

# POLITICS AND PERSONALITY

## Was Achilles the First Director of Athletics?

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Give or take a couple of hundred years, 1250 B.C. appears to be the accepted date for the fall of Troy. Homer authored the *ILLIAD* in about 850 B.C. in what has come to be accepted as Western Civilization's first written account. With the significance of Homer and his works established, let us again re-visit the oft studied and referred to source-Book 23 of the *ILLIAD*. "Was Achilles the first Director of Athletics?" Technically the answer is no, only because the sons of Amaryngkeus failed to leave a written account describing their king's funeral at Bouprasion (Il. 632). Nestor's athletic prowess behind us, the answer to this question is an obvious yes.

After much lamentation and sacrificing Achilles announces and prepares for the funeral games to begin. Achilles the director, the impresario, the person responsible for the games is a well documented fact throughout Book 23. So much for "Director," what about athletics? My position regarding athletics reflects Weiss' (Vanderzwagg, 1972, p. 70) treatise which includes the following criteria: excellence, training, spectators, standardization and winning. Paulo Vivante author and internationally respected Homer scholar has said, "Today we suffer from a historical prejudice. That moment of truth as perceived by Homer isn't any different from the Bronze Age than it is today." Within this frame of reference let us continue to ponder the question concerning athletics, using Weiss' criteria, to determine if Achilles was the first Director of Athletics?

### Excellence

After the chariot race, Achilles, in search of competitors for the boxing match addresses the warriors, "the best among you (659)". Similarly, Diomedes and Ajax answer his call to the spear fight when Achilles says, "We invite two men the best among you (800)." Clearly, two specific examples concerning excellence however, the essence of Homer's genius as described in the *ILLIAD* is the warrior ethic, the hero cult, the warrior's struggle to attain arete or excellence. In death a hero receives his glory or *klaos*, hence, his place in immortality. A place to be remembered by the rhapsodoi as they orally recapture the hero's excellence. So heart rendering was Sarphadon's glory or *klaos* that Zeus cried tears of blood over his son's death. Gregory Nagy, linguist, made the following statement:

The *Iliad* is a substitute for the hero-cult. The *Iliad* redefines heros. . . . Greek heros are

disequilibrated, only in death do they become balanced, hence a hero. Furthermore, the gods represent an antagonism toward the heroes.

### **Spectators**

A chronology of references to spectators would include the following incidents. The preparation for Patroklos' funeral procession described as, "behind them came on a cloud of foot-soldiers- by thousands (132)." Nestor explaining to young Antilochos that his demise in the chariot race would be a thing of joy for the others (342). The heated words between Idomeneus and Ajax describing Ajax as "windy" and their eventual wager as to the outcome of the race. It took Achilles, "I message" to quell their emotions (485). Also, between the chariot race and boxing match spectators are referred to as, . . . "among great numbers of Achaians" (651). A humorous perspective describes, "they all (spectators) laughed happily at him, (784)," Ajax's ordeal in the dung and a similar reaction by the spectators involving Epeios' efforts at weight-throwing (840).

### **Standardization**

To hold the world's record in 100 meters that measured only 95 meters would be folly and meaningless. Obviously rules, space and time features and many other regulations became prerequisite where athletics are concerned. In the chariot race Achilles appoints Phoenix a judge to remember, to be honest and to use judgment (360). Lane assignments were determined by lots (352). Antilochos, charged by Menelaos, had to take the oath (442). The foot race incorporated a pre-determined turn post (757). In wrestling, Odysseus and Ajax were spared a third fall by Achilles (733). Likewise the Achaians, themselves, concluded the spear fight between Diomedes and Ajax (823). Finally, the prizes, their relative worth per event, and the fact that all competitors received a prize for their efforts clearly establishes the motion of standardization. Although a tripod equal to twelve oxen was awarded to first place and a woman, the equal of four oxen, awarded for second place in the wrestling match one should not be dismayed by these unabashed chauvinistic tendencies. . . . lest we forget that the Trojan War was started over a woman.

### **Teaching Techniques**

Unquestionably and probably unfortunately athletes and their relationship, even dependency, upon technocracy represents a scenario loaded with over-zealous teaching techniques. About 3,000 years ago "coach" Nestor used the phrase, "science of racing (312)." For the boxing match Diomedes offers his services as a "trainer" to the underdog Euryalos (681). In wrestling, "resourceful Odysseus rose, versed in every advantage (709)." How much skill did Diomedes need in the chariot race using captured Trojan horses? Enough to win the cauldron containing twenty-two measures. But the classic statement still remains, "The wood cutter is far better for skill than he is for brute strength (315)."

### **Winning**

Winning, if it was easy, would not mean anything. To be a winner implies an attitude and self-sacrifice and other criteria previously discussed. Epeios' attitude as he prepares for the boxing match is yet another classic . . . "the jenny's mine . . . let the challenger come forward who will take away the two-handed goblet (665): I wonder if Ali or Hagler and other such pugilists have ever heard of this Greek "guy" called Homer? "Furious for combat," is the description given to Ajax and Diomedes as they approach each other in the spear fight (814). Supplications by some of the warriors also connotes an attitude: Odysseus in the foot race prays to Athene; Teukros in the archery competition makes promises to Apollo, the one who strikes from afar; Diomedes thanks Athene for her intervention against Apollo in the chariot race and did Ajax slip on the dung because of his negative attitude?

In summary. . . I do not think we can refute the idea that an accurate written account does not exist. From this investigator's perspective the information strongly suggests that Achilles functioned in some capacity that we as twentieth-century Americans have come to know as a Director of Athletics.