

Attitudes of the Ancient Greeks Concerning Athletics and Gymnastics

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Physical education has found difficulty in being accepted on equal terms with other subject areas in our present-day educational system. One apparent reason for the lack of support is physical education's close association in the public's mind with organized athletics. The general public often confuses athletics with physical education; and, unfortunately, so do many present-day scholars and educators. The problem arises when the relative merits of organized athletics and their contribution to the over-all objectives of education begin to be questioned by scholars. Because of the evils and irregularities that exist in many athletic programs, generally negative attitudes towards organized athletics have been generated. Unfortunately, since in the layman's mind there is such a close association between athletics and physical education, these same negative attitudes often, and without justification, spill over into physical education curricula. It is, therefore, important to make clear the differences between athletics and physical education. The problem of identification of these two kinds of physical activity is by no means a new phenomenon. Correct distinctions have existed for many years, dating as far back as ancient Greece, but either have been thought of as unimportant or perhaps have simply been misunderstood. It will, therefore, be interesting to look at some ancient Greek attitudes concerning this subject. For it is to the Greeks of antiquity that we look for guidance in many facets of education. Here too, in the areas of athletics and gymnastics (the ancient equivalent of modern-day physical education) the Greeks had definite ideas and notions.

Etymologically, the various English forms of words pertaining to athletics and gymnastics are derived from Greek, both of which have different meanings. In seeking to understand the nature of and differences between these two kinds of physical activity, it is necessary to define precisely what is meant by these terms. Athletics and gymnastics are similar, in that both have exercises of the body as a common factor, but employ these exercises in different ways and for different reasons. In ancient Greece, athletes who took part in the many athletic festivals throughout the Greek world, did not acquire their expertise at school. Their training regimen had nothing to do with any school system and their activities, accordingly, were distinct from gymnastics. When group, or individual instruction was given by recognized teachers, who received payment for their instruction, and whose duties were not to train athletes, but to develop physically fit bodies, prepared to face the demands of daily life — this we may call gymnastic education. It is important to note that the element of competition may be present in both athletics and gymnastics, but the main ingredient of seeking a prize is missing in the latter. Athletics and gymnastics, therefore, although similar to some degree, were different in respect to the attitude, preparation and purpose of the participant.

It may be claimed that it really is not important if these two terms are used interchangeably. As a professional physical educator, I believe it is necessary clearly to define and understand these differences. There have been many instances where contemporary writers have confused the terms athletics and gymnastics. Such highly regarded educators as H. I. Marrou, Allan H. Gilbert, and Thomas Woody used these words interchangeably

in quoting Plato, Xenophon, or Aristotle. Fortunately, the ancient writers were clear and concise in their understanding of these two kinds of physical activity. The evidence indicates clearly that the ancient scholars were in general agreement that athletics, as practiced during the 5th and 4th centuries B.C., was an undesirable aspect of Greek life. However, Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle agreed that gymnastic training was an essential and integral part of ancient Greek education. Yet, when reading some of the works of the above mentioned modern-day writers, one is left with the impression that gymnastics was looked upon unfavorably during antiquity.

In today's educational system many traditional beliefs and ideals are being questioned. One area that invariably is challenged is the physical education requirement in our schools. If the confusion regarding both past and present philosophies concerning athletics and physical education is not dispelled, suspicion will still remain in the minds of many people. The possibility of this uncertainty could very well jeopardize many programs, for in the final analysis, high school and college administrators, faculties, and various committees will ultimately decide the future of many physical education programs.