

The Development of Professionalism in Greek Athletics

by

DAVID MATZ

Gustavus Adolphus College

Most scholars who study ancient Greek athletics contend with varying degrees of assertiveness that professionalism did not become prevalent until after the Peloponnesian War, and that prior to that time, Greek athletes were almost all amateurs. This paper demonstrates that professional athletes were, in fact, active as early as the sixth century, and were common by the fifth century in Greece.

There are numerous indications that organized Greek athletics offered profit as well as fun to its participants far earlier than the time of the Peloponnesian War. Examples: (1) Solon (Plut. *Solon* 23.3) offered cash payments to Athenians who won at the Great Games: 100 drachmae for victorious athletes at the Isthmian games; 500 drachmae for Olympian victors. (2) Winners at major festivals in the sixth and fifth centuries were often the recipients of free meals and/or free food. Aristotle, Xenophanes, and several inscriptions all attest to this. (3) Other valuable prizes, such as woolen cloaks, bronze shields, silver cups and amphorae of olive oil awaited victorious athletes at various festivals.

Although the awarding of cash or valuable prizes to sixth and fifth century athletes is the most direct and graphic illustration of the existence of professionalism at that time, there are other indications that the “thrill of victory” could be made even more exhilarating by the prospect of profit. Athenaeus (12.522 f.) relates that in the sixth century, the Sybarites attempted to compete with the Olympian games by establishing a concurrent athletic festival of their own. In order to attract athletes, they advertised a plethora of extravagant prizes. Although Athenaeus does not comment on the ultimate outcome of this hubristic venture, the festival of Sybaris must have been similar (in its system of rewards) to the many other athletic competitions staged by various communities scattered throughout the Greek world: to get the “big stars” to participate in their games, they had to offer compensation that was far more substantial than the wreaths of the crown festivals.

The second half of the paper focuses on some individual sixth and fifth century athletes who were clearly professionals. Milo of Croton, who between 540 and 520 won six successive Olympian wrestling crowns, is one example. In that same time period, he was triumphant six times at the Pythian games, ten times at the Isthmian, and nine times at the Nemean, all in wrestling, for a total of 31 major wrestling championships. Milo clearly devoted a good portion of his time in that 20 year span to participating in the crown festivals. When not actually competing, he must have been in training; to succeed in any of the crown festivals, which undoubtedly attracted the best athletes in the Greek world, would require of a man the utmost in skill, strength and endurance. As any athlete knows, these qualities erode quickly if they are not carefully maintained and regularly cultivated. Many other athletes, and families of athletes, such as Theagenes of Thasos, Diagoras of Rhodes and sons, and the Thaeaus family of Argos, had athletic careers similar to Milo's.

It can scarcely be doubted that there were many athletic festivals in the sixth and fifth centuries that offered cash or valuable prizes to their victorious contestants, and that cities subsidized athletes. It is equally clear that athletes could and did take advantage of an athletic system that offered these rewards. Organized athletics was much more of a business and a profession than an avocation in the sixth and fifth centuries. And while competition at

that time was probably not restricted to professionals. nevertheless professionals were most often the recipients of civic honors, victory statues, epinician odes and especially the monetary rewards which made the thrill of victory eminently sweeter and more desirable.