

# PRESERVING SPORT, TEACHING SPORT

## Winning and Watching the Greek Pentathlon

Donald G. Kyle

University of Texas at Arlington

As the bibliographies by Scanlon and Crowther indicate, the controversy over the method of deciding the ultimate victor in the ancient Greek pentathlon is an old and an ongoing one. Although the evidence is inconclusive, debate at the theoretical level has produced a number of hypotheses: numbers of victories, a points system, comparative victories, systems of elimination, relative placements, *ephedroi* with byes, etc. Recently W. Sweet in *ZPE* and in his *Sourcebook* of 1987 has suggested a new theory: if no triple victor emerges after the first three events, all athletes compete in the fourth event, and then, if necessary, the victors from the first four events compete in *repêchage* events chosen by lot. However, Sweet's system is simply too complex. While Sweet's contributions to the study and teaching of ancient sport are major ones, in this instance, via his stature, he may mislead the next generation.

I suggest that the (revised) interpretation by H.A. Harris (*Greece and Rome* 1972 and *Sport in Greece and Rome*), that only winners of the first three events proceed to further competition, is the most reasonable position to take. However, I would revise Harris and substitute running rather than wrestling as the elimination event, if needed. With this minor adjustment, we should return to Harris' position and let the whole matter drop.

In the course of discussing the problem and the evidence I commented on the controversies over the sequence of the events and over the origin of the pentathlon. I discounted the value of Philostratus' account (*Gym.* 3) of the origin and nature of the pentathlon as apocryphal and inherently implausible. Furthermore, I offered some additional arguments from considerations of spectatorship, sports management, and the nature of ancient versus modern sporting competition.