

**Wolfgang Decker, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt*, trans. by A Guttman. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992. Illus., index, notes. pp. 212.**

Wolfgang Decker's book provides us with the most comprehensive examination of physical activity in ancient Egypt, an area which has generally been under-researched by sports historians. *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt* brings the study of 'sport' in ancient Egypt from the periphery, where it has languished for the last two decades, into the mainstream of sports history.

After an initial wave of descriptive histories of ancient sport in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a dearth of penetrating analyses on sport in ancient Egypt. Egyptian sport's marginal position in the field was partly the result of a traditional Euro-centric examination of sport in antiquity - focusing on Greek and Roman physical activity and its subsequent influence on Western civilisation. This marginalisation was compounded by the complexity and technical demand of the ancient Egyptian material. The study of sport in this civilisation rested outside the traditional foci of Egyptology, yet beyond the technical capabilities of many sports historians.

Decker's book contributes significantly to the integration of sports history with the field of Egyptology. Organised thematically around categories of activities such as games, hunting, acrobatics, the sports of the Pharaohs and private persons, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt* is a comprehensive presentation of sporting activity in this society. These categories are complemented by chapters on source material, the nature of sporting competitions and the history of research on Egyptian sports, which all helps to further contextualise the array of information compiled by Decker. Utilising a diverse range of evidence from Egyptian art, architecture and script, Decker indicates the extent of Egyptian physical culture. The broad approach also reflects the author's expertise and career-long research in the field.

The thematic format makes this book an informative collection on physical activities. As a consequence, Decker forgoes an attempt to produce a synthesis of Egyptian sporting culture, based on the lines of the historical development of Egyptian civilisation. While this thematic organisation orders his information, it is also somewhat problematic. The inherent difficulty faced by Decker is that he has had to imply a continuity based on fragmentary pieces of evidence from different time periods. While conveying the essence of the sporting activities and the general factors effecting their evolution, this was occasionally done at the expense of more subtle analysis.

Decker can, however, be excused for the occasional sweeping generalisation in his Herculean effort of condensing three thousand years of sports history into a concise, digestible, and, most importantly, immediately useful survey text. The clarity of explanation of Egypt's unique cultural phenomena and their relationship to sport is one of the book's more prominent features. This book is a long overdue benchmark for works on Egyptian sports history. *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt* is not only an important survey text, but it poignantly highlights the need for further examination and translation of material on physical activity in ancient Egypt.

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#### NOTE

1. W Decker, 'The Study of the History of Sport in Ancient Egypt', 1976 *Proceedings of the Society on the History of Physical Education and Sport in Asia and the Pacific Area*, U Simri, ed., The Wingate Institute for Physical Education and Sport, Tel Aviv, 1977. p. 9.