

Aspects of Greek Boxing in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods

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While Greek athletes in the Hellenistic and Roman periods often came from the traditional Greek aristocracy, pugilists generally came from the lower classes or boxing families. The *sphairai*, like the 18th century boxing muffler invented by Thomas Broughton, may have been developed to allow aristocrats an opportunity to practice a sport which they, unlike their ancestors, considered dangerous. In matches boxers continued to fight with *himantes*, leather straps, wound around their hands. There were few recorded fatalities and it is quite likely that this form of pugilism was less brutal than its modern counterpart. A boxer's punching force comes from the legs rather than the hands and a Greek pugilist fighting without shoes in sand could not get the leverage a modern boxer can.

Inscriptional evidence suggests that Ptolemaic Egypt replaced mainland Greece as the center for boxing in the late Hellenistic Period. It seems that the Ptolemies, hoping to gain prestige, sponsored pugilism. Boxers, who were now earning more than their colleagues in track and field, were the object of some criticism. Certain political and military figures thought they were over-trained and too specialized and therefore useless in warfare.

It is not clear whether the Romans borrowed pugilism from the Etruscans or Greeks. Indeed it may have been an indigenous Italian sport. Cato the Elder was fond of boxing and taught it to his son but felt that it should be practiced in the Campus Martius rather than the gymnasium. Most Romans were suspicious of what went on in the gymnasium. They not only felt that nudity led to homosexuality but agreed with the Greek critics of the sport who thought that a trained boxer, like a fine thoroughbred race horse, was simply too fragile, and thus unable to endure a rigorous military campaign.

Roman generals of the late republic included pugilists in the athletic festivals which marked their triumphs. Boxing was the preferred sport of Augustus, but the masses seemed to favor a deformation of the sport. In some cases these were normally part of gladiatorial contests, where pugilists wore gloves with projecting spikes. In the Aeneid Virgil has the spectators of the Dares-Entellus match rejecting this brutal version of the sport and demanding that the pugilists follow the Greek rules. It is clear from the description of the match that Virgil, who was probably like most Romans in this matter, did not understand the finer points of boxing.

Titus was one of the few emperors who was an avid boxing fan. His attachment to Melancomas, an Olympic boxing champion, was somewhat of a scandal. Dio Chrysostom's account of Melancomas' technique suggests that this man was more of a ballet dancer than a pugilist, but we can not give much credence to Dio in this work. Dio's essay on boxing, like much of the literature of the Second Sophistic, was a mere rhetorical exercise riddled with hyperbole. Boxing flourished in the Roman Empire but it never came close to replacing the Roman national sports of gladiatorial contests and chariot racing. Its role in Rome is similar to that of soccer in America-an interesting foreign sport which will never pose a threat to either baseball or football.



Canadian sport was the topic of Sandy Young's Maxwell Howell Lecture.