

# **“But the Mare I Will Not Give Up”**

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There is a danger when dealing with Greek sport of divorcing it from the very matrix from which it sprang. Sports historians, archaeologists, and philologists alike run the risk of viewing it merely from their own narrow perspective rather than as an integrative social phenomenon which pervades all of Greek life.

This paper concentrates on the earliest known instance of the use of sport in literature -- the funeral games for Patroklos in Book 23 of the Iliad. It will attempt to show that when Homer needed to give his first major indication that Achilles had changed, he naturally moved to the realm of sport to do so.

Book 23 is often given short shrift. Major teaching anthologies leave it out completely and some commentators tend to view the games as indicating a return to normalcy on Achilles' part or as showing Achilles once more in the role of respecting hero. Others stress that the book serves mostly as a breathing space before the intense emotions of Book 24. Sports historians have looked to the games episode primarily as a resource for discovering what the status of Mycenaean or Iron Age athletics may have been.

But there is one other way of viewing the book which is less often discussed. Why, at this crucial point in the story, did Homer turn to sport? It is not enough to say that funeral games were traditional, for Homer goes beyond describing the traditional.

Instead, he carefully links Book 23 with Book I, using it to mark the beginning of the laying aside of Achilles' wrath. Sport, then, becomes a metaphor for life.

The paper analyzes Book 23 from this point of view, with a special emphasis on how the chariot race can be shown to elucidate the entire epic. Achilles' first settles a quarrel during the race that reminds us of how he and Agamemnon should have come to terms. He then exhibits even-handed and generous bestowing of prizes at the conclusion of the race, demonstrating the great lessons he has learned since the epic's beginning. He no longer views honor in light of what one has earned and thus gives prizes to those who should have won but did not and even to those (Agamemnon and Nestor) who did not compete at all. To these elders he gives prizes simply because of their status -- a far cry from the Achilles of Book 1.

Other examples of the ancients' use of sport as a prime metaphor are mentioned and the paper ends with thoughts concerning the extent to which sport was at the very heart of ancient Greek life at all levels.