London, 1964), 78-79, he believed that there could be four separate winners in the first four events. Later, in "The Method of Deciding Victory in the Pentathlon," *Greece and Rome* 19 (1972): 64, and *Sports in Greece and Rome* (London, 1972), 34, he amended his view to allow only the victors in the first three contests to continue.

2. The term comes from the sport of rowing and is used by Harris in *GAA* (above, note 1), 78.

3. Kyle (above, note 1), 202. See also J. Ebert, *Zum Pentathlon der Antike* [=Abhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie für Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse, Band 56, Heft 1] (Berlin, 1963), 12-13, who proposes that the pentathlon footrace may have been five stades long. If true, neither the initial race nor a *repêchage* would be so quick or so relatively undemanding. Ebert's suggestion of a five-stade race has not, however, won general acceptance.

4. W. E. Sweet, "A New Proposal for Scoring the Greek Pentathlon." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 50 (1983): 289-290, and *Sport and Recreation in Ancient Greece* (New York and Oxford, 1987), 59, believes with the earlier view of Harris, *GAA* (above, note 1) that there could be four separate winners after the first four events, thus requiring two semifinals.

the pentathlon which neither athlete had won, the event being determined by lot.⁴ Thus, if A had won the discus and footrace, B the jump, and C the javelin, then B and C would compete in either the discus or the footrace for the right to challenge A.

There is a problem, however, with the suggestions of Kyle and Sweet. Each would have athletes compete in a contest which neither had won. *Yet they had already competed against each other in those contests*, and their placements relative to each other would have been easily discernible.⁵ The results would have been especially obvious in the footrace, with only three athletes competing. Thus, the interest of the spectators could not have been as great as both scholars suggest. There is also a second difficulty. Suppose that B and C reversed the order of their previous finish. For example, following Kyle, let us assume that B and C finished second and third respectively in the footrace, but in the *repêchage*, C defeated B. Why should this second run count more than the first? Or would the athletes race yet a third time?

Under Sweet's system, another problem occurs. Suppose that B and C were to draw lots between two events in each of which one was decidedly superior to the other. For example, if B and C had won neither the discus nor the race, and if B was a much better discobolus and C a much swifter runner, then the right to challenge A would rest not upon skill *per se* as upon the luck of the draw, the fortunate athlete being the one whose stronger event happened to be chosen.

We cannot deny that there is an inbuilt advantage in the Harris system for athlete A, who sits out the first round of the wrestling. Yet A does in a sense earn that advantage insofar as he has one more outright win than B or C.⁶ Even stronger proof that the Greeks tolerated this "unfairness" comes from their use of a bye-system in the combat sports (wrestling, boxing, pankration). When an uneven number of contestants competed, lots were drawn and an athlete could obtain a bye. A victor who won without a bye could boast that he had triumphed *anephedros*, "without sitting out" a round.⁷ The conversion of a disadvantage into a special form of merit indicates that the Greeks sanctioned this inequity.⁸

Kyle argues that it would be poor spectator sport to match a rested athlete against one who, after three events, also had to wrestle a preliminary bout. But surely this disadvantage is less than that of the combat athlete who had to fight an extra opponent. The combat sports are violent and grueling

5. M. K. Langdon, "Scoring the Ancient Pentathlon: Final Solution?" *ZPE* 78 (1989): 117, in criticizing Sweet, notes "Contestants are given a second chance in events in which they had already lost."

6. See D. F. Jackson, "Philostratos and the Pentathlon," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 111 (1991): 180. Kyle (above, note 1), 303, states that "the man with two wins had in a sense earned a bye" and is more concerned with the quality of the competition from the spectators' viewpoint.

7. M. B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* (New Haven and London, 1987), 21-22.

8. Langdon (above, note 5), 118, advises against anachronistically applying modern standards of fairness to the ancient Greeks. One may, however, disagree with his overly sweeping statement that "It mattered little to the ancients whether an athletic event was fair for those who participated in it."

events. In contrast, the first four events of the pentathlon are all non-contact sports and far less taxing and conducive to injury. Moreover, Kyle's statement that the pentathletes were "non-specialists" and thus by implication unsuited to the demands of two wrestling matches needs qualification. First, we should note how widely popular a participatory sport wrestling was in Greek culture and education.⁹ Secondly, although pentathletes were not on the same competitive level as those who wrestled exclusively, they were highly trained and skilled simply because they had to be, for in all likelihood most pentathlon contests did not end before the wrestling. Three victories were required of the overall victor, and the odds were against an individual winning the first three or three of the first four contests, so that victory more often than not was determined by the wrestling. Finally, from the viewpoint of the spectators, a preliminary wrestling match between B and C as proposed by Harris would be much more dramatic than watching the reprise of an event in which the athletes had already competed.

On balance, then, the use of wrestling for the *repêchage* as proposed by Harris enjoys important advantages over the alternatives suggested by Kyle and Sweet.¹⁰

9. Cf. E. N. Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* (Oxford, 1930: repr., Chicago, 1978). 181: "The very name palaestra, 'the wrestling-school', indicates its importance in Greek life. Metaphors from wrestling abound in Greek literature, and scenes from the wrestling-ring occur not only in athletic art but also in mythological subjects." Poliakoff (above, note 7) 23, states, "Hellenic society expected that an accomplished and educated man would practice and enjoy wrestling as an adult." Langdon (above, note 5), 118, also mentions the popularity of wrestling among the Greeks as an argument in favor of wrestling for the *repêchage*. I would disagree, however, with his reasons for rejecting the discus, javelin, and jump for the *repêchage*. He states that these events "did not enjoy a great deal of favor." We know that the pentathlon was not as richly rewarded as the footraces or heavy events in athletic contests, but it was part of the program in the panhellenic contests and the individual events are depicted very frequently on Greek vases.

10. I wish to express my gratitude to an anonymous referee for his helpful suggestions for improving this paper.