

athletics and philosophy in the ancient world

contests of virtue

Heather L. Reid



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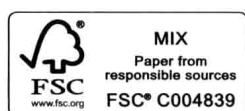
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Athletics and Philosophy in the Ancient World

This book examines the relationship between athletics and philosophy in ancient Greece and Rome focused on the connection between athleticism and virtue. It begins by observing that the link between athleticism and virtue is older than sport, reaching back to the athletic feats of kings and pharaohs in early Egypt and Mesopotamia. It then traces the role of athletics and the Olympic Games in transforming the idea of aristocracy as something acquired by birth to something that can be trained. This idea of training virtue through the techniques and practice of athletics is examined in relation to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Then Roman spectacles such as chariot racing and gladiator games are studied in light of the philosophy of Lucretius, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. The concluding chapter connects the book's ancient observations with contemporary issues such as the use of athletes as role models, the relationship between money and corruption, the relative worth of participation and spectatorship, and the role of females in sport.

The author argues that there is a strong link between sport and philosophy in the ancient world, calling them offspring of common parents: concern about virtue and the spirit of free enquiry.

This book was previously published as a special issue of *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*.

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**Athletics and Philosophy in the
Ancient World**

Contests of Virtue

Heather L. Reid

For Larry

PREFACE

This is a work of philosophy. I begin with that statement because my extensive use of historical and classical texts may cause confusion about this book's methods and goals. As a philosopher, I am comfortable making arguments and conjectures that might be anathema for historians and classicists. Foremost among these are my consistent and insistent comparisons between the ideas and practices of the ancient world and those of the modern day. I understand that there are good reasons to avoid such comparisons, in particular the tendency to reconstruct the ancient world in a way that serves modern tastes or political goals. Ancient sport has been a frequent victim of such treatment. The Greek Olympics have been falsely idealized to promote a class-based notion of amateurism. Roman gladiators have been falsely demonized to promote images of Christian martyrdom (gladiator contests and public executions of Christians who eschewed Roman religious laws were two different things). In this text, I interpret history and classical texts in such a way as to support my thesis of a meaningful connection between ancient sport and virtue that is relevant even today. But I have striven to do so in a way that respects not only historical context but also scholarly demands for evidence and logical consistency. In sum, I seek an understanding of what sport has been in order to construct a philosophical vision of what it may become.

This is also an interdisciplinary work. As a student-athlete I always valued the balanced opposition of divergent activities. As a scholar I try to maintain a variety of interests and approaches. I believe that academic silos interfere with academic goals when they act as barriers between mutually relevant subjects and methods. My official academic camp (i.e. the subject of my dissertation) is Plato's theory of education, but if I had confined my studies to his writings and the secondary philosophical literature, I would have arrived at much narrower, more impoverished and ultimately less socially relevant understanding of my subject. Instead, I have sought to complement my philosophical training with studies in sports history, ancient cultures, classical philology and even my personal experience as an athlete. I believe that these interdisciplinary excursions enhance the contribution I am able to make to each of fields I am involved in. Not only do I expect an appreciation of athletic competition to enrich our understanding of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, I expect the philosophical notion of virtue developed in those texts to improve our comprehension of the history of athletics. Finally, and perhaps most important, I hope that the interdisciplinary perspective offered in this book will inspire more holistic and open-minding thinking about the social limitations and possibilities of sport as we practice it today and tomorrow.

*Viterbo, Italy
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INTRODUCTION

Even in its most ancient form, sport is a human construction. Play may be natural, even common to humans and animals, but sport only has existed and only will exist as long as we choose to make it so. Even if the rules of an athletic game were literally written in stone, the sport itself would not exist until people got together and played it, and their actions would not have meaning until we thought about them within some framework of beliefs and values. Because sport depends upon human beings for its meaning and existence, we also have a special responsibility to ensure its social worth. If sport offers no benefit, or causes more harm than good to society, then we should change the way we practise it. If it cannot be reformed in a positive way, then we should abolish it. Most important, we should never regard sport as something beyond our collective control. Sport philosophy acts as the root of this responsibility. It strives to understand what sport is, and what it may become. And in order to do that, it must also understand what sport has been.

Why Study Ancient Philosophy and Sport ... Again?

At first glance, 'understanding what sport has been' seems like a goal more appropriate for historians, or perhaps one we sport philosophers have already achieved. Our philosophical training included ancient texts such as *The Apology of Socrates*, Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Ethics*. Our study of sport encompassed the ancient Olympic Games and the events of Rome's Colosseum. Why should we return to these subjects again, in such depth and detail, side by side, as they relate to one another? After all, the *real* object of our studies is the practice of sport today – to understand, to criticise and ultimately to make it better both for individuals and for the global community. To my knowledge, no other book has so closely examined the relationship between sport and philosophy in Greece and Rome between the eighth century BCE and the second century CE.¹ The relevance of such a project to sport philosophy's contemporary goals is therefore easily and deservedly questioned.²

My first response to the question is simply: perspective. As sport philosophers we are generally very close to our subject. We are often employed as professors and scholars of philosophy, and we generally are – or at least have been – athletes, coaches and fans. We are standing among the trees of a forest we are trying to understand as a whole. We need the *perspective* gained by distance. Looking back through the haze of history at ancient sport and philosophy is not unlike looking across the countryside towards a range of mountains in the distance. At first, they may look majestic, shining in the sun of idealism, but part of their majesty comes precisely from the fact that it is easy to overlook their flaws from afar.

To understand them better, and to uncover their relevance to the terrain we occupy now, we need to consult ancient texts, just as we would consult travellers returning from the range. And from this we must try to figure out, first of all, what it is about those mountains that makes them like our own; that is, we must recognise what ancient and modern sport have in common so we can come closer to some idea of sport's enduring characteristics. Next, we must recognise what makes ancient and modern sport

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different, so we may better fathom its personality and possibilities. And always, we must retain a critical distance, never assuming that what is ancient is better, what is modern is better, or what is shared by the ancient and modern worlds is somehow essential. Sport has been and remains a human construct – it is always within our collective power to change or even abolish it. What the perspective of distance offers us is space to think about how we can change sport for the better, based on an informed understanding of its history and philosophy.

Some scholars contend that our cultural inheritance from ancient Greece and Rome is so riddled with evils such as sexism, racism, elitism and violence that it is better tossed aside wholesale. This may be the case, but before we dismiss that heritage from the philosophical discussion table, we should at least try to understand *what* we're tossing aside (as much as possible) on its own terms. In addition, I believe that we should make an effort to be generous in our interpretation of the ancient world, treating it as we would a living dialectical partner – even one with whom we have serious disagreements – in the effort to improve our own understanding. As with any philosophical debate, our differences and disagreements with the past are likely to reveal flaws in our modern thinking. By studying not just the practice of sport in antiquity, but its relationship with ancient philosophy, our conversation is enriched by comparisons both of practice and critical perspective. My purpose in this text, therefore, is not to present the ancient world as some shining ideal of perfection. Neither do I assume any myth of progress under which modern sport is automatically assumed to be an improvement. What I am trying to do is to enable a foundational understanding of ancient sport and philosophy that makes a sincere dialogue with modern practices both possible and fruitful.

Athleticism and Aretē: From Aristocracy to Democracy

I think it is more than mere coincidence that athletics and philosophy both originate from a similar time and place. The two practices seem to be fraternal offspring of a distinctively Hellenic spirit of free inquiry combined with a serious concern about virtue and excellence, or what the Greeks called *aretē*. There is no understanding ancient sport or philosophy without understanding *aretē*, a concept that has no good translation or even a precise definition. We can say generally that *aretē* is the quality (or set of qualities) that makes a thing excellent, so the *aretē* of a sandal, for example, might be comfort and durability. The *aretē* of human beings, however, is certainly more complex and seems to differ according to historical context, cultural values, the task at hand and perhaps even gender and individual proclivity. Nevertheless *aretē* has this universal characteristic: it results in good actions. Accordingly, particular virtues such as courage, self-discipline, fairness and wisdom are common to nearly all conceptions of human excellence, whether we call them by the Greek name *aretē*, the Latin *virtus*, the English virtue or even the Chinese *de*.³ Understanding how and why conceptions of virtue change is as important as understanding the sense in which they stay the same.

What sport does to virtue in the period we examine is to transform it conceptually from an inborn quality, limited only to the established aristocracy, to something available through cultivation to individuals regardless of social status. Sport's ability to effect this transformation came about when the historical connection between athleticism and *aretē* confronted the emerging spirit of free inquiry in ancient Greece. Even before philosophy itself was born, athletic contests began to exhibit what I have called knowledge-seeking

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characteristics: authentic questioning, impartial testing and public demonstration of results (Reid 2009a). Because so many competitive truth-seeking activities persist today (scientific experiments, court trials, democratic elections, soccer tournaments), these characteristics may seem familiar and unsurprising to us. But they were new and even revolutionary in the ancient world, apparently developed in response to rising concern about the fallibility of human ideas and traditional political hierarchies. Since humans and their social structures remain fallible today, our study of philosophy and sport in antiquity may provide the perspective necessary to revive some of the social benefits of sport.

Homer

In Chapter 1 we discover that the use of athleticism as proof of virtue is a practice older even than sport itself. In early Egypt and Mesopotamia, long before Olympia's games or even Homer's Trojan Wars, kings and pharaohs used fables about great athletic feats and public demonstrations of athletic ability to confirm their royal worthiness and even their links to divinity. In general royal athleticism was left unchallenged and untested by others; presumably because there was not much doubt – or not much point in doubting – these leaders' worthiness to begin with. Such practices are reflected in Homer's *Iliad* when King Agamemnon is awarded first prize in the javelin contest without ever lifting a finger. A central theme of the epic up until that point, however, is serious doubt precisely about Agamemnon's worthiness to lead. Achilles, the godlike runner and the king's main rival, does not compete in the games either; instead he organises and conducts them, acting as a more judicious leader than Agamemnon has been. So here in Homer's *Iliad*, a document that expresses the foundational beliefs of Hellenic civilisation, we find both the gesture of leaving a king's excellence athletically untested, and a very serious challenge to his authority based in part upon the athletic excellence of an underling.

From the seeds of such doubt and questioning about *aretē* and authority, it is a small step to using athleticism as an actual test. Already in Homer's *Odyssey* we find athletic performances being used to prove the hero's nobility. When Odysseus washes up on the unfamiliar shores of Phaeacia, he is treated to a demonstration of the islanders' athletic skills. Odysseus stays out of the games until someone has the gall suggest that he is a lowly businessman rather than a noble, at which point he grabs a discus and proves his nobility beyond all doubt by tossing it well beyond the marks set by the locals. When Odysseus finally does return home, he is so physically decimated by his journey that no one but his dog recognises their legitimate ruler. It takes a boxing match and archery contest to overcome his subjects' doubt, prove the king's identity and re-establish his authority to rule. Homer's epics reflect Hellenic history in so far athletics address the doubt about virtue generated when encounters with diversity create competing claims to truth and authority. Later, at Olympia, the religious puzzle of who among the various tribes gathered there should have the honour of lighting the sacrificial flame came to be solved by a simple footrace from the edge of the sanctuary to the altar.⁴

The Olympic Games

The coming together of diverse people with competing claims to truth and virtue is hardly distinctively Hellenic; it reflects the challenges of multiculturalism and globalisation we face today. That is why appreciating the Hellenes' response to these challenges is so

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important and relevant. As Chapter 2 shows, it was at Olympia that the principles of open and impartial (con)testing seem to have taken root. Olympia was first and foremost a religious sanctuary dedicated to a wide variety of gods, and not to any particular city, state, or tribe. These conditions motivated the revolutionary decision to delegate the answering of an important religious question to a relatively open and impartial contest, rather than tradition, authority or violence. I say 'relatively open and impartial' because females, foreigners and slaves were excluded from Olympic contests, presumably from the start. But simply by expanding access to public recognition of *aretē* beyond the presumed elite, Olympia made the athletic success of marginalised groups possible, and thereby helped to subvert ancient assumptions about the link between virtue and class.

It was not long after the official founding of the Olympic Games in 776 BCE that the practice we now call philosophy emerged in Ionia as an approach to studying nature that has similar characteristics and similar results to competitive sport. A blossoming of trade brought unprecedented levels of intercultural contact in the area – contact that no doubt spawned doubts about traditional religious and mythological explanations for natural phenomena such as floods and rain. It was in this environment that the Pre-Socratic philosophers began to question the received wisdom and to develop more impartial and demonstrable methods for understanding the world – methods that bypassed worldly authority and social hierarchies. Because they shared this idea of the open and impartial test, both philosophy and Olympic-style sport proved subversive not only to the social hierarchy, but more generally towards reliance on dogmatic and relativistic standards for truth (i.e. those controlled by worldly rank and power). Impartial mechanisms for truth-seeking act to neutralise the effects of human fallibility and worldly bias, providing equal opportunity for diverse possibilities: athletes, ideas, even hypotheses.

Democracy

In tandem with athletics and philosophy, democracy's emergence from ancient Hellenic soil has roots in Olympia's revolution. Confidence in the veracity of contest results derived not just from the structure and administration of the contest, but most importantly from the fact that the gathered public personally observed the proceedings. Indeed the Greek word *agōn*, which refers to an athletic contest, originally indicated the gathering place where the event was observed – it shares a root with *agora*, the familiar term for a city's public market place. The selection of winners to be accorded public honour cannot help but be politically charged, especially in a place such as the ancient (or modern) Olympic Games where so many groups arrive believing their own representative best deserves that honour. It is easy to see how the secret or arbitrary selection of the honouree could lead to discord and even fighting. The public nature of the athletic contest, however, like the public nature of philosophical debate, shifted the authority in decision making towards the many (*hoi polloi*) and served, as Chapter 3 shows, as a foundation for the invention of democracy.

In ancient Greece, athletic games also motivated the setting aside of interpersonal and inter-tribal conflicts in order to unite for a larger cause. We see this in Homer's *Iliad*, when the Achaeans finally unite and defeat the Trojans. And we see it in history, where the great athletic festivals are credited with uniting the Hellenic tribes against their common enemy, the Persians. Again, the religious context, especially the sacred truce (*ekecheiria*), which made safe travel possible, created a rare opportunity for diverse (and often warring)

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tribes to come together in peace. The practice of athletic nudity, furthermore, symbolically stripped competitors of their social and cultural categories. And (presumably clothed) intellectuals exchanged ideas on neutral ground just as boxers exchanged blows. The sense of equality and the cooperation expressed in the games paved the way for economic and political cooperation without subjection to a single authority. Most important, though, these gatherings fostered a democratic spirit in which people rather than kings were ultimately responsible for decisions.

Sport as Training for Virtue in Classical Greek Philosophy

In addition to philosophy, democracy and the Olympic Games, one of our most cherished inheritances from ancient Greece is the use of athletic training in education as a means of building moral character. Long before Greece's classical apotheosis in the fifth century BCE, athletics had become a traditional part of Hellenic education. Given athleticism's deep historical links with *aretē*, it is likely that gymnastic education was intended in part to develop – or at least reveal – virtue. Along with Mike McNamee (2006, 185), however, I must express very little confidence in the idea that 'somehow, magically, the very playing of sports would inculcate in its practitioners moral qualities we think of as virtues'. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle seem to have had similar doubts, judging from their infiltration of Athens's gymnasia in the explicit effort to educate the youth for virtue.

Looking back, we may imagine these philosophers bringing academic studies to places designed for physical exercise, thereby complementing the training of the body with training for the mind. But we would be overlooking (at least) two important factors on that interpretation. First, the very word 'academics' derives from the gymnasium frequented by Socrates and Plato, Athens's Academy. Academic education grew up and out of the gymnasium; it was not introduced as the kind of foreign element we might imagine it to be today. Second, the educational divide between body and mind that underpins that first dichotomy would not have been made by the ancient Greeks. It is perhaps an unfortunate legacy of terms such as 'physical education' that we imagine gymnastic and athletic education as training for the body alone. Greeks distinguished between body and mind, but the body (*sōma*) was to them essentially inanimate. Intentional physical movement was therefore a product and expression of the *psychē*, the part of the person that encompasses what we now call the mind, soul, spirit, emotion, even appetites. The corresponding Latin term, *anima*, may help us to see the connection better: it is the soul that *animates* the material body. The philosophers went to the gymnasia in order to train souls for virtue, and their methods both reflected and included athletic activities.

Socrates

It appears to have been the notoriously ugly Socrates who most deftly adapted tricks of the athletic trade to turn young men's souls away from victory and towards virtue. When the conventionally beautiful Alcibiades, bedecked with the ribbons (*tainiai*) awarded to athletic victors, crashes a party at which Socrates is present, he asks to tie the ribbons around Socrates' head (Plato, *Symposium* 212c–213e). The ironic implication that Socrates is the real athlete continues as Alcibiades goes on to praise the philosopher's amazing beauty – that is, the beauty of his soul. Socrates replies that his own beauty really would transcend that of Alcibiades if he had the power to make the champion into a better man

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(ibid., 218e). This moment, poignant because it seems that Socrates has failed that wish, explains Socrates' educational project, which, as we shall see in Chapter 4, not only takes place in athletes' hangouts, but also employs their methods. A close examination of Socratic dialogues reveals both the competitive nature of his method, called *elenchos* from the word for the inflicting of shame, and how *agōn* (contest) can be put in the service of higher educational goals.

Socratic competition is directed not at victory, but at the higher goals of virtue, wisdom and truth. Of course this quest sometimes includes shaming and defeating those who would thwart it, and it was this that led to Socrates' trial for corrupting the youth. By publicly exposing local wise men's ignorance, he saw himself as serving the god, and indeed compared his 'labours' to those of the athletic Heracles (Latin: Hercules), who liberated the Greeks from tyrants and pests (Plato, *Apology* 22a). But the Socratic *agōn* also had the explicitly educational function of motivating Athenian youths (and later the readers of Plato's dialogues) to enquire after the truth for themselves rather than blindly following authority or paying sophists for empty answers. In this sense Socratic questioning is a community service and he says the city should reward him for it as it does Olympic victors, since champions only make the city *think* itself happier, whereas Socrates offers them a chance at true happiness (ibid., 36e). It is instructive that a Socratic athlete values struggle and even losing, just as philosophers value the challenge and even refutation of our arguments. A 'winning is the only thing' mentality destroys the educational potential of sport.

Plato

Plato did more than hang out in Athens' gymnasias, he actually set up a philosophical school in one. How education in Plato's Academy differed from traditional Greek gymnasias is the subject of Chapter 5. In the utopian vision of *Republic*, Plato used athletics as part of the guardians' education explicitly for the purpose of selecting and developing souls capable of forgoing personal pleasures, studying philosophy and, eventually, becoming leaders (Reid 2007). He seems to have believed that athletics can promote *aretē*, which he describes as harmony among the intellectual, spirited and appetitive parts of the soul, because sport requires the intellect to apprehend the rules of the game and then to recruit the spirit and appetite to its cause. Plato's real-life gymnasium, however, did not exist in the utopian *kallipolis* but rather in democratic Athens. An aristocrat by heritage, Plato was critical of democracy, but he did believe that *aretē* was a matter of training rather than birth, and that training citizens for virtue is the best way to ensure good democratic government. The methods used to cultivate *aretē* in Plato's Academy probably reflected the customary values of the gymnasium: military preparedness, athletic beauty (*kalokagathia*), even erotic partnerships.

The Academy no doubt remained a place for gymnastic training under Plato, but the focus of *kalokagathia* (being beautiful and good) shifted from the body to the soul. Military training, too, probably focused on cultivating virtues such as courage and wisdom rather than mere weapons skills. And educational pederasty was exchanged for chaste partnerships that directed erotic desire away from the body and towards ideals such as wisdom. Plato's emphasis on the soul also prompted the inclusion of females, both in the utopian *Republic* and the real-world Academy. It is likely, of course, that Plato added philosophical dialogue and maybe even lectures to the existing gymnastic curriculum at the academy. But it is unlikely that he reduced or eliminated the gymnastic training and

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athletic games traditionally associated with that place. Sport is made educational by its ends, not simply its practice, and Plato adapted sport quite explicitly to the end of *aretē*.

Aristotle

Aristotle, too, set up his school in a gymnasium, specifically the Lyceum. In contrast with his philosophic predecessors, though, Aristotle is often viewed as indifferent or even hostile towards athletics. Chapter 6 argues that this was not the case. To be sure, Aristotle criticises cities who 'brutalise' their youth by subjecting them to harsh athletic training (*Politics* 1139ab), but this does not entail that he rejected gymnastic exercises or even moderate competition. Aristotle praised the beauty of pentathletes because it reflected his own ethical theory. The main source of athletic beauty is, of course, training, and habituation (*ethos*) is the primary form of moral education in Aristotle. The balance and moderation evident in pentathletes' well-proportioned frames are likewise central to Aristotle's conception of *aretē*. His famous 'doctrine of the mean' imagines the virtuous person aiming her intention, like an archer, at a midpoint between excess and deficiency. Individual virtues are also described as means; courage, for example, is the midpoint between cowardice and rashness.

Furthermore the pentathlete's beauty is best expressed in action. Aristotle insisted that *aretē* was an activity and not a state; in fact he defined happiness as 'activity in accordance with virtue' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a). He specifies this as activity of the soul and envisions its highest form as a kind of undisturbed contemplation. Again, however, athletic activity is not excluded by these considerations – just removed from an unhealthy milieu characterised by excessive means and ignoble ends. Most important, Aristotle's explicit characterisation of *aretē* as something cultivated through training, expressed in activity and characterised by moderation, represents an about-face from the pre-Olympic idea of virtue as something inherited by blood that needs neither training nor testing. Sport became a form of education in ancient Greece because athleticism had always been linked to virtue; Olympic-style sport showed that athleticism could be trained; and the rational conclusion was that virtue could be cultivated. Classical Greek philosophy, aimed primarily at virtue, found fertile soil in Athens's gymnasias.

Learning from Watching Ancient Roman Spectacles

The political implications of the idea that virtue was available through training were, as we have seen, enormous. But just as democratised sport found a way to challenge the social hierarchy in Greece, the social hierarchy in Rome found a way to turn sport back towards its political purposes. The city of Rome was very large and culturally diverse, drawing citizens from every corner of a vast empire. The challenge was not, as it had been in Greece, to emphasise widespread participation and reward individual excellence; rather it was to unite the motley group under the charismatic leadership of the emperor. This was not accomplished by the emperor, or any other government leaders, demonstrating their worthiness through sport. Roman athletes occupied the opposite end of the social spectrum: they were mostly foreigners, prisoners, slaves, even criminals. The virtue they displayed was explicitly subject to the emperor's command, and in this way the spectacle reinforced the social hierarchy. Philosophical spectators saw through the charade, however, and found in Rome's *ludi* insight and inspiration for their own pursuit of virtue.