

Aristotle's Illustrative Use of Athletics and Physical Exercise

by
RAY C. THURMOND
University of Oklahoma

Sport historians have an illustrious predecessor in Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). He compiled lists of the victors of the Pythian Games (began 586 B.C.) and the Olympic Games (began 776 B.C.). This effort has been described as "contribution to the cultural history of Greece of the first importance." Aristotle indeed was knowledgeable of the athletics of Greece of his time, and the Lyceum where he taught was located in the proximity of the gymnasium.

Throughout the works of Aristotle there are many references to athletics and physical exercise. Generally, these references can be classified into three categories: (1) discussions of the place of gymnastics in education, (2) the relationship of the body and of the soul, (3) the use of analogies and examples drawn from athletics to illustrate and explain a point. In the case of the latter, Aristotle often gave a concrete image for an abstract idea or to illustrate a function. Aristotle's own statement was, "to gain light on things imperceptible we must use the evidence of sensible things" (*Nicomachean ethics*, 1104a14). It is this facet of Aristotle's work that this study is focused on.

Historians and philosophers of sport often express disappointment that the works of Aristotle do not include a profound philosophical discourse on physical exercise and athletics. An explanation is perhaps given by Aristotle in his discussion of the choice of subjects for deliberation. He said that "we do not deliberate about the letters of the alphabet (for we have no doubt how they should be written)." Aristotle said that we deliberate about means and not ends and gave an example that we deliberate more about "the art of navigation than in that of gymnastics" because navigation has been less exactly worked out (*Nicomachean ethics* 1112a15-1113a14). It is doubtful whether Aristotle would have been much more interested in deliberating about gymnastics than the alphabet. However, in his effort to convey precise meanings and clear understandings of his thought, he often used the familiar and known examples of physical activity. Aristotle epitomized the Greek philosophy of sport and its place in the life of the individual and community. It was integrated with all other phases of life and considered an essential rather than an idealized philosophic abstraction that nineteenth and twentieth century scholars have wanted to ascribe to it.

Aristotle used walking, running, jumping, boxing, wrestling, swimming, quoits, and gymnastics as illustrative examples. These references are a discontinuous 'golden thread' throughout the Aristotelian corpus. We should not seek more in them.
