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Prizes in Greek Athletics:

Dispelling the Myth of the Amateur Greek Athlete

Sonia Sorrell

From the nineteenth century until recently, ancient Greek athletes have been viewed as patriotic, self-sacrificing amateurs. Pierre de Coubertin enhanced this romantic view of Greek athletics when he revived the tradition of the ancient Olympic games in 1896.¹ During the first decades of the twentieth century, authors promoted and even magnified the myth of the amateur athlete in ancient Greece. Early historians of sport believed that Greek athletics originated in the aristocratic Homeric games and that they reached a zenith in the Panhellenic games of the sixth century, but that Greek athletics declined throughout the fifth and fourth centuries as specialization and professionalism increased.² E. N. Gardiner wrote, "The Nemesis of excess in athletics is professionalism, which is the death of all true sport."³

Recently, however, scholars have begun to re-examine this popular picture of ancient Greek amateurism. David Young, a leader in this quest for historical accuracy, believes the myth was founded by "partisans of the nineteenth-century Anglo-American amateur movement [who] wished to legitimize with an ancient precedent their own athletic system, which sought to restrict participation to a wealthy, leisured class." Young points out that the word "athletes" literally means "competitor for a prize."⁴ Ancient evidence clearly shows that ancient Greek athletics had an intricate system of prizes and rewards. That is not to say that no ancient athlete ever competed solely for the love of sport or for the glory of his

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city, but that along with these intrinsic rewards of victory, came the extrinsic, more tangible rewards of prizes.

The two types of athletic festivals were the "crown" festival and the "prize" festival. In the "crown" festival, the host city presented wreaths to the athletes as symbols of their victories. Each city had a symbolic plant that it used for the victors' crowns: Olympia presented wreaths of wild olive; Delphi, the laurel of the Pythian Apollo; at Isthmia, the crown was pine; and the Nemeans used wild celery. In the less well know "crown" games, other plants were used: barley at Eleusis; myrtle at Thebes and Argos; and white poplar at Rhodes. The victors were also given a palm branch to hold and they were decorated with ribbons.⁵ Then the victors' home cities would award them with prizes such as free meals or free seats at festivals. The "crown" festivals were often called "sacred" festivals. They required treaties among the participating cities to ensure that each city would reward its victorious citizens.

The second type of Greek athletic competition was the "prize" festival. In this type of festival, the host city of the games supplied the prizes for the victorious athletes. The awards at the "prize" festivals were often quite valuable. They ranged from bronze cauldrons to oxen. Sometimes the prizes were products unique to the host city, as were the *amphorae* of olive oil that Athens presented to the victorious athletes at her games. Many new festivals started as prize festivals. If they were successful, they changed to sacred or crown festivals and the responsibility of providing prizes was delegated to the home cities of the contestants.⁶

THE EARLY GAMES

Homer provides the earliest reference to prizes at athletic competitions. In the *Iliad*, Nestor tells of chariot races in Elis with tripods as prizes during the reign of King Augeas of Olympia.⁷ Archaeologists have found a series of tripods at Olympia; the earliest date to the tenth century, the latest to about 700 B.C. The reference to tripods as prizes in the *Iliad* indicates that they were used as such during Homer's day and perhaps much earlier.⁸

The earliest extant pictorial representations of athletic contests on mainland Greece are from the eighth century B.C. - the time of Homer and the founding of the Olympic games. The paintings were done in the geometric style on Attic and Argive vases. L. Roller believes that the contests they represent are funeral games.⁹

Homer's account of the funeral games of Patroclus reveals much about the prizes awarded in the heroic age. "But Achilles stayed the folk in that place, and made them sit in wide assembly, and from his ship he brought forth prizes, cauldrons and tripods, and horses and mules and strong oxen,

and fair-girdled women, and grey iron."¹⁰ Prizes were awarded for first through fifth places in the chariot race. The first place winner received a woman skilled in handiwork and a twenty-two measure tripod; the second place winner received a pregnant horse; the third place winner was awarded a new four measure cauldron; fourth prize was two talents of gold; and fifth prize was a new two-handled urn. The winner of the boxing match received a mule and the loser received a two-handled cup. The winner of the wrestling match received a great tripod valued at the worth of twelve oxen and the loser was awarded a woman valued at four oxen. The first three place winners in the foot race received a beautiful silver mixing bowl, a fat ox, and a half talent of gold respectively. The prize for the winner of the contest in armor was the armor that Patroklos had taken from Sarpedon. The winner of the discus throw received a quantity of iron. The winner of the archery contest was presented with a number of double axes and the runner-up received the single axes. A spear and an unused cauldron went to the winner of the javelin contest. A.E. Raubitschek posits that "The prizes given on the occasion of the funeral games may have been taken from the property of the deceased, because, as described in the *Iliad*, they were given not only to the winners but to practically all those present."¹¹

From Hesiod and the Hesiodic corpus (c.700 BC) come two more statements about prizes. "Good is she [Hecate] also when men contend at the games, for there too the goddess is with them and profits them: for he who by his might and strength gets the victory wins the rich prize easily with joy, and brings glory to his parents".¹² "Next to them the horsemen were hard set, and they contended and labored for a prize. . . And there was set out for them within the course a great tripod of gold, the splendid work of cunning Hephaestus".¹³

In the first century A.D., Plutarch composed the *Life of Solon*, a biography of the Athenian statesman of the sixth century B.C. Plutarch credited Solon with legislation that awarded large sums of cash to victors in the major festivals.

In the valuations of sacrificial offerings, at any rate, a sheep and a bushel of grain are reckoned at a *drachma*; the victor at the Isthmian games was to be paid a hundred *drachmas*, and the Olympic victor five hundred; the man who brought in a wolf was given five *drachmas*, and for a wolf's whelp, one; the former sum, according to Demotrius the Phalerian, was the price of an ox, the latter that of a sheep. For although the prices which Solon fixes in his sixteenth table are for choice victims, and naturally many times as great as those for ordinary ones, still, even these are low in comparison with present prices (23.3).

An Athenian victor at Olympia still would have been ineligible to be a member of the *pentacosimedimnoi*, the wealthiest of Solon's four "classes," unless he met the mandatory property qualifications stated by Aristotle.¹⁴

A brief inscription on a bronze tablet found at Sybaris in southern Italy reads, "A gift. Kleombrotos son of Dexilaos having won at Olympia and having promised the prize to Athena, dedicated a tithe."¹⁵ The inscription has been dated c. 600 B.C. Since Olympia awarded only olive wreaths, the tithe dedicated by the victor was probably part of the monetary prize awarded by his home town for his victory in the "crown" festival of Olympia.

Besides monetary awards, the home towns of "crown" festival athletes would award free meals and/or stadium tickets to their victors. Xenophanes, (c. 525 B.C.), complained that rewards should be reserved for intellectuals, not athletes.

Even if a man should win a victory in the sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia in the foot races or the *pentathlon* or the wrestling or the painful boxing or in the dreadful struggle which men call *pankration*, even if he should become a most glorious symbol for his fellow citizens to observe, and win a front row seat at the games and his meals at public expense and some especially valuable gift from the state, even if he should win in the horse races, and even if he should accomplish all of these things and not just one of them, he still would not be so valuable as I am. For my wisdom is a better thing than the strength of men or horses. The current custom of honoring strength more than wisdom is neither proper nor just. For the city-state is not a bit more law-abiding for having a good boxer or a pentathlete or a wrestler or a fast runner even though running may be the most honored event in the games of man. There is little joy for a state when an athlete wins at Olympia, for he does not fill the state's coffers.¹⁶

By the middle of the fifth century, it was common for a city-state to reward her victors with pensions of free meals. One Greek inscription reads, "Those citizens who have won the athletic competitions at Olympia or Delphi or Isthmia or Nemea shall have a free meal every day for the rest of their lives in the *prytaneion* and other honors as well. Also those citizens who have won the *tethrippon* or the *keles* at Olympia or Delphi or Isthmia or Nemea shall have a free meal every day for the rest of their lives in the *prytaneion*."¹⁷ This inscription was found on a marble paving block from Hermes Street in Athens and dates to c. 436 B.C. The words of

this inscription were echoed by Socrates when he appeared before the jury to suggest a "punishment" for himself. Socrates argued, "Well, what is appropriate for a poor man who is a public benefactor and who requires leisure for giving you moral encouragement? Nothing could be more appropriate for such a person than free maintenance at the State's expense. He deserves it much more than any victor in the races at Olympia, whether he wins with a single horse or a pair or a team of four. These people give you the semblance of success, but I give you the reality; they do not need maintenance but I do."¹⁸

THE FIFTH CENTURY

Herodotus, the fifth century historian, tells us much about Greek athletics. In one of his accounts Democedes, the court physician to Darius, escaped, returned to his native Croton, and sent word to Darius that he was engaged to marry the daughter of Milo the wrestler. Herodotus stated that Milo's "name is held in high esteem by the King. I think that Democedes decided to make this marriage even though it cost him a large sum of money in order to show Darius that he was important in his own homeland."¹⁹ Before the fifth century, athletes of Milo's status were known for their wealth and power and a king, even of a distant land, would have heard of their accomplishments. Croton, Milo's home city, was a Greek polis in southern Italy that supplied more than a fifth of all Olympic victors between 588 and 484 B.C. Milo won at least six Olympic victories between 540 and 516 B.C.²⁰

The first contest Herodotus mentioned by name was the one held in honor of the Triopian Apollo. The prize for this festival was a bronze tripod, which the victor was expected to leave in the temple of Apollo. One victor from Halicarnassus took the tripod home with him and thereby caused the expulsion of Halicarnassus from the Dorian hexapolis. Herodotus mentioned another non-Greek festival held at Chemis in Egypt where the prizes were cattle, cloaks and hides. In one passage the historian also comments on the valuable prizes awarded to the victors of the single combat events at funerary occasions in Thrace.²¹

The Olympic games were popular, even during times of war. In an attempt to explain the failure of the Greek allies to reinforce the troops at Thermopylae Herodotus said that the Olympic games were being held. When the Persians were told that the athletes were competing for an olive crown, the Persians asked what type of men would compete with one another for honor rather than money?²²

Many times Herodotus defined his characters in terms of their athletic records: Cleobis and Biton were described as men who had won prizes in athletic competition; Philip son of Butacides was victorious in the

Olympic games and his wealth was indicated by his ability to furnish his own battleship and crew; the Eretrian general Eualcides won contests in which the winners were crowned; Miltiades, son of Cypselus, won the four-horse chariot race in which the owner, not the driver, was proclaimed the winner; Demaratus of Sparta also won the four-horse chariot race at Olympia; Eurybates of Argos was an expert in the *pentathlon* and played a prominent role in the public affairs of his city; the Spartan Evagoras also owned horses that won chariot races at Olympia; Croesus' gift to Alcmaeon enabled that family to own horses and win prizes at the Olympic games; Cleisthenes of Sicyon not only won the chariot race at Olympia but he took that occasion to announce that he was looking for a husband for his daughter since he knew that the most eligible men would be present at the games; and the only ship from the West to join the Greek forces at Salamis was commended by an athlete named Phayllus from Croton who had been victor three times in the Pythian games.²³

It is obvious that athletics and political prominence were interrelated in ancient Greece. Herodotus listed victories in festivals alongside victories in battles when he related a man's accomplishments. Often battles were described as if they were athletic events. When Themistocles urged the Greeks to attack the Persians at Salamis, Adeimantos told him, "In the games those who start before the signal are flogged." Themistocles replied, "Yes, but those left at the start win no prizes".²⁴

Thucydides also revealed the intimate connection between athletics and politics in this statement of Alcibiades,

I think, Athenians, that I am worthy of the command. First of all, my deeds, which make me the object of public outcry, actually bring glory not only to my ancestors and myself, but also to my country, and this glory is mixed with practical advantages as well. The Greeks who had been hoping that our city was exhausted by war came to think of our power as even greater than it is because of my magnificent *theoria* at Olympia. I entered seven four-horse chariots, a number never before entered by a private citizen, and I came in first, second, and fourth, and I provided all the trappings worthy of such a victory. For it is the custom that such accomplishments convey honor, and at the same time power is inferred from the achievement.²⁵

From c. 530 to 430 B.C., it was the custom to have a professional poet compose a hymn to be sung at the celebration of an athlete's victory. The victor, his friends or the sponsoring town would assume the expense for these "Epinikia." Pindar wrote many such hymns. In his *Nemean Ode X*,

Pindar told of the enormous variety of prizes won by the Theaeus family of Argos, including heirloom vases filled with olive oil, wool cloaks, silver cups, and numerous bronze objects. From the odes, we learn that it was not unusual for families to have had several generations of successful athletes. Pindar mentioned many such people as: Hippocleas of Thessaly, 490 B.C., Megacles of Athens, 486 B.C., Timodemus of Acharnae, 485 B.C. and Pythias of Aegina, 485 B.C.²⁶ Pindar also told of a victorious wrestler who, in 468 B.C., won a warm cloak at the games at Pellana.²⁷ In the *Olympian Ode* VII, Pindar enumerated the works of art that were given as prizes at the games at Arcadi and Thebes. In the *Pythian Ode* VIII, Pindar stated, "He who has won has a fresh beauty and is all the more graceful for his high hopes as he flies on the wings of his manly deeds with his mind far above the pursuit of money."²⁸

Some athletes, however, must have had their minds on money because they became full-time athletes and made athletic competition their primary occupation. One such man was Theogenes of Thasos who is reported to have won between 1300 and 1400 victories. In the early twentieth century, Gardiner referred to Theogenes as a "pothunter" and "Shamateur" who traveled from city to city "picking up prizes."²⁹ The ancients did not have such a negative view of Theogenes; in fact, he was made into a hero and a shrine was erected in his honor. An inscription, c. 100 A.D., was discovered outside the shrine of Theogenes. It is in the form of an offering box and reads, "Those who sacrifice to Theogenes are to contribute not less than three [dollars] in the offering box. Anyone who does not make a contribution as written above will be remembered. The money collected each year is to be given to the High Priest, and he is to save it until it has reached a total of [\$]16,000. When this total has been collected, the Boule and the People shall decide whether it is to be spent for some ornamentation or for repairs to the shrine of Theogenes."³⁰

Nevertheless, full-time professional athletes did not dominate all fifth century athletic competitions. Informal and impromptu contests were still held. Xenophon mentioned a festival held by the Greek troops in 40 B.C. to celebrate their safe arrival in Trapezus. The prizes at these games were hides.³¹

THE FOURTH CENTURY

By the beginning of the fourth century, many athletes had turned to sport as a full-time occupation. Athletics was a means whereby a poor man could improve his position in life. In a speech written by Isocrates, Alcibiades complained that athletes are "of low birth, inhabitants of petty states, and of mean education." According to H.W. Pleket, some factors in the increase of professionalism in athletics were "the democratization

of sports (due to the rise of the *gymnasium*), the expansion of the number of games ('sacred' and prize-games); the development of scientific training-methods and, last but not least, the impoverishment caused by the Peloponnesian War (compelling people to offer themselves as mercenaries; others went in for professional athletics)...³²

Two inscriptions from the early fourth century indicate that olive oil was used for prizes in all the events and that it was not only awarded in great quantities but that it was quite valuable as well. Athens awarded as many as 1300 *amphorae* of olive oil at the Panathenaean festival in 380 B.C., in prizes varying from six to sixty jars.³³ The recipient, if he chose to do so, could sell his oil at a price of twelve *drachmas* an *amphora*.³⁴ The winner of a chariot race received one hundred *amphorae* of olive oil.³⁵ This prize would have equaled 1200 *drachmas* or the equivalent of 1200 days pay, more than four year's wages for the average Athenian worker, and it was tax-free.

The olive oil was collected as a tax from Athenian landholders. The people of Athens elected ten *Athlothetai* (Commissioners of Games) who were responsible for the contests and the prizes. The Boule and the Treasurer of Military Funds supervised the manufacture of the prizes for the Panathenaic festival. Aristotle wrote, "The prizes are, for the winners in the musical contests, in silver and gold decorations; for those who have won the contest in physical fitness and beauty (*euandria*), a shield; but for the winner in gymnastic contests and horse races, olive oil."³⁶

In addition to the value of the olive oil, the value of the vase itself was considerable. By 530 B.C., the shape and decoration of the vases had become standardized and although black-figure vases were no longer popular for other purposes, that style remained the traditional style for prize vases. On one side of the vase was a figure of Athena and on the other was a depiction of the athletic event for which the vase was awarded. The vases bore the official Panathenaic inscription and later vases, by 375/4 B.C., also bore the name of the archon. The contract for the production of the prize *amphorae* was awarded, quite fittingly, by competition.³⁷

CONCLUSION

From at least the times of Homer and Hesiod, the Greeks participated in athletics for prizes. It appears that the term "amateur" was unknown to the Greeks.³⁹ Although the evidence indicates that most of the competitors were from the wealthy aristocracy, it also shows that many athletes were not. Athletic contests in Greece were open to all competitors, regardless of their wealth or rank. The Greeks attached no stigma to accepting prizes for athletic accomplishments; such criticisms seem to have been reserved for those who accepted rewards for teaching.

The two types of athletic festivals were the "crown" festival and the "prize" festival. In the former, prizes were presented by the home city; in the latter, prizes were supplied by the host city. The prizes ranged from pensions (in the form of free meals or seats at events), to valuable, albeit utilitarian, prizes such as woolen cloaks, oxen, precious metals, and cash. Most often it was "all or nothing" and prizes went only to the first place victor. But sometimes, particularly in funerary games, prizes were awarded for several place winners as well. The fact that Greek athletes accepted prizes for their athletic abilities does not mean that they competed for solely pecuniary reasons. The weight of the evidence shows that Greek athletes also competed for the love of competition and the desire to be first.

NOTES

¹ P. de Coubertin, "Why I Revived the Olympic Games," *Fortnightly Review* 90 (1908), 110-115.

² T. Woody, "Professionalism and the Decay of Greek Athletics," *School and Society* 47 (1938), 521-28.

³ E. N. Gardiner, *Athletics in the Ancient World* (Oxford, 1930), 99

⁴ D. C. Young, "Professionalism in Archaic and Classical Greek Athletics," *AW* 7 (1983), 45. David Young presented a paper, "Professionalism and Record Keeping in Archaic and Classical Greece," to APA in 1979 and he is about to publish a book, *The Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics* (Chicago 1983/4).

⁵ H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (Bloomington, 1964), 36.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 153-4.

⁷ *Iliad* (11.698-702).

⁸ A. E. Raubitschek, "The Agonistic Spirit in Greek Culture," *AW* 7 (1983), 5.

⁹ L. Roller, "Funeral Games in Greek Art," *American Journal of Archeology* 85 (1981), 113-16.

¹⁰ *Iliad* (23.256-897)

¹¹ A.E. Raubitschek, 7.

¹² *Theogony*, 435-8.

¹³ *Scutum*, 301-13.

¹⁴ Young, n.4 *supra*, 48, states that a workman in classical times had to labor eight and a half days for the price of a sheep, or one drachma. Young does not state the source for his figures but they are contradicted by the findings of J.H. Randall, "The Erectheum Workmen," *AJA* 57 (1953), 199-210, who believes that an average wage for a workman during the classical age would have been one drachma per day. This wage is also suggested by F.J. Frost, *Greek Society* (Lexington, Mass., 1980). Even if one takes the figure of one drachma per day, the Olympic victor would have won the equivalent of five hundred days' pay. *Ath. Pol.* (7.3).

¹⁵ *Bull. Epig.* (1967) 569, no. 697.

¹⁶ Xenophanes, fragment 2.

¹⁷ *Inscriptiones Graecae* I² (77.11-17).

¹⁸ Plato, *Apology*, 36d.

¹⁹ Herodotus, 3.137.

²⁰ Young, n.4 *supra*, 49.

²¹ Herodotus, 1.44; 2.91; 5.8.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.206; 8.26.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.31; 5.47; 5.102; 6.35; 6.70; 6.103; 6.12; T. S. Brown, "Herodotus' Views on Athletics," *AW* 7 (1983), 17-29. Herodotus, 8.47.

²⁴ Herodotus, 8.59.

²⁵ Thucydides, 6.16.2.

²⁶ Harris, n. 5 *supra*, 123-25. Pindar mentioned: Hippocleas of Thessaly, 490 B.C. (*Pyth. Ode* X); Megacles of Athens, 486 B.C. (*Pyth. Ode* VII); Timodemus of Acharnae, 485 B.C. (*Nem. Ode* II); Pythias of Aegina, 485 B.C. (*Nem. Ode* V); Melissus of Thebes, 478 B.C. (*Isthm. Ode* IV); the Lampon family of Aegina, 476 B.C. (*Isthm. Ode* V and VI); and the Timasarchus clan of Aegina, 473 B.C. (*Nem. Ode* IV). The list is from R.S. Robinson, *Sources for the History of Greek Athletics* (Chicago, 1970), 252 n.92.

²⁷ Pindar, *Olym. Ode IX* Frost, n.11 *supra*, 65, values such a woolen cloak at 5 to 20 drachmas, or \$200. to \$800. based on a wage of one drachma/ or \$40.00 per day today.

²⁸ A full discussion of athletics and Pindar can be found in H.M. Lee, "Athletic Arete in Pindar," *AW* 7 (1983), 31-37.

²⁹ Harris, n.5 *supra*, 116; Gardiner, n.2, 101.

³⁰ *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique*, 64-65 (1940-41), 175. S.G. Miller, *Arete: Ancient Writers, Papyri and Inscriptions on the History and Ideals of Greek Athletics* (Chicago, 1979) 61; the dollar amounts are provided by S.G. Miller who uses \$8.00 wage per day as his base, a figure that seems too low to both Young, n. 4 *supra*, 47, and to Miller himself, who, in his introduction (iii), states that the figure is conservative; "My rate of exchange is, then, clearly not excessive, but the figures which sometimes result seem to be so. It is difficult to believe that, for example, Theogenes of Thasos could pay a fine of some \$96,000 or that Democedes of Croton might be paid a salary of a like amount. . ."

³¹ *Anabasis*, 4.8.25-28.

³² Isocrates, *Team of Horses*, 25.33. H.W. Pleket, "Some Aspects of the History of the Athletic Guilds," *ZPE* 10 (1973), 198.

³³ *IG* II², 2311.

³⁴ *IG* II², 1356. If we use Frost's suggested figure of \$40.00 per day (n. 11 *supra*) and combine it with Randall's estimate of one drachma for a day's pay in antiquity (n. 22 *supra*); 12 X \$40.00 = \$480.00 per amphora; if the victor had won the top prize of sixty amphorae, it would have been valued at \$28,800. Whatever the modern equivalent might be, in antiquity, the prize would have equaled 720 days' pay.

³⁵ *IG* II, 965.

³⁶ Arist. *AP* 60; 49.3; 60.4.

³⁷ J. Boardman, *Athenian Black Figure Vases* (New York, 1974), 167-77. the name of the archon of the year when the oil was pressed was the name recorded on the vases. T.B.L. Webster, *Potter and Patron in Classical Athens* (London, 1972), 11.

³⁸ E.N. Gardiner, n.2 *supra*, states that "idiotes" is the Greek term for "amateur." Young, n.4 *supra*, 45, argues that "idiotes" means "untrained" or "non-competitor" and in no way means "amateur" in our modern sense of the word.