

Sports in the *Odyssey*

ANTHONY J. PAPALAS

East Carolina University

In the *Odyssey* (8. 90 ff.) Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians, suggested that the nobles quit the banquet tables for the athletic field. While Alcinous wished to entertain Odysseus, a stranger whom he had hitherto failed to please, the games were not recreational in the way Nausicaa's ball game with her girl friends was. Ostensibly Alcinous wanted to impress Odysseus with the athletic skills of his people. The games provided Phaeacian aristocrats - who did not receive prizes for competing - with an opportunity to gain prestige and fame in the community and display their manhood and fitness for marriage. Laodamus, the brother of Nausicaa and Eurymachus, possibly a suitor, aware of Nausicaa's infatuation with Odysseus, challenged the stranger to compete in the events in order to determine his class and virility. A middle aged man was possibly too old to marry the most nubile maiden in Phaeacia. Prodded into competing, Odysseus won the discus contest, an event in which a middle aged man like Odysseus can hold his own against younger men. Alcinous, realizing that Odysseus was both aristocratic and manly, reduced the tension by claiming that his people were more attached to light past-times and luxuries than vigorous sports. This implied initiatory rite in the Phaeacian games is clearly visible in the bow contest in book 21. Odysseus and the suitors engaged in stringing a bow and hitting a target, feats of strength and skill, to win the hand of Penelope. Odysseus regained his wife as Pelops won his through success in agonistic activity.

While sports seem to have been practiced by all social classes, aristocrats did not compete with commoners. The contestants at the Phaeacian games were members of the upper class and Eurymachus' taunt that Odysseus was a merchant unskilled at sports clearly states the predominance of the aristocratic element in sports of the Homeric age. The suitors allowed Odysseus, ostensibly a beggar, to compete in the bow contest only after Penelope persuaded them that the vagabond was a noble who had fallen on hard times.

Irus, the palace beggar, knew something about pugilism. When Odysseus arrived on the scene in the guise of a vagabond, Irus challenged him to a match while he boasted of his pugilistic techniques. Irus possibly learned something of pugilism from watching aristocrats at their games. He lacked, however, the qualities of an aristocratic athlete. He was unskilled as well as cowardly. In defeat he was the object of derision dragged from the scene like a vanquished warrior. Defeat was not a mark of ignominy, but Irus' conduct, essentially lower class, was. Epeius, however, the boxing champion at the games for Patroclus (*Iliad* 23. 260 ff.) showed respect for his defeated aristocratic foe. Epeius like his fellow athletes at Troy competed for fame as well as valuable prizes.

The *Odyssey* gives a distinctly different picture of sports in the archaic age than the *Iliad*. N. Gardiner, **Greek Athletics, Sports and Festivals, Athletics of the Ancient World**,

and H.A. Harris, **Greek Athletes and Athletics, Sport in Greece and Rome**, did not fully exploit the evidence in the *Odyssey* to support their view of the aristocratic-amateur athlete in the archaic period. Several recent studies have brilliantly revised the Gardiner-Harris thesis. W.H. Pleket, "Games, Prizes, Athletes and Ideology," **Stadion I** (1975), and D.C. Young, **The Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics**, who see a strong professional and non-aristocratic element in Greek sports, do not adequately deal with the questions raised in the *Odyssey*. Athletes of the archaic age came from all classes and participated for a variety of reasons.