The magic of Olympic fame

Flashbacks to the history of the Games

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### Contents

Preface by André Bolhuis .......................... 5  
Atlanta 1996 ........................................ 7  

**Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg**  
Olympic Games between 393 en 1896 .......... 9  
International or Olympic? ...................... 15  

**Geralda Jurriaans-Helle**  
The torch and Olympic fire ....................... 21  

**H.W. Pleket**  
The reward of the Olympic athlete ............ 27  

**Marije Bosman**  
The Olympic stadium ............................. 31  

**Thomas van Maaren**  
Apite: Go ........................................ 37  

**Karin Rikkers**  
Equestrian events ................................ 41  

**J.J.V.M. Derksen**  
Wrestling, boxing and the pankration ......... 47  

**Thomas van Maaren**  
The two throwing events ....................... 53  

**J.J.V.M. Derksen**  
The Olympic Pentathlon ........................ 59  

**Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg**  
The marathon: in the tracks of a legend ...... 65  

**H.T. Wallinga**  
Competitive rowing is no sport ............... 73  

**Guido van Dongen**  
Records and eternal fame ....................... 77  

**S. Wiersma**  
Blest is the one on whom praises shower ...... 81  

**H.W. Pleket**  
The social status of Greek athletes .......... 87  

**H.F.J. Horstmanshoff**  
Exertion and pain ................................ 91
Exertion and pain

Sport, medicine and physiotherapy

Medicine is an integral part of modern sport. Doctors counsel professionals and amateurs, doctors recommend sport as a way of promoting health, but on the other hand a lot of sick leave is due to sports injuries. Physiotherapy plays an important role in modern sports. What was the situation in antiquity?

The idea that health is the result of a balance between the humours or bodily fluids (ill. 1), and that disruption of that balance causes illness, is the foundation of ancient medicine. How people live and behave affects their health. The precise origin of this doctrine is still unclear, but it was fully developed by the time of Hippokrates, the father of Greek medicine (late fifth century BC), and was to continue to dominate medicine until late in the nineteenth century AD. Dietetics (the Greek diaita can be roughly translated as ‘lifestyle’) was not confined to nutrition, but extended to sleep, sexuality, movement, and the patient’s whole life-style. So physicians concerned themselves with the exercise of sport and trainers developed medical theories: the start of a prolonged rivalry.

The earliest mention of the connection between sport and medicine goes back to 668 BC. The Spartan Charmis, who won the 200 metre sprint in the Olympic Games held in that year, followed a special diet of dried figs. The long-distance runner Dromeus (the name means ‘runner’) is said to have been the first to substitute a diet of meat for the traditional cheese diet. It worked, because he won twice at the Olympic Games (in 484 and 480 BC). The athlete Ikkos of Tarente (mid-fifth century BC) had a clear answer to the question of whether sex and top-level sport were compatible. He had never had contact with a boy or woman
throughout his career, and he was moderate in his consumption of food and drink. ‘Ilkos’ meal’ became proverbial.

III. 1: Scheme of the four elements.

Herodikos of Selymbria (fifth century BC) connected medicine with gymnastics, though not everyone approved of his methods. ‘Herodikos has killed fever patients by making them run, wrestle and take steam baths’, Hippokrates declares. In the words of an anonymous Greek medical author: ‘Herodikos of Selymbria believes that illness is caused by how one lives. It is natural if it includes a moderate degree of exertion and pain and if food is digested accordingly.’

The influence of the physicians could be seen in the place where wrestling was done (the palaistra). For instance, Hippokrates recommends the use of oil during training in the winter because it does not draw heat from the body, while sand is preferable in the summer because of its cooling effect. Sand and oil had to be scraped off after training with a strigil. The body was then rinsed with cold water and a sponge and rubbed with aromatic oils.

Large numbers of medical and paramedical professionals were to be found in and near the stadion, where races were held, and the palaistra, where contact sports were practised.
An inscription from the third century AD indicates that an athletics association in a city in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) employed its own sports physician. The main task of doctors was to treat injuries; caring for fit athletes was left to the trainers.

The oldest word for a trainer or coach is paidotribes, from pais (boy) and tribein (rub), referring to massaging with oil. However, perhaps tribein simply means ‘train’. Another word is gymnastes (‘training master’), a function often performed by retired athletes whose age forced them to withdraw from active competitive sports. The gymnastes and the paidotribes represented the theoretical and practical sides respectively. The aleiptes, ‘anointer’, knew the physical condition of his pupils and how he could improve their muscular development with massage.

According to Galen (second century AD), it was not all these trainers and masseurs but the physicians who were the real teachers of gymnastics. Galen spares himself no pains to elevate the status of his own profession, medicine, in his many works. One of his writings is entitled: The best physician is also a philosopher — Galen’s own motto. However, Galen’s enormous erudition was exceptional among physicians. In general the medical knowledge of trainers, dieticians and masseurs will not have differed appreciably from that of physicians in antiquity.

Galen was a sports physician. He was associated with the gladiatorial school of the city of Pergamum (present-day Bergama in northwest Turkey). He was responsible for the health of the gladiators, who fought to the death in the arena. He kept an eye on their daily diet, advised on their training, and patched them up when they were wounded. In the process, he took advantage of their terrible injuries to improve his anatomical knowledge. His writings contain extended reports of his successes.
In his theoretical writings, however, Galen is anything but positive about sport. He views professional sport as an activity for the uncivilised. People deserve praise for their intellectual and moral feats, not because they happen to be good at discus-throwing. Galen continued a long-standing tradition of philosophical criticism of sport which goes back at least to the sixth century BC. Athletes, 'enslaved to their appetites', have no part in the riches of the spirit. Their physical well-being is damaged by the excessive training and eating. Their peak condition is inflated and immediately collapses once they stop training — reminiscent of the world of anabolic steroids and other pep pills.

The only exception that Galen considers suitable for a sensible person is 'the game with the small ball', on which he wrote a separate treatise. It does not involve any rough play and it promotes the ability to react (ill. 2). Overindulgence in sport is detrimental to health.

As a physician, Galen did not consider himself above devoting his medical skills to the gladiators in his care. As a philosopher, however, he felt them to be beneath his
dignity. In this he was simply representing the traditional point of view of the intellectual elite.

H.F.J. HORSTMANSHOFF