

Contests and Controversies in Greek Athletics: Games, Prizes, and Athletes

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A watershed in the study of Greek sport, H.W. Piekert's "Games, Prizes and Ideology" in *Stadion 1* (1975) called for revisionist studies and the demythologizing of ancient sport. Previously, traditional scholars, including E.N. Gardiner and H.A. Harris, had depicted a classicist scenario of the golden age, the tragic flaws, and the decline and fall of Greek sport. Their moral didacticism and their biased history have since been exposed by a new generation of scholars. For non-specialists, this paper surveys the progress made since 1975 and demonstrates the accessibility and value of the study of Greek sport for students and scholars of antiquity.

We now agree that, while sport and agonism are universal human phenomena, the Greeks were ethnologically distinctive in the degree to which they institutionalized athletics with regular festivals and prizes. While the traditional typology of Greek games was strict and judgmental, we now see that Greek sport was pluralistic. There was more to the Greek games than an Olympic or Panhellenic pinnacle and debased, local rivals. Games might be seen as funeral, crown, sacred crown, stephanitic,

chrematistic, Panhellenic, local, civic, or ephichoric, but games, prizes and athletes were found everywhere in Greece.

As the very word athletics implies, prizes were essential to all contests. At the games victors accepted any and all prizes from wreaths to money, tripods and olive oil, as well as additional rewards upon their return home, including cash bonuses, free meals and more. This paper suggests that we should look at the prize-giving from the viewpoint of the donors as well as the recipients. From Homeric treasures to Panhellenic crowns to Panathenaic amphoras full of oil, givers of prizes sought glory and benefits from their generosity. The proliferation of rewards and the development of self-declaratory prizes promoted and marketed both sport and its sponsors.

Thanks to David C. Young and others, the once pervasive Olympic myth of Greek athletic amateurism should now be moribund, but we continue to debate the sociology (i.e., class origins, social status and mobility) of Greek athletics. Athletes usually were heroized by their states but sometimes they were criticized as civically undesirable or socially dysfunctional. Greek athletes were not all Victorian aristocratic amateurs, but did lower class individuals have equality of opportunity? We have challenged Gardiner's amateurist and athleticist mythology but disagreements among Piekiet, Young and Kyle suggest that we have more demythologizing to do.