

## Research Note

# Philostratus, *Repêchage*, Running and Wrestling: The Greek Pentathlon Again

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During my defense of my dissertation on the history of athletics in ancient Athens in 1981, I was holding my own in demonstrating that the histories of Athens and its athletics were interrelated when one examiner threw the pentathlon at me. I groaned internally and wanted to shout that I did not care how the Greeks scored the pentathlon, that I was interested in the social, cultural, and political significance of sport, not in some antiquarian puzzle. Instead, I responded politely with a summary of the debate and comforted myself that that would be the end of it. When I began teaching a course on ancient sport, I spent little time on the technical aspects of events, merely noting the pentathlon problem and suggesting my own opinion. Later in 1987 in his sourcebook, the late Waldo Sweet, to whom the teaching and study of ancient sport owes a great debt, gave his interpretation of the scoring of the pentathlon.<sup>1</sup> His system (e.g. with all entrants advancing to the run as the fourth event, and the use of lots to determine the event for a *repêchage* —an extra contest in which two athletes with one win each competed for the chance to enter the final event and wrestle against an athlete who had already won two sub-events) was too complex, but I feared that students would accept it in a book from Oxford by a major expert. Therefore, I wrote the piece which appeared in the *Journal of Sport History* (1990), reviewing the controversy, disagreeing with Sweet, adding the perspectives of spectatorship and sports management, and finally offering a variation on Harris' suggestion of a *repêchage* in wrestling. I suggested a *repêchage* in running as consistent with the arrangement, context, and ideology of the pentathlon.<sup>2</sup>

1. W. E. Sweet, *Sport and Recreation in Ancient Greece* (New York and Oxford, 1987), pp. 56-59; also "A New Proposal for Scoring the Greek Pentathlon." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 50 (1983): 287-290.

2. Donald G. Kyle. "Winning and Watching the Greek Pentathlon," *Journal of Sport History* 17 (1990): 291-305.

In closing I predicted, correctly, that I would not have the last word. In the same year, Gene Waddell made an appropriate appeal for more systematic examination of vase-paintings as evidence for the events of the pentathlon, and he rejected Sweet's system.<sup>3</sup> Trying to vindicate Philostratus' story (*Gym.* 3) that Jason invented the pentathlon to allow his friend Peleus, a fine wrestler but a second-place athlete in other events, to win an overall victory, Waddell suggests that second-place finishes counted. He (p. 99) points to Pliny's story (*NH* 34.53) of a contest among five fifth-century sculptors in which each of the five won one vote for first place but Polyclitus, having the largest number of second-place votes, was declared the winner. This need not have anything to do with the pentathlon, but if we are suggesting analogies, a more appropriate and traditional one would be military, since the sport-war metaphor was old and prevalent. Herodotus (8.123.1-2) tells of a contest to decide who was the best general after the battle of Salamis: each commander voted himself first place and, although Themistocles won the most votes for second place, out of mutual jealousy the generals disbanded the contest as undecided and sailed away. In Greek athletics and war, winning was everything. Waddell feels the competition continued as long as "more than one contestant had a chance to win," and that "no pentathlete was eliminated while he stood a chance for an overall victory," but it is unclear how the decisions about elimination would be calculated and applied in practice.<sup>4</sup>

In 1991 Donald F. Jackson tried to harmonize two seemingly incompatible ideas in the testimonia: the overall victor needed three wins but Philostratus suggests that a second-rater could win overall.<sup>5</sup> He feels he has a "very simple" and a "foolproof" answer, but his system is nearly as complex as Sweet's, Jackson suggests a progressive elimination from the first event in Jason's pentathlon: the last man in each event was dropped, unless the last finisher had won an earlier event, in which case the second last placer was eliminated. In theory, this would allow Peleus to continue by finishing at least second in each event and to emerge the victor ultimately in the wrestling.<sup>6</sup> Philostratus never mentions elimination but Jackson feels his ancient readers would have understood the procedure.<sup>7</sup> By this system, the hero

3. Gene Waddell, "The Greek Pentathlon," *Greek Vases in the J. Paul Getty Museum* 5 (1990): 99-106.

4. Waddell also makes an argument for the run as the first pentathlon event, offering Artemidoros *Onirocriticon* 1.57 on dreams as support, but an inscription from Rhodes suggests strongly that the first event, something done in turn five times, was not a run. See S.G. Miller, *Arete: Greek Sport from Ancient Sources*, second ed., (Berkeley, 1991) no. 46 translating *Rivista di Filologia* (1956): 55-57.

5. Donald F. Jackson, "Philostratos and the Pentathlon," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 111 (1991): 178-181. Note that while Philostratus' Peleus was second-rate in the three events peculiar to the pentathlon (and second-rate in the run) but excellent in wrestling, other testimonia (see below) characterize pentathletes as second-rate in wrestling and running. Ps. Plato *Amat.* 135e says pentathletes are left behind by wrestlers and runners in their specialties. As I argue, pentathletes had to be excellent in the first three events, and victorious in one, to have a chance to win overall.

6. Jackson, in n. 10 on p. 179, comments: "The interpretation offered here obviously depends upon the five contestants listed by Philostratos being the only contestants, a fact, as far as I know, acceptable."

7. Pindar *Isthmian One* lines 26-27 says that in the time of the heroes Castor and Iolaus there was no pentathlon yet but there were separate prizes for each feat. Both Pindar and Philostratus may have been influenced by Homer's inclusion of the discus and the javelin as distinct events in *Iliad* 23, but Pindar, closer to the phenomenon, omits the curious story found in Philostratus.

recognized as best in the javelin, should he come last in an earlier event, would be dropped and denied the chance to compete in his area of excellence. This might help Peleus, or it might lead to a violent argument. Moreover, Philostratus comments further (*Gym.* 3, trans. Sweet, p. 214): “. . . Peleus won the victory in such fashion that he was considered to be the best soldier of them all, because of his courage in battle and his skill in the pentathlon, which was regarded as a military exercise, because of the competition in the javelin.” If Peleus came second in the javelin, or the best javelinist had not been allowed to compete, would the pentathlon have contributed to the military status of Peleus?<sup>8</sup> As I suggested earlier, Jason had only to convene a wrestling contest, not to invent a pentathlon, to orchestrate a victory for Peleus.<sup>9</sup>

Applying his theory based on Philostratus, Jackson suggests that in practice, in a field of 12, one third of the entrants would be dropped after the first event (one of the three core events) and that further eliminations would follow until at most three athletes advanced to the run. After the run, he feels Harris’ system of a *repêchage* in wrestling could be applied when necessary. This would mean that some athletes who had trained for a year for the pentathlon might be out of competition after one event, and moreover that a superlative athlete in one of the three events peculiar to the pentathlon might not get to compete in that event. Both of these possibilities are inconsistent with the probable establishment of the pentathlon as a way to demonstrate and to view excellence in three events (the discus, jump, and javelin) which did not exist as independent events in the great games.

Waddell and Jackson represent the scholarly tendency to try to affirm the reliability of ancient texts whenever possible and to underestimate the willingness of ancient authors, even ones as flawed as Philostratus, to invent stories.<sup>10</sup> However scarce and precious, ancient sources, especially late and weak ones, do err. As Sweet notes, Scholiasts on Aristeides and Pindar include boxing and the pankration in the pentathlon.<sup>11</sup> If we make ingenious efforts to save Philostratus’ story, do we also have to defend Lucillius’ epigram on a pentathlete who not only entered but came last in all five events—a text quite incompatible with Jackson’s system?<sup>12</sup>

Most recently, Hugh M. Lee has revived the debate in this journal.<sup>13</sup> A

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8. Cf. *Iliad* 23.669470: Epeius proclaims himself champion in boxing but admits that he is deficient in warfare.

9. Jackson, pp. 180-181, feels that his system suits the character of Jason as a second-rate hero and a trickster. Arguably the whole story is more likely an extrapolation from that character than a reflection of general practice in the pentathlon. At best, Philostratus may reflect a late or local variation on scoring the pentathlon.

10. See Kyle, “Pentathlon,” n. 14 on p. 294 citing M. I. Finley, *Ancient History* (New York: 1985), pp. 21, 104.

11. Sweet, *Sport and Recreation*, p. 37.

12. Lucillius, *Greek Anthology* 11.84, trans. in Sweet, p. 37.

13. Hugh M. Lee, “Wrestling in the *Repêchage* of the Ancient Pentathlon,” *JSH* 20 (1993): 227-229.

fine scholar with a long list of meticulous, evidentially diligent publications on specific issues and problems in ancient sport history,<sup>14</sup> Lee has critically analyzed Harris, Sweet, and myself on the pentathlon. Unfortunately, Lee neither cites nor discusses ancient evidence; he simply restates earlier arguments readily available to readers interested in the matter. He focuses on Sweet's system, which has not been generally supported,<sup>15</sup> and on my relatively minor modification of Harris' system. Moreover, Lee tries to lump my position with Sweet's when the main thrust of my discussion was a rejection of Sweet's system.

Lee and I agree against Philostratus' origin, against Sweet's system, and for some system of elimination with a possible *repêchage*. but we have differing opinions about whether Harris had the perfect or the only solution. This is simply an interpretational disagreement, a discretionary call based on intuitive readings of the "feel" of the event. Perhaps appropriate to a discussion of the *repêchage*, we are just "fishing again". There is no ancient evidence for a *repêchage* to begin with, just Harris' reasoned argument based on his reading of the Greek situation.<sup>16</sup> I agree that a *repêchage* was needed at times but I disagree, most respectfully, with Harris and now Lee on the specific event used when needed.

Our disagreement concerns only one scenario: a situation in which, after four events had been held and the field had been narrowed to three athletes, athlete A had two victories, and so earned a bye (as an *ephedros*), while athletes B and C competed against each other in some event to eliminate one of the two and to send the winner on to the final wrestling event against A. Lee supports Harris' suggestion that the *repêchage* event between B and C would be a wrestling match, and he repeats Harris' arguments that byes were used in heavy events, and that pentathletes were fine athletes who knew how to wrestle. I had suggested that the *repêchage* event would be another run, which would leave the winning runner in decent shape to put on a better wrestling performance than an athlete who had just wrestled. In terms of the management of the pentathlon, a run would be quick and efficient: and, in terms of spectatorship, the final wrestling performance would be more entertaining for those watching.

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14. E.g. "The *TEPMA* and the Javelin in Pindar, Nemean vii 70-3. and Greek Athletics," *JHS* 96 (1976): 70-79; "Athletic Arete in Pindar," *The Ancient World* 7:1-2 (1983): 31-37; "Some Changes in the Ancient Olympic Program," pp. 105-111 in W. Coulson and H. Kyrieleis, ed., *Proceedings of an International Symposium on the Olympic Games*, 5-9 September 1988 (Athens, 1992).

15. E.g. M. K. Langdon, "Scoring the Ancient Pentathlon: Final Solution?" *ZPE* 78 (1989): 117-118 had already rejected Sweet and supported a return to Harris' system. Lee cites but does not thoroughly discuss Jackson.

16. E. N. Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals* (London, 1910), p. 370, comments that ". . . there is absolutely no evidence for a bye in the pentathlon at all."

As I argued earlier, I see the core of the pentathlon as the first three contests (discus, javelin, jump),<sup>17</sup> with the final two (run, wrestling) added, originally and probably most of the time, as a means to narrow the field and decide the overall victor—the athlete with three victories. Lee’s argument hinges at times on the analogy between wrestling in the pentathlon and wrestling as an independent “heavy” event. Certainly, at advanced levels of competition pentathletes were splendid athletes, but they were generally recognized as not as good in wrestling and running as specialists in those events.<sup>18</sup> Lee objects to my comment that pentathletes were “non-specialists,” but he admits that “pentathletes were not on the same competitive level as those who wrestled exclusively . . . .”<sup>19</sup> Ancient pentathletes were fit enough to endure Harris’ system and more, but their skills and chances in wrestling would be hindered greatly by back-to-back matches. A wrestling *repêchage* would increase the possibility of injury prior to the final wrestling, and surely such an arrangement would not be conducive to excellent performances for the crowd.<sup>20</sup>

Harris and Lee would have athletes B and C compete in the first four events, involving multiple throws and jumps and a run, and then, while the double-victor A sat out, the two single-victory athletes competed in a *repêchage* wrestling. Ancient testimonia prove that a bye was a distinct advantage in heavy events,<sup>21</sup> and Lee (p. 278) admits that the *ephedros* would have an “inbuilt advantage” in Harris’ system. Lee does not discuss the scoring of such a wrestling match, but normally a wrestler had to win three (of a possible five) falls to win the match. Without time limits and without weight classes, adding three to five falls to efforts already exerted in the first

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17. See my earlier arguments about Philostratus on training for the pentathlon and on the usual depiction of the three core events in art. E.g. a black figure lekythos of the late sixth century showing five athletes practising for the pentathlon includes two javelinists, two jumpers, and one discus thrower. The five athletes could have been depicted performing the full five events of the pentathlon but the painter concentrates, as the practising athletes did, on the essential and distinctive elements of the pentathlon; attributed to the Michigan Painter, Metropolitan Museum of New York, Rogers Fund, 1906, 06.1021.60. *ABV* 345.1: *MMA 5,000 Years of Art* (New York, 1981), no. 16, recently illustrated in *Goddess and Polis*, J. Neils, ed., (Princeton, 1992), fig. 26 on p. 85.

18. Aristotle *Rhet.* 1.5. 1361b said that pentathletes had beautiful bodies adapted for strength and speed, but (as noted above n. 5) Ps. Plato *Amat.* 135e declares them second-raters who are defeated by specialists in their specialties.

19. Lee, p. 279: “Moreover, Kyle’s statement that the pentathletes were ‘non-specialists’ and thus by implication unsuited to the demands of two wrestling matches needs qualification.”

20. Although he and I both reject the use of placements in the pentathlon, as an argument against a *repêchage* in running, Lee raises the anachronistic issue of placements. If placements counted, as in the stadion as the fourth event, there would be no need for a *rêpechage* in either running or wrestling. However, again I must contend, as Harris did, that only first placements counted. A win in the *repêchage* counted because it was a first-place victory—no matter how small the field. Pausanias (6.13.4) commented that the victor in the stadion, by winning his heat and the final race, “actually wins twice.”

21. Victors in heavy events commented on winning without byes: Ariston proudly proclaims that he won the boys’ pankration *anephedros* by defeating three opponents in a field of seven entrants: Miller, *Arete*, no. 71, p. 70 (*IvO* 225 = *IAG* 64). Paus. 6.1.2 discounts victories won by byes and not by strength. Michael B. Poliakov, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* (New Haven and London, 1987), p. 21, suggests that an athlete, whom Pindar (*Nem.* 6.63-65) said was deprived of victory by the draw, probably had to compete in straight rounds against a fresh and rested opponent. Lucian *Hermotimos* 40 (Miller, *Arete*, no. 72, pp. 71-72) comments that the athlete who receives a bye is fortunate and “will be able while fresh to fall on those who have tired.”

four events would have put the *repêchage* victor at a serious disadvantage against the *ephedros*, whom he now had to wrestle for three of possibly five falls in the hot Greek sun.

I have few illusions about “fairness” in Greek sport. Rather, I remain convinced that concern for spectator interest is not irrelevant: as early as *Iliad* 23.721 Odysseus and Ajax altered the nature of their wrestling match when the spectators became restless. At Olympia the digging of wells near the racetrack suggests that spectatorship was increasing around 704, and the pentathlon was introduced in 708 BC.<sup>22</sup> Lee (p. 279) feels that “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.” I feel that the Greeks would have saved the drama—and not undermined it by excess exertion and an inbuilt serious disadvantage—for the final event which determined the overall victory.<sup>23</sup>

I agree with Lee that Greeks, especially the leisured elite of whom we know the most from fine pottery and hierarchically biased literature, were knowledgeable about gymnastic events, including wrestling, and would practice them for fitness well into maturity.<sup>24</sup> North Americans are widely knowledgeable about baseball and football, and many of us delude ourselves that we can play for recreation without embarrassment well into maturity, but that does not mean that, even as young men, we had the skills as well as the endurance to compete at an advanced level in the modern equivalent of the pentathlon. Despite the glory of Bruce Jenner, most modern Olympians specialize in one form of competition. Deion Sanders and Bo Jackson have played football and baseball for a time, but even the magnificent Michael Jordan is struggling to adjust to baseball.

At this time the existing evidence is simply too inadequate and incompatible for the debate on the pentathlon to be resolved conclusively by any of the several scholars involved. The debate has gone on too long already, and perhaps we all should “agree to disagree.” Let’s not turn the debate on the pentathlon into a marathon, which we all know was not a Greek athletic competition.

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22. Alfred Mallwitz, “Cult and Competition Locations at Olympia,” p. 99, in W. J. Raschke, ed., *The Archaeology of the Olympics* (Madison, 1988).

23. Lee did not discuss Xenophon’s comment (*Hell.* 7.4.29) that after the stadium events (the dromika, i.e. the discus, javelin, jump and run held in the stadium) “competitors who had advanced to the wrestling” moved from the stadium to wrestle between the stadium and the altar, which seems to imply that wrestling was the final event after the field had been narrowed in the stadium.

24. If Homer is any indication, non-aristocrats may not have been so proficient or so well rounded: Irus (*Odyssey* 18.66-101) is clearly a bully and not a skilled boxer, and Epeius (*Iliad* 23.840), a formidable boxer who admits to being deficient (i.e. non-aristocratic) in war (as noted above n. 8), evokes laughter when he attempts the discus.