
Hugh Lee
University of Maryland

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Thomas Scanlon, ed.,


At the APA meeting in Boston on December 29, 1979, I organized and chaired a panel of five papers on Greek and Roman Athletics. The decade of the seventies had witnessed a resurgence in the study of ancient sports both in Europe and North America. Not only was there an increase in the number of scholarly articles, but in Cologne, Germany, a new journal, *Stadion*, had been founded dedicated to scholarship on both ancient and modern sports. In the Peloponnese in 1973 Stephen Miller of the University of California, Berkeley, had commenced his exemplary excavations at Nemea. In the undergraduate curriculum, more universities were offering courses on ancient athletics.

The 1970s in turn spurred even greater interest and growth in ancient athletic studies. Among the most prominent and active scholars has been Thomas Scanlon, Professor of Classics at the University of California, Riverside, the editor of this Oxford two-volume anthology consisting of twenty previously published articles or book chapters by some of the most distinguished names in the field. With the exception of the article by W. H. Willis entitled “Athletic Contests in the Epic,” published in 1941, the contributions are dated from 1972 to 2003. Furthermore, each contribution is followed by an Addendum to provide more recent bibliography and the author’s recent thoughts on the subject. In the case of Willis (deceased 2000), Scanlon has provided the Addendum. The reader searching for the source of the
original writings should note, however, that it is not supplied at the beginning or conclusion of each contribution but rather at the end of the book in the Acknowledgements; see pp. 328-9 in volume 1 and pp. 371-2 in volume 2.

Even with ever-increasing digital access to publications, this handy compendium of well-chosen and important essays is most welcome. Increasing its attractiveness enormously, however, is the fact that five of the papers, by Wolfgang Decker, François de Polignac, Christian Mann, H.W. Pleket, and Ulrich Sinn, are translations from the original German or French into English, making the volume accessible for the non-specialist reader and useful for an undergraduate course on ancient athletics.

Scanlon’s Introduction provides a historical overview of the modern scholarship on ancient athletics, enhancing the reader’s understanding and appreciation of the scholarly papers. Somewhat curiously, however, the same Introduction is provided at the beginning of each volume, apparently presuming that there may some who will purchase one volume but not the other.

The contributions cover a diverse range, and each volume is divided into three sections: in volume 1, (I) Greek Heroes and Origins, (II) Contesting the Olympics, (III) Enigmas and Solutions of the Greek Contests; and in volume 2, (I) Identity, Status, and the Greek Athlete, (II) Greek Sports in the Roman Era, (III) Etruscan and Roman Sports and Spectacles. For each section Scanlon has also authored an introductory essay, but the novice or non-specialist will nevertheless find it helpful to have at hand a comprehensive text such as Miller’s *Ancient Greek Athletics* (2004) or D. G. Kyle’s *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (2007).

The subject matter of the essays reflects the range of scholarly activity of the last half-century. There are breakthrough articles such as Miller’s discovery, based upon his early excavations at Nemea, that whereas in the *diaulos*, the foot race of approximately 400 meters, the runners employed two lanes, up and back, with individual turning posts at the far end of the stadium, in the *dolichos*, or “long” race of several laps, the runners utilized a common turning post at each end. In the first of his two contributions, Ulrich Sinn, the most recent head of the German archaeological team at Olympia, discusses recent finds at the oldest and most thoroughly-excavated panhellenic site. On the Roman side, Kathryn Welch argues for the origin of the amphitheater in the capital, challenging the still widely held traditional view of a Campanian source. The connection between religion and athletics is explored in the essays by Sinn (the Olympia essay), de Polignac, and Scanlon (two essays). In both places Scanlon also discusses the place of women in ancient athletics. Crowther, Golden, and Sinn (his first essay) expound on the relation between society, poli-
tics, and athletics. Farrington, Mann, and Sinn explore aspects of Greek athletics in the Roman era, a fertile and still relatively unexplored field. Scholars of earlier generations focused on the archaic and classical periods as the “golden age of Greek athletics”, regarding the later eras, especially the Roman, as being corrupted by professionalism. To judge, however, from Pausanias’ description of Olympia and the spread of athletics in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, one could well argue that the real golden age was in the second century CE. It is good to have a contribution on the gymnasium from Wolfgang Decker, the eminent Egyptologist and classical scholar of ancient sports, whose other publications are primarily in German. Decker was cofounding editor of both Stadion and Nikephoros, a journal devoted to ancient sport which initiated publication in the 1980s. There are also papers on Etruscan sports (Gori), gladiators, (Carter), animal spectacles (Kyle’s second paper), and Roman horse-racing (Harris).

The essays by Pleket, “On the Sociology of Ancient Sport” and the late David Young (deceased 2013), “Professionalism in Archaic and Classical Greek Athletics”, are juxtaposed appropriately. Both scholars were instrumental in helping to dispel the commonly held scholarly and popular belief that Greek athletes were amateurs. Pleket’s pioneering study is a monument of erudition. Initially appearing in 1974 as ”Zur Sociologie des antiken Sports” in a Dutch journal and later reprinted with some revision in Nikephoros (2001), it now appears for the first time in English. Young, the renowned Pindarist and historian of both the ancient and modern Olympics, originally delivered his paper as a participant in the 1979 APA panel mentioned above. Maintaining the lively style of the oral presentation, it first appeared in print in 1983 (The Ancient World) and was his second publication on ancient sports, to be followed by The Myth of Greek Amateur Athletics (1984).

The reader should note, however, that Pleket and Young differed on the meaning of professionalism when applied to Greek antiquity and about the extent of participation in athletics by the non-elite during the archaic period. The controversy continued in print for more than a decade; see Pleket’s Addenda for the references. Indeed, the degree of participation by both elites and non-elites from the archaic through the Roman periods is still a contentious scholarly issue. With regards to the question of amateurism, however, the efforts of Pleket and Young were part of a movement ultimately leading to the acceptance of professional athletes in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics (the USA basketball “Dream Team”). Young’s addendum, his last publication, reflects on this remarkable transformation in such a brief time.

Many theories have been proposed to explain how the Greeks determined the
winner in the pentathlon. Kyle’s (the first essay) offers a variation of the scheme first proposed by H. A. Harris, one that has won wide acceptance and which I favored for many years. Eventually, however, I proposed an alternate system, which Kyle graciously acknowledges, based upon the scoring method suggested by the German scholar Joachim Ebert. Suffice to say that while the Harris-Kyle system has the virtues of greater practicality and simplicity, it allows the possibility that the victor can be inferior to an opponent in three of the five events. In the absence of new evidence, a definitive answer remains elusive.

Kyle, like Scanlon, has been among the foremost scholars working on ancient athletics over the past three-and-a-half decades. Coincidentally, he and Paul Christesen have co-edited a “rival” volume of essays entitled *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity,* Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (2014) [Disclaimer: I contributed an essay to this volume]. Kyle and Christensen have, however, chosen a different approach, soliciting original essays, which include a guide to further reading, from an international team of scholars. All the essays are in English. They total forty-three, thus covering a greater range of topics than the Oxford volumes. Four scholars, Kyle, Mann, Miller, and Pleket, are contributors to both anthologies.

Like subjects such as mythology, women in antiquity, and sexuality, which were once regarded as not serious or respectable, ancient athletics in the past half-century has entered the mainstream of classical studies. In 1979 one would have offered hecatombs to have something akin to the Oxford and Blackwell’s anthologies. Both collections attest to the breadth, depth, and sophistication of the scholarship, and to the bright future for the study of Greek and Roman sport. *Kudos* and olive wreaths to the editors for their *arete.* By reprinting significant contributions from previous decades, Scanlon’s Oxford volumes also enable us to relive the scholarly journey.

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University of Maryland