

Sport Spectators in Ancient Greece

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While the ancient sources have a great deal to say about Greek athletes and athletics there is little about the Greek sport spectator. M.I. Finley and H. W. Pleket in the *Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years* maintain that "crowds in ancient Greece were as partisan, as volatile and as excitable as in any other time". They cite Polybius' description of a boxing contest at Olympia in 212 B.C. where the spectators played a key role in cheering on Clitomachus, a great champion to victory, and a passage from Dio Chrysostom's *Alexandrian Oration* delivered about A.D. 70. Dio chided the Alexandrian for their outrageous behavior in the stadium where they behaved like drug maniacs doing and saying terrible things. H.A. Harris in his *Greek Athlete and Athletics* argues that "ancient spectators of sporting events were no less excitable than modern crowds," citing, among other sources, Dio's *Alexandrian Oration*. In a later work *Sports in Greece and Rome* Harris seems to modify his views somewhat by connecting spectator interest in ancient Greece to

the rise of the professional athlete in the fifth century arguing that for many centuries the spectator was incidental to Greek sports. David Young in the *Olympic Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics* has shown that Harris was incorrect in his use of the terms amateur and professional in ancient Greece, and therefore his remarks about spectators are misleading. Alan Guttman, "Sport Spectators from Antiquity to the Renaissance," questions the views of Finley, Pleket and Harris arguing they mainly rely on Dio Chrysostom, a first century A.D. source. Such evidence is insufficient to come to any conclusion about the behavior of Greek sport fans in the classical period. While Finley and Pleket do cite other evidence and Harris' views are more complex than Guttman assumes, he does raise a valid question. How relevant is Dio Chrysostom's *Alexandrian Oration* to earlier periods of Greek history?

This study traces the development of spectators at Greek sporting events from the Minoan to the classical period. Art work suggests the presence of spectators at Minoan bull fights and boxing matches. Homer in the *Iliad* book 23 and the *Odyssey* book 8 suggests a long tradition of spectators at sporting events. The role of the spectators varied. Fathers could select fit husbands for their daughters. Onlookers could express, and at times were expected to, their admiration for the aristocratic athlete. Odysseus violated this rule when he failed to praise the skills of the Phaeacian athletes. Finally one could simply experience pleasure at the aesthetic achievement and comic developments of an athletic meet.

Recent archeological excavations have revealed that great efforts were made in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. to accommodate spectators at the major Greek festivals. Pleasure was the primary reason why spectators flocked to the athletic contests in the classical period. The Finley-Pleket comparison of Greek sport crowds to contemporary crowds is too vague to be useful. Today there is a great difference between a baseball crowd in New York and Toronto and English and American football fans do not behave the same. While Greek sport spectators were certainly as enthusiastic as their modern counterpart there is no evidence that they were as unruly as the worst elements of our sport fans. Dio's *Alexandrian Oration* does not apply to Greeks of any period of classical antiquity. Dio, an agent of the emperor Vespasian, delivered the speech, which is riddled with hyperbole, to chide the Alexandrians for their support of Nero and the previous regime. The Alexandrian populace was a mixture of Greek, Roman, Jewish and native Egyptian. Its behavior was more akin to Roman crowds than Greek.