Sport and Society in Ancient Greece


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Golden’s work is designed to satisfy the pressing need for an up-to-date introduction to the history of Greek athletics. His approach to this subject differs greatly from that of the long-standard handbooks by Gardiner and Harris, both of whom were interested mainly in technical issues such as how the discus was thrown or how the starting gates for chariot races worked. In contrast, Golden focuses on the role that athletics played in Greek society, and he touches on the issues that interested Gardiner and Harris only when they have a bearing on his primary subject. Ultimately, because they have such different aims, Golden’s book must stand as a companion to, rather than a replacement for, the older surveys.

Golden begins by arguing that earlier theories about the connection between athletics and religion or warfare do not adequately explain why the Greeks made athletics an essential feature of their society. He then introduces his own view that Greek athletics represented an area where “the discourse of difference” could take place. In other words, aristocrats and other elements in Greek society used athletics as a means of asserting their relative superiority. Neither his rejection of earlier theories nor his own position is going to win the day with all historians of ancient sports. However, his theory is helpful in explaining some features of Greek athletics that have not been well treated in the past. For example, he makes a strong argument that equestrian events were added to the Olympic program at various dates as older and wealthier Greeks sought ways to be honored that were not open to younger or lower-class athletes.

Chapter 2 comprises a survey of the types of evidence available for the history of Greek sports and is a great improvement over Harris (Gardiner avoided the question). Yet, given his audience, Golden could have said even more about how historians of ancient sports deal with evidence that covers twelve centuries and is so varied in character. One of Golden’s strengths is his command of the evidence, and the general reader may be baffled by his arguments that often turn on the subtle differences between various sources. For example, at the end of chapter 2, Golden shows that, although virtually every textbook on Greek history states that the Olympics began in 776 BC, there was no consensus in antiquity about when the
Olympics were founded. The significance of this may not be readily apparent to the non-specialist. If the Olympics were founded in 776, then for over a century the Olympics included only athletic competitions, and the addition of the equestrian competitions favored by the super-wealthy could be seen by some elements of Greek society as having diluted the purity of the games.

While nominally a victor in the Olympics and other major games received only a wreath as a prize, in actuality the honors bestowed on successful athletes and equestrian victors rivaled those granted the gods. In chapter 3, Golden looks at how some of these honors were developed to promote the interests of different elements of society. In particular, epinician (victory) poetry was created to glorify the accomplishments of aristocrats (or those who wished to be considered aristocrats), but this distinctive form of poetry died out relatively quickly when aristocrats turned to other means of marking their accomplishments.

Golden next applies the concept of "the discourse of difference" to issues that may be of greatest interest to the general reader, such as why the Greeks developed age classes but not weight classes. Golden's interpretation is that the creation of a separate category for boys prevented the socially unacceptable situation of a young man defeating his father or someone of his father's generation and social status. In another application of his theory, chariot racing and other equestrian events must be seen as having been specifically designed so that the elite could continue to win prestige for themselves long after they were able to be successful as athletes. The last issue treated in this chapter involves whether women competed in athletic events in antiquity. Golden reviews the current evidence and accepts the fairly standard position that women did compete, but only at separate festivals and in shorter races. His interpretation, however, is somewhat novel. Competition by women is not a sign that Greek women lived a freer life than historians have sometimes supposed. Rather, the superiority of male athletes (i.e., their different position in society) was affirmed by the fact that women did not compete with men and that events for women were scaled down to match their abilities (a situation which, as Golden notes, is still generally true for the modern Olympics).

Finally, Golden considers the social status of athletes, a subject poorly treated by Gardiner and Harris because of their bias towards upper-class amateur athletics. Here Golden sides with those scholars who have argued that the cash prizes awarded in less important festivals and free access to gymasia did not enable poor athletes to gain a start on a career in athletics. The issue is complex but one should note that aspiring athletes may have received more help over time as the number of festivals increased and cities were more willing to support training facilities for their athletes. To get at how Greeks regarded the cash prizes earned by athletes, Golden looks at Heracles, the god most associated with athletes and whose labors were called athloi, "contests." The Greeks were generally not sympathetic