

The Rise of the Idle Spectator In Ancient Greece

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Historians of Ancient Greek sport have written much about the magnificent athletic festivals, the Greeks' high level of physical training and the heroic Greek Athlete, but they have merely referred to those who watched the great athletic contests, the spectators. Influenced by this neglect, this initial research examined

the character, the motivation and the evolution of the Greek spectator from Homeric times until the Macedonian conquest. Affirmation of life, religion, and the constant quest for and appreciation of excellence initially reinforced the physically active life of the Greek spectator. Changes occurred within Greece, however, that served to facilitate the rise of the idle spectator.

Early observations of the spectators recounted by Homer revealed an informal period of Greek sport in which little differentiation was made between athlete and observer. The games of these Greeks reflected the training which all men went through for a tough, warlike existence. All warriors could participate in the contests if they wished. Thus, the spectator could easily move from the role of observer to participant.

During the 7th and 6th centuries B.C., athletic contests became organized and evolved to the point where national sport festivals brought the Greeks together to view and participate in games. Athletic contests in this period served to motivate and reinforce the athletic training which Greek aristocracy took part in. While only the best athletes participated in the contests, all who watched were inspired to train and exercise in the games so that next time they might be the ones to win honor and glory in the games.

Athletic festivals also appear to have had religious implications which both the athletes and the spectators recognized. Sports festivals in many cases honored the gods. Although much controversy has arisen over the religious significance of Greek sport, early literary evidence depicted the Greeks coming together to worship the gods with games. These athletic games formed a part of a religion which affirmed life. In a religious sense the games served to remind the Greek spectator that life, life tilled with competition, life aimed at the achievement of virtue and honor, was the purpose of man.

As athletic games became more plentiful and better organized, the role of the spectator and athlete became more defined. Monetary rewards awarded by city states to victor of the Greek festival games helped to precipitate the development of a class of athletes who spent all their time training to compete. This development probably made it harder for the average citizen to enter athletic contests and forced most into the role of a spectator.

By the 4th century B.C. the athletic festivals had become grand entertaining shows which for the most part gave pleasure to the spectators. Politicians used athletic contests to gain favor with the populus and the populus came to expect entertainment. No longer did the games primarily inspire the observer to train and exercise. Instead, the games came to amuse soft, luxury loving observers. The idle spectator became the rule rather than the exception.

Thus, the spectator changed from an active, athletic onlooker who could freely enter athletic contests to an idle, pleasure loving individual who wished to be amused. This change paralleled the growing organization of Greek sport as it evolved from informal contests among warriors to large multi-day contests. The rise of the idle spectator mirrored this change in sport and reflected the changing function of sport within Greek society in the years between Homer and the Macedonian conquest.