

Sport and Military Training: An Evaluation of the Training Techniques of Ancient and Modern-Day Warriors

JOHN R. GIROSKI

Youngstown, Ohio

The games of Ancient Greece were enthusiastically received by all segments of Hellenic society. At their inception the games were contested by the noble class in imitation of Homer's Epic Heroes. Boxing was the final event of the last Ancient Olympic Games. Varaztad's victory in boxing ended more than a thousand years of Olympic competition. Since Odysseus' victory in the Funeral Games of Patrocles, boxing and the combative sports of wrestling and pankration had outstripped the other events in popularity. Pankration was all-out combat with no holds barred. The techniques of boxing and wrestling were employed almost simultaneously as fighters sought mastery over opponents. Tactics such as gouging and choking were used with relative impunity and seldom were fouls declared. The Pankration involved more wrestling than boxing as the latter was considered the most dangerous of athletic contests and followed the Pankration in the order of events.

Combative sport complemented skills needed for war. Greek hoplites did not train as military units therefore it was the responsibility of the hoplite to train and equip himself for battle. Greek sport dates from Homer's writing of the Funeral Games held in honor of Achilles friend, Patrocles. Warriors were athletes, not merchants. The hoplite charge at Marathon, one of the fifteen (15) Decisive Battles of the World was accomplished by soldier-athletes. It was difficult to raise horses in Greece because vegetation was scarce and the terrain rough. Thus deprived of cavalry, essentially the Greeks fought infantry battles. They had a keen understanding of the need for proper diet and exercise.

War was big business in ancient Greece and because city-states did not maintain standing armies it was the duty of the citizen to be prepared for battle. Until Alexander and later Hannibal's time military tactics remained quite simple. Warfare essentially was a series of man-to-man encounters.

Great military leaders were aware of the value of sport during war. Alexander was aware of its martial implications and participated freely in athletics while encouraging his Companions to do likewise. Napoleon sponsored military experiments in an attempt to measure the distance which a javelin could be accurately thrown.