

SPORT BIOGRAPHY

Xenophon and Greek Athletics

ANTHONY J. PAPALAS

East Carolina University

Xenophon (ca. 430 B.C. to 354 B.C.), the historian, philosopher and soldier, was very interested in all forms of sports and lived in an age which conferred wealth and fame on athletes. Some scholars argue that this was a time when professionals from the lower class emerged, pushing out aristocrats from their dominance in the circuit games, while other scholars maintain that professionals existed in Greek sports from the very beginning. Xenophon admired the victors of the circuit games, but expressed some reservations about their “careers”. While a careful study of his work does not end the controversy, it does reveal an aristocracy devoted to athletics and physical activity.

The Greeks, like the English of the nineteenth century, felt superior to other people because of their unique interest in athletics. The Spartan King Agesilaus stripped naked foreign prisoners so his soldiers could see and feel superior to the effeminate, pale, flabby foe that knew not of the gymnasium. Xenophon suggests that the Spartans were more devoted to athletic training than other Greeks. They were bound by tradition to exercise twice daily even during a military campaign. In Sparta men with poor military records were ostracized from athletic competition. The Athenians, while free to do as they chose, frequently visited athletic clubs. Xenophon saw the Athenian masses as irresponsible in military and civilian affairs but willing to submit to the judgement of referees and skilled trainers in athletic contests. Xenophon was impressed that the Athenian people, often turbulent in the assembly, could be manageable sport spectators. Indeed the Greeks, even soldiers, were good spectators not prone to hooliganism.

The men in Xenophon’s work, mostly aristocrats, were interested in athletics and whatever their age, practiced some sport. The young and the gifted competed in the great festivals, these were in our terms professionals, and the others enjoyed daily wrestling

matches, throwing a discus, playing catch, walking, running, shadow boxing or anything to work up a sweat.

Xenophon saw athletic competition and exercise as primarily a way to prepare men for war. Generals offering prizes put on athletic festivals for their men, commanders turned the daily drudgery of military campaigns into competitive games, the best archers and bowmen, the swiftest hoplites were honored. On several occasions hoplites had to run down -as if they were running in a hoplitodromos, peltast or light armed soldiers. For Xenophon the queen of sports was hunting. It required men to march through rough country bearing arms and to match their wits against wild game. Apart from the sheer pleasure in the hunt the sport made men ready for war.

Xenophon felt that athletic competition and the hunt instilled in man, *philonika*, the will to win and made them courageous and ready to undergo toils, *ponoi*. The competitive instinct, however, might go too far in that the losers could become a disgruntled element among the citizens. For this Xenophon had no solution. There is not mention of sportsmanship, but rather an emphasis on *apate*, deceit, which Xenophon felt was appropriate in the hunt, athletic competition and all sports. It is not clear whether Xenophon was referring to the acceptable sort of deception used in a boxing or wrestling match, or illegal actions like gauging or low blows. Xenophon's contemporary, Alcibiades, justified pulling his opponents hair in a wrestling match by resorting to sophistic arguments. Xenophon lived in the age of the sophists, and he was perhaps influenced in this matter by their thinking.

Xenophon saw an ideal beauty in the trained athlete, though he suggested that the rigorous training for victory in the great festivals formed asymmetrical bodies. He suggested that athletic success, as impressive as it was, was not an end in itself and that the athlete should achieve something noteworthy in an other sphere of life. Perhaps in this view he was criticizing the specialization that was taking place in sports during his day.