

CLAS 00210

Sport in the Ancient Greek World



Class 34

Wednesday 21 April

Dissenting Voices:
Ancient Critics of
Athletes and the Games



A.D. 67: the emperor **Nero**'s madcap trip to Greece.
All festivals rescheduled to allow him to "win" 1,808
"victories"

Read the biographer **Suetonius**'s account
Arete # 203

Remember...

A.D. 2: the emperor **Augustus** established a new “Italic, Roman, Augustan, IsOlympic” festival with athletic games at Naples

A.D. 86: the emperor **Domitian** sets up the quadrennial (4-yearly) **Capitoline Games** in Rome itself.

This became part of an **enlarged 7-game circuit** (the periodos of panhellenic games, plus

- the Capitoline Games
- the games of Hera at Argos
- the Actian Games (celebrating Augustus’s naval victory in 31 B.C.)

What did the historian Tacitus think of all this?

“Traditional morals, already gradually deteriorating, have been utterly ruined by this imported lasciviousness.

It makes everything potentially corrupting and corruptible flow into the capital, Rome — foreign influences demoralize our young men into shirkers, gymnasts, and perverts.”

But was Tacitus’s attitude typical of his times?

No!

See **Dio Chrysostom** (writing ca. 100 A.D.)
Arete #202

Funeral speech for the famous boxer **Melancomas of Caria** (who died during training for the new Naples Games set up by Augustus)

Dio goes to great lengths to stress the virtues of athletes and of an athletic career...

...claiming that they are superior to the virtues of soldiers and the military life.

Moralizing attacks on athletes

Diogenes the Cynic:

To an athlete boasting he was the fastest in all Greece:
“Yes, but you’re not faster than a rabbit or a deer, and they — the swiftest of animals — are also the most cowardly.”

Aesop:

To a boastful winner of one of the “heavy” events:

Aesop: Was the man you defeated the stronger?

A: Don’t say that: my strength proved the greater.

Aesop: Well then, idiot, what honor have you earned, if you were the stronger man and you beat the weaker man? We might put up with you if you were telling us that by skill you overcame a man who was superior to you in bodily strength.”

Galen

(former gladiator and trainer; court doctor, ca. 180 A.D.)

On **Milo of Croton**:

“Big deal! How really stupid!! Didn’t Milo realize even this — that when the bull was alive, the animal’s mind held up its body with much less exertion than Milo had put out; and not only that, the bull could actually run around while it held itself upright. But the bull’s mind wasn’t worth anything... just about like the value of Milo’s brain!”

Themes running through these criticisms:

- the glorification of the athlete rests on a false evaluation of what is truly and properly human in man — i.e., on an exaggeration of certain bodily excellences at the expense of other things
- enthusiasm for professional victors in competitive games diverts attention from the real needs of the community (e.g., for disciplined soldiers)

The Roman poet **Juvenal** (ca. 65-130 A.D.):

*“Once you elected generals, heads of state,
commanders of legions;
Now you care only for bread and circuses [panem
et circenses]”*

The Greek poet and philosopher **Xenophanes**
(ca. 525 BC. — i.e., just before Pindar):

Arete # 229

The philosopher **Aristotle** (4th c. B.C.):

“The athlete’s habit of body neither produces a good condition for the general purposes of civic life, nor does it encourage ordinary health and the procreation of children...”

Some amount of exertion is essential for the best habit, but it must be neither violent nor specialized, as is the case with the athlete. It should rather be a general exertion, directed to all the activities of the free man.”

But some things were never criticized...

- the competitive spirit of the games
- the violence and brutality of the most popular events
- professionalization of the games
- Olympic victors profiting from their athletic prowess

Euripides (ca. 420 B.C.):

Arete #230