

Athletics, Horse-Racing and Political Leadership in Ancient Athens

DON KYLE

Department of History

McMaster University

Hamilton, Ontario L85 1K1

In ancient Athens gymnastic or equestrian competition was a public, prestigious activity, and the administration of athletic games and buildings was a major civic responsibility. Thus sport had a political potential not unrecognized by politicians and athletes motivated by the same agonistic spirit of *philotimia*. However, when sport and politics became specialized activities, Athenian political leadership shifted from the direct participants to the benefactors and administrators of athletics.

In early Athens both politics and athletics were dominated by the hereditary, propertied aristocracy. Nobles competed in gymnastic and equestrian events and went on to compete for civic leadership. An early pancratiast Phrynon became a famous general, and the runner Cylon even tried to establish a tyranny. Trained in athletics in youth, men like Kallias, Kimon I and Alkmeon also made Athens famous for its horses. The tyrant Peisistratus came to terms with a political opponent to acquire an Olympic chariot victory.

In the age of democracy and empire the Pindaric *kuloskagathos*, a leader in both sport and politics, was doomed. Specialization and the need for technical training made Panhellenic athletic competition a full time commitment. Similarly, under the democracy, politicians had to become trained orators and crowd-pleasers. Since the masses favoured and watched athletics, leaders sought prominence indirectly as benefactors and administrators of sport. Kimon II and Pericles, for instance, engineered the expansion of sports facilities and festivals. A famous exception, Alcibiades, avoided the demands of athletic preparation. By entering several chariots with hired drivers, Alcibiades won unprecedented victories at Olympia and made political mileage of this.

By the fourth century Athenian athletes and politicians had come to realize that, with increasing specialization in both areas, success was attainable through direct participation in only one area. Although athletics remained a significant part of civic life, direct or indirect involvement no longer had overtones for political leadership.