

The Will to Win: Ancient (And Modern) Perspectives

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There are certain features of Greek athletic competition that are peculiar to that society. Ethnographic data shows that many societies enjoy high standards of athletics and may indeed be highly competitive, but there are distinct features of Greek athletics that, when properly evaluated, lead us to a deeper understanding of the sociology and history of ancient Greece.

Greek obsession with victory, especially in athletics, is the first of three distinguishing features. The person who died in an athletic event almost always garnered praise for his devotion and strength of character. The Greeks used padded practice gloves, *sphairai*, but shunned such inoffensive weapons in competition: the disregard for the safety of the competitors is *willful*. The Greek so valued recognition as the best in a particular activity, that no-contest (*akoniri*) victories are proudly recorded, a fact which seriously weakens romanticized views of ancient sporting ethics. In some of the smaller athletic festivals, second, third, and fourth places mattered, but normally one place only mattered, and that was the one at the top. The vehicle for competition was a progressive elimination tournament, with only the victors advancing to the subsequent rounds. Greek inscriptions record up to nine rounds of competition before the fortunate victor emerged. This elaborate system of selecting one individual as victor, along with the established system of rewards, is hard to parallel in other civilizations.

Two other features of Greek sport that we need to note are the focus on the individual and the wide and democratic distribution of contest. None of the four great inter-city athletic contests had events for teams. All the contests were for individuals, there was no official tally of the number of victories a given city achieved. Militaristic Sparta, a state devoted to the supremacy of its battle line at the expense of personal development, had violent contests between teams of ballplayers: this phenomenon is an exception that tests the rule for the rest of Greece.

Contrast, e.g., the wrestling festivals of the Nuba. The anthropologist, Siegfried Nadel, reported: "My question, 'who was the winner in this year's tournament,' was not understood . . . moreover the memory of these tournaments does not last long; my informants had already forgotten the results of the contest of two years ago" (*The Nuba* [Oxford 1947] 232-34). The Greeks, however, made abundant records of their distinguished champions.

It appears that the contest, *agon*, for all its obsessiveness filled a crucial need as an outlet for the highly competitive and individualistic impulses Greece developed during the period from VII to V B.C.E., values particularly noticeable in Homer, which formed a central part of Greek education. Not the least of contest's functions was to service the potentially volatile heirs of the warrior elite. Athletic violence, at first glance surprising in a culture that rigorously prosecuted simple assault, seems to function as a surrogate for the traditional impulse towards single combat and the duel. Hesiod gives us the best summary of Hellenic values: "the contest (*eris*), which dark Night first spawned . . . she spurs on to work even the delicate man, all the same . . . and potter envies potter, and builder builder, beggar is jealous of beggar, and poet of poet." (*Words and Days* 11 ff.)