

# Aristophanes and the Good Old Days

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Cited frequently but not always used judiciously, the eleven comedies of Aristophanes (dating from 425 to 388 B.C.) constitute an important source for the history of ancient Greek sport and physical education; but, as a critic of trends in ancient sport, this comic playwright remains problematic. His use by historians of ancient sport with Olympist inclinations can be shown to be all too often suspect, and standard classical works like Dover's literary study and Ehrenberg's sociological approach, pay only limited attention to sport in Aristophanes. Clearly Aristophanes is a major source offering varied and valuable information but isolated passages should not be used out of context. A thorough re-evaluation is needed. The time is now right for a systematic and balanced examination following the lead of recent studies of sport in specific authors and genres by D. Sutton, T.S. Brown and others. Such studies have indicated that the Greeks, as Hewitt suggested back in the 1920's, found something essentially comic in athletic contests. Furthermore, my own study of athletics in ancient Athens provides independent evidence from inscriptions and pottery whereby we can corroborate or qualify references in Aristophanes.

The present paper is based upon research in progress, involving the collection, chronological ordering and analysis of references to sport (metaphors, jokes, allusions, anecdotes and incidents) in the Aristophanic corpus. As Harris commented on Greek literature in general, Aristophanes' plays provide a remarkable number of specific points about sport but many fewer extended passages. The collected references offer specific information about techniques, events, facilities, festivals, and terminology in Greek sport. Examples include information about the torch race in *Frogs*, the hoplite race in *Birds*, Phayllos as a famous athlete in *Acharnians*, Spartan female exercises in *Lysistrata*, the Isthmian festival in Peace, money and games in *Plutus*, homosexuality in athletic facilities in *Wasps*, and wrestling techniques in *Knights*. Such information from comedy tends to be more useful than similar references from tragedy because comedy has a contemporary focus and often its references to events and persons - although hyperbolic and/or obscene are very overt and specific. However, this information is provided indirectly, incidentally and almost unintentionally by Aristophanes. These were merely items from daily life which Aristophanes and his audience took for granted as we take biblical or biological analogies. Actual extended passages discussing sport or physical education are few. The *Clouds* is the comedy richest in comments on sport with the hippomania of Phidippides, the New (non-physical) Education of Socrates, and references to the pyrrhic dance, unmanly immorality and warm baths. Yet with the *Clouds* as with all the plays we always face the problem of confusing Aristophanes' views with those of his *dramatis personae*.

When Aristophanes, by the length and number of references, does seem to be expressing his own views, is he distinctive as a source on sport? I argue that he should not be lumped with Xenophanes and other so-called "critics". Aristophanes does not criticize athletics or physical education per se as lesser than intellectual or poetic activity. Rather, through his characters he laments the supposed degeneration of sport. Aristophanes is an artist rather than an intellectual, a traditionalist rather than a reformer. He wants to restore the good old days when men and boys were boys. He would turn back the clock rather than reforming

society into a perfect state which transcends athleticism. Exactly when the good old days were is uncertain but not insignificant for the use of Aristophanes as a source. This temporal aspect - the motif of decline in sport history - is prominent in Aristophanes but it probably originates with Nestor in the *Iliad*, it is absent in most "critics" until much later when Galen urges a return not to athleticism but to moderation. Where the good old days took place is clear: Athens. Aristophanes thus also differs in his orientation, his polis-patriotism. His focus is Athens, not Greece in general and decidedly not the Olympic Games - despite his frequent (mis)use (like Athenian vase paintings) as evidence concerning Olympic sport. He condemns the decline of Athenian sport in hopes of inspiring his fellow citizens to take up the torch of the Marathonomachai, not to save the Olympics from themselves.

The temptations and dangers with Aristophanes include historical relativism and romanticism. His themes touch us all. The good old days exist for all of us in pre-expansion leagues, before specialty teams, DH's, million-dollar contracts and sideline-loving running backs. It's a human and a universal theme, invaluable to sport literature, but does it make good history? Did the good old days of Athenian - or Olympic - sport ever exist? Did Athenian sport really decline or, as I have suggested elsewhere, was it a matter of the proliferation of sources showing imperfections in sport combined with the fact that Athenian life was becoming more multifaceted? Perhaps sport experienced a temporary reduction in its splendor due to the war and the plague, and apparently sport was becoming less dominant in (higher) education, but sources other than Aristophanes suggest that overall Aristophanes' lifetime sport was quantitatively increasing and technically improving.