

Sport Through a Family Perspective: A Reappraisal of Greek & Roman Games

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If one accepts the premise that sport is a significant social institution, indeed a societal constant and accurate mirror of society, one will also be led to conclude that changes in other major social institutions will be reflected by changes in sport. Upon examining the evolving patterns of society in ancient Greece and Rome, specifically the relationship between the family structure and the “state” structure, one discovers that changes in this relationship were mirrored, as it were, by changes in sportive patterns.

During the archaic or earliest periods of Greek and Roman history, the fabric of society and the individual’s life patterns were woven and controlled by the extended family, much to the hindrance of any type of “state” structure. Eventually the state began emerging to wrest power and societal control from the extended families; thus the individual and his life patterns were gradually controlled more and more by the state. Ultimately the state virtually freed the individual from familial control, a phase that will be designated “atomistic” as opposed to the earliest “trustee” and the intermediate “transitional” periods. Quite interestingly, sporting patterns mirrored this change; the “trustee” period was one in which sport was very dominated by the family and the “transitional” and “atomistic” periods witnessed the emergence of more and more state controlled and/or sponsored sport. Glimpses of Greece and Rome during each period corroborate these thoughts.

The Greece of the archaic period (roughly 1200-700 B.C.) was a society dominated by the aristocratic “genos” or extended family. Participation in society was virtually

predicated upon membership in an aristocratic *genos*. The legal and social systems were shaped by family law and custom, religion and spiritual existence was exercised within the context of family cults and ancestor worship. Indeed, the life of the individual was regulated by the “*genos*.” Correspondingly, sport was family dominated: the evidence for the archaic period suggests that festivals were of a local and cultic nature; many organized games were funereal in nature; the hero was most importantly a representative of an aristocratic family; family festivals were an integral component of ones “rites of passage.”

During the transitional period (700-500 B.C.) the “*polis*” emerged and began to exercise social control, to the disadvantage of the “*genos*”. Primary catalysts in this evolution were the tyrants who were politicians, for the most part of noble birth, who in one way or another often enlarged the size of the group enjoying the franchise. Draco, Solon, Peisistratus and Cleisthenes, all of Athens were each involved in the process of breaking the social control of the *genos* and giving it to the state; sport reflected this change. As Pindar’s *odes* attest, athletic victors were more and more considered to be representatives of the *polis*, not just the *genos*. Public festivals were established to take the place of family festivals. Local games, such as the Pan Athenaean, were used to strengthen ones allegiance to his *polis*.

As the Greek Atomistic period (500-100 B.C.) transpired, the individual was emancipated almost entirely from family control and in many cases from state control. His life patterns were less absolutely regulated by either institution; individualism was the style of the time, often with disastrous results. Alcibiade’s conduct during the Peloponnesian war indicated the possible aberrations to be expected from one who felt allegiance to no institution or code. The orators offer evidence of the breakdown of the once potent family ethos; divorces were rampant, birth rates were falling and women were enjoying freedom from the strict control of familial morals. Pan-Hellenism was encouraging one to feel allegiance toward the *Greek* ideal rather than to the code of any one city-state. Again, sport mirrored these changes: the Pan-Hellenic games witnessed the period of their greatest popularity yet the meaning of representation had changed so much toward that of *self-representation* that the professional pothunter flourished for the first time. Social clubs acted as almost surrogate families for the individuals who broke clear of *genos* and *polis* to make it on their own in the Hellenistic Age; women began to participate in more sporting activities that were not of a ritualistic and familistic nature. Sport was by and for the individual, but the individual had less direction in his sporting endeavors.

The same basic evolution may be seen in Roman history and, again, sport mirrored the change. During the “trustee” period, when the “*gens*” or extended family controlled society and the *pater familias* had virtual life or death control of the individual, sport was greatly influenced by the family. Many festivals were of a cultic and familial nature, less were of a quasi-socio-political nature. The gladiatorial combats of the period were of limited scope and were actual “gifts” to dead relatives, paid for and produced totally by private funds. The baths were still of private family concern, and women, who were socially restricted in general, had a very limited involvement in sport,

The Republic quite obviously grew in power and stature so that by the time of Augustus the family or *gens* had extremely limited control over the life of the individual. The state regulated life; but as we know, the Roman state did not efficiently regulate the morals of its people, and the old family *pietas*, the moral fiber of the state, suffered grievously. Augustus employed severe laws in an attempt to arrest the breakdown of the family system: divorce and adultery were rampant, the individual received little guidance from the state. The complexion of sport changed considerably: public festivals, promoted and financed by the state increased astronomically; the gladiatorial games became a public responsibility; the baths emerged as a public operation; men and women displayed in sport the general lack of moral direction that pervaded society.

As seen in the Greek and Roman evidence, as society evolved from family control

to state control to individual control the nature of sport participation changed also. Examining this evolution, then, enables the sport historian to better understand the changes that took place in sport. The institutions of the family and the state are by no means the only societal variables that affect sport, but an examination of their effects on sport may offer valuable insights as to the meaning of sport in man's past.