

Multi-Sport Athletes in the Ancient Games

DAVID S. MATZ

St. Bonaventure University

Unlike their modern counterparts, ancient Olympic athletes seldom competed in more than one event. For example, the epinician poet Pindar, chronicler of champion athletes, records only one multiple-event winner (of a total of thirty-three athletes whom he honored in his extant poems). Other ancient sources reveal a similar pattern. The reason for this specialization is unknown, but it is probable that it was a result of the intensely competitive nature of the ancient games, coupled with a desire on the part of the athletes to avoid the taint of hubris that might be associated with their participation in more than one event.

An understanding of this aspect of ancient athletics is, oddly enough, useful in contributing to the debate on a problem of Pindaric literary interpretation. There has been a longstanding question about whether Pindar originally wrote his third and fourth *Isthmians* as separate poems, or as one. The fact that the third honors a Theban charioteer named Melissus, while the fourth glorifies Melissus the pankratiast suggests that they certainly must have been separate poems about two different athletes. It is most improbable that the same competitor could have triumphed in two events as dissimilar as charioteering and the pankration.



Host Harry Jebson welcomed us to Capital University