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# The Ancient Olympics: Athletes, Games, and Heroes

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*THE ANCIENT OLYMPIC: ATHLETES, GAMES AND HEROES* (1996), a video lecture by David Gilman Romano, Executive Producer Getzel M. Cohen, Producer Sheila C. Cohen, The Institute for Mediterranean Studies, Cincinnati, Video Lecture Series, Vol. 2, 55 minutes, \$21.95.

The teaching of ancient sport and the expectations of today's students both demand that instructors go beyond the written text and the standard lecture to include visual content, to discuss physical evidence, to provide energetic, interactive teaching, and to confront the issue of relevance. Teachers of ancient sport have long desired an up-to-date, lively, and reliable video survey of the ancient Olympics, and David Gilman Romano and the Institute of Mediterranean Studies (IMS) are to be commended for attempting this challenging task. This reasonably priced video offers a wealth of visual content and a good introduction to archaeological and art historical evidence. Unfortunately, the presentation, although clear and informative, is fairly traditional, and it strains at times to suggest the contemporary relevance of ancient sport for a broad audience. An advertisement says the video is intended for home viewing for the general public as well as for use in educational settings. Esoteric terms (athlos, stadion) are explained, the video comes packaged with a brief glossary, and the credits end with recommendations for further reading.

This video has the same format as volume I in the IMS Video Lecture Series, *Pandora's Box: The Roles of Women in Ancient Greece*, which incidentally has some good visual content on Atlanta, Amazons, and the running of pre-adolescent girls in rituals in sanctuaries of Artemis. Rather than sensationalistic tales of mysteries and wonders delivered by Carl Sagan, Michael Woods, or even Mr. Speck, we are presented with a dignified, knowledgeable, neck-tied expert, a professor reading a carefully constructed text with appropriate attention to evidence and balanced discussions of problems.

The narrator and author of the text of this lecture, D.G. Romano, Keeper of the Collections, Mediterranean Section, University of Pennsylvania Museum, is well-known for his publications on ancient sports (see the review of his *Athletics and Mathematics in Archaic Corinth: The Origins of the Greek Stadium* *JSH* 22.2 [1995] 169–170). As a runner, coach, and scholar, Romano is dedicated to the study of ancient sport, but the delivery of the lecture from a desk fixed in an academic setting seriously hinders his ability to communicate his enthusiasm for the subject. After comments by Romano, the video cuts to visuals, and livelier offscreen narrators interweave discussion and presentation of diverse evidence (e.g., vase paintings, sculpture, inscriptions, coins, equipment, sites) with excellent stills collected from a host of prestigious international museums. We are told that common Greeks enjoyed a wrestling or boxing match the way we enjoy golf or tennis today, and there are clips of modern track meets but no attempted recreations of events. Quite effective are the narrators' recitations from ancient sources, such as the chariot race scene from Sophocles' *Electra*, but some ancient humorous or critical comments on athletes would have further enlivened the script.

As the audience and the genre perhaps demand, the video opens with assertions of the modern relevance of ancient sport. Romano says that ancient athletics were the inspiration for the inception and organization of the Modern Olympic Games and that we have modeled many of our events on those of the Ancient Olympics. It closes similarly with the comment that, although they were religious festivals and the athletes were not amateurs, the ancient Olympics were much like the modern Olympics: they were intrinsically political, nationalistic, and commercial. It is indeed tempting to hitch a ride on the Modern Olympic bandwagon but, after a century, the historical relevance of the Ancient for the Modern Games is hard to defend. The audience may be smaller, but the greatest value and relevance for ancient sport is in helping us understand ancient Greek culture and society or the phenomenon of sport in general—not in legitimizing the very different phenomenon of the Modern Olympics.

The body of the lecture is in three parts. In "The Games: Rituals and Rules," Romano introduces the ancient games as an athletic festival held at a sanctuary. As he surveys legendary origins, the preparation of athletes, and the development of facilities, he is admirably honest about the limits of our evidence for the early years of the games. In "The Five-Day Ancient Olympiad," Romano walks the viewer through the program of the festival and explains the rules and techniques of various events. "Athletes and Heroes: Rewards, Scandals, and Politics" focuses on historical athletes and controversies. Romano explains that rewards won beyond Olympia meant that Greek athletes were not amateurs by modern standards, that as political pawns athletes might transfer their victories to the credit of another state, and that the Olympic truce was a positive influence but did not stop wars.

Like a textbook for a general audience, the lecture integrates scholarly work but generally keeps to mainstream positions. It notes incidents of cheating, and it is candid about the brutality of combat events, but there is no revisionism on

Coubertin and the early Modern Olympics and no suggestion that the ancient games had erotic overtones. Demonstration by Alcibiades and Nero of the athletic travesty of victory in equestrian events at Olympia are omitted. Only occasionally does Romano insert his own personal views, such as his argument for the origin of the stadium as a standing place for spectators. With nearly an hour of narrative, a few quibbles are inevitable. For example, one might question how many people came to classical Olympia by boat (cf. Xenophon *Memorabilia* 3.13.5-6). I remain unconvinced that unmarried girls, even if not technically excluded like mature women, truly watched these nude male competitions. That *sitesis* (one free meal a day for victors for life) was a kind of early pension plan seems overstated. Most problematic is Romano's retrojection of procedures, especially a daily subsidy for competitors, from the Isolympic Games established by Augustus at Naples to practices at Olympia centuries earlier.

For its text and its visuals, I recommend this for introductory courses in sport history or Greek civilization. We in the field appreciate the difficulty of completing a project of such technical and academic quality. The intended audience, however, is not so patient or understanding. In trial runs in sophomore classes, my students pronounced the video *good but not great*. Viewers with prior interest and knowledge (and students fearing a quiz) will attend carefully, but the video may not hold or convert the disinterested.