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Mark Golden
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SPORT AND SOCIETY IN ANCIENT GREECE

This book provides a concise and readable introduction to ancient Greek sport. It covers such standard topics as the links between sport, religion and warfare, the origins and history of the Olympic games, and the spirit of competition among the Greeks. Its main focus, however, is on Greek sport as an arena for the creation and expression of difference among individuals and groups. Sport not only identified winners and losers. It also drew boundaries between groups (Greeks and barbarians, boys and men, males and females) and offered a field for debate on the relative worth of athletic and equestrian competition. The book includes guides to the ancient evidence and to modern scholarship on the subject.

Mark Golden is Professor of Classics in the University of Winnipeg. He is the author of *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens* (1990), and, with Peter Toohey, edited *Inventing Ancient Culture: Historicism, Periodization and the Ancient World* (1997).

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Preface

This book stems from my teaching. The last fifteen years have witnessed an extraordinary upsurge of interest in Greek sport. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the appearance of the journal *Nikephoros*, devoted to ancient sport, and by the availability of no fewer than three collections of ancient literary sources on the subject in English translation (see the Bibliographical Essay). We may also point (among books in English only) to publications on the origin of Greek sport, its Near Eastern antecedents, its early cult environment, on important competitive festivals such as the Olympics and Panathenaea, on athletics at Athens, on combat sports, on the ideology of amateurism in ancient and modern sport. Yet there is no up-to-date survey of the place of sport in ancient Greek society. I myself order books by E.N. Gardiner and H.A. Harris for my students. But these, though informative and well illustrated, are inevitably misleading on many points of detail, especially those illuminated by ongoing archaeological investigations; and they are embarrassingly out of step with contemporary attitudes in respect to gender, social class and ethnicity. I hope that this book will go some way towards replacing them. It is meant to be accessible to classicists and ancient historians with no expertise in sport, to sport historians who know nothing of the ancient world, to those who watch and compete in events like the Greeks' and in events they never dreamed of. It may be within the considerable reach of Shaquille O'Neal. (Asked whether he had visited the Parthenon during a visit to Greece, the American basketball star responded, 'I can't really remember all the clubs we went to.') I have therefore translated all the Greek and Latin quotations from ancient sources; these translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. I also hope, however,

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that there is something here for specialists too, both in the overall approach I take and in its application to particular issues.¹

This is *an* introduction to the study of ancient Greek sport and society; it is not the only one possible. It reflects my own priorities as a teacher: identifying different approaches, encouraging critical use of evidence, tracing sport's links with attitudes and realities within Greek culture as a whole. So, while I have aimed to include most of the information I consider essential to an account of ancient Greek sport, I have not always presented it in predictable ways. For example, I have not provided a survey of the individual events most commonly included in competitive festivals or of the ways in which they were conducted – a feature of most introductions and source-books. However, a list of the events on the Olympic programme plays a part in an examination of the competing claims to pre-eminence of equestrian and athletic competition; and I review debates on the nature of the Greek jump and on the scoring of the pentathlon in order to explore problems posed by the nature of our evidence and the consequences which our solutions may entail for our ideas about the Greeks. The index, which does double duty as a glossary of terms, should reduce any inconvenience arising from this strategy.

The first chapter outlines some current ways of seeing sport and evaluates their applicability to ancient Greece. After an investigation of three traditional topics still current today – sport and religion, sport and warfare, the competitive culture of the Greeks and its relationship to nearby nations – I turn to the approach which gives this book its thematic unity. I argue that Greek sport is implicated in what I call a discourse of difference. It served to express and maintain distinctions between groups of many kinds (peoples, social classes, genders, ages) as well as between individuals. It also afforded a field for the Greek predilection to establish and dispute hierarchies (as among festivals and events). I end the chapter with a demonstration of this understanding of Greek sport in action, examining the motives for the real and imagined introduction of events at Olympia. In the second chapter, I detour to survey our sources of evidence and the challenges they impose; here the discussion proceeds by case studies – of athletic nudity and the date of the first

¹ O'Neal: this book might also interest the baseball player Ben Oglivie, 'probably the first home run champion since Lou Gehrig to carry around a volume of Plutarch' (Okrent and Wulf 1989:334–5).

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Olympics as well as the jump and the pentathlon. Chapter 3 returns to the discourse of difference *via* consideration of some consequences of victory and its representation in literature and art; the emphasis is on the praise poetry of Simonides, Pindar, Bacchylides and on the depiction of Orestes as a winner – and a loser – in Greek tragedy. Chapter 4 takes up gender and age. Women’s success in equestrian competition against men might be used to demean such claims to distinction; their participation in athletics, though always (or nearly so) apart from men, revealed them nevertheless as inferior. As for age, horse-racing was generally the preserve of older owners, a means to prolong competition for the rich and increase their access to its rewards. This connection of wealth and equestrian competition crops up again in Chapter 5, on social class. Here I set out from reflections on the privileged position of the crown games in aristocratic ideology (as revealed through the myth of Heracles) to explore hostility to the athletic and equestrian elite in democratic Athens. A brief conclusion and a bibliographical essay on further reading round the book off.

Two preliminary cautions are in order. First, I refer to Greek *sport* and the Olympic (and other) *games*. Carrying as they do connotations of leisure and amusement, these terms are quite inappropriate (cf. Young 1984:171–6). Athletic and equestrian competition was serious business for the Greek: *agōn* (plural *agones*), the common word for contest, is the root of our ‘agony’. I was puzzled as a student that my Ottawa high school had an English motto even though it taught five years of Latin. Now I realize that ‘Play the game’ is one of those modern ideas for which it is hard to find a Greek or Latin tag; the ideal of the ‘good sport’, while not utterly unknown, did not predominate among the Greeks. ‘Nice guys finish last’, ‘Winning isn’t the main thing, it’s the only thing’, ‘Show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser’ – these are slogans closer to the spirit of Greek sport. I use ‘sport’ and ‘games’ because the words have become established in this connection, and to avoid the awkwardness of ‘athletic and equestrian competition’. This prompts my second warning. In confining my study to such contests alone, I omit other important areas of competition, the cultural *agones*, for musicians, singers, reciters of Homer and others, that shared the stage with them at many festivals and may even have overshadowed them at celebrations as significant as the Pythian games at Delphi. In part, this is because Greek writers too tended to group together athletic

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and equestrian events, in part because cultural competitions (for trumpeters and heralds) were late and of relatively little moment at Olympia, the most important festival of all (Crowther 1994b). But I must confess that I have let my own interests – especially in the rivalry between athletic and horse-racing – prevail over the temptation to write a comprehensive account of competition in ancient Greece, an ambition in any case doomed to failure in such a short book.²

It is pleasant to pass from my own shortcomings to those people who have done so much to make up for them. This book is dedicated to my students and co-workers at the University of Winnipeg, a pleasant and productive home away from home for the past fifteen years. Students have sometimes been guinea pigs, rarely parrots; on the contrary, much of the discussion of religion in Chapter 1 is indebted to the Honours thesis of Mark Matz, now a Rhodes Scholar at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. My colleagues in the Department of Classics (Jane Cahill, Craig Cooper, Bob Gold, Lou Lépine, Iain McDougall) have provided models of commitment and competence. Allison Sproul Dixon and her associates in the Inter-lending Department of the university library have worked tirelessly to decipher loan requests and still possessed energy enough to obtain the research materials I needed. What they could not find I was usually able to inspect on site due to the support of the office of the Associate Vice-President for Research and the members of the university's Research and Travel Committee.

I also owe thanks elsewhere. My editor, Paul Cartledge, commented on each chapter as it emerged; his own scholarship inspired me at the same time as his vigour put me to shame. Peter Garnsey, the co-editor of this series, urged readability with a clarity I can only hope to emulate. Don Kyle (my predecessor at Winnipeg) and Mac Wallace, friend and wise advisor for thirty years, read the whole typescript in draft; David Depew and Nancy Felson (-Rubin) commented on individual chapters. I am grateful for assistance of various kinds to Tim Barnes, Glenn Bugh, Douglas Cairns, Nigel Crowther, Richard Hamilton, Steve Hodgkinson, Sandra Kirby, Hugh Lee, Harold Mattingly, Kathryn Morgan, Pauline Ripat, Jim Roy, Alan Sommerstein, Peter Toohey, Liz Warman, Ingomar

² Athletic and equestrian events: *gumnikoi kai hippikoi agones* (c.g. Hdt. 1.167, 6.38, 8.26, Xen. *Oec.* 7.9, Pl. *Resp.* 3.412b, [Dem.] 60.13).

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Weiler. The Department of Classics, University of Toronto, provided me with an office, technical help and the best of company for the first half of the sabbatical year in which this project began. During the second half, I enjoyed the fellowship of Clare Hall, Cambridge and had the run of the resources of the library of the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge University. ('Greek sport', observed one of the locals, a specialist in Latin literary criticism, as I dusted off a copy of Moretti's list of Olympic victors. 'That's not very fashionable.') I was lucky enough to finish the book as a Summer Scholar at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington DC. To all these institutions, thanks for hospitality and help. I gratefully acknowledge the permission of *Aethlon* (formerly *Arete*): *The Journal of Sport Literature* to revise material originally published as 'Sport and wage-labour in the Heracles myth' (*Arete* 3.2 (1986) 145–58) for use in Chapter 5. My last debt is the oldest, to friends who played and talked sport with me before my interest became academic: Mike Beck, Bruce Burron, the late Paul Hoch, Bob Kellermann, Charlie Novogrodsky, Dave Whitson.

The focus of this book is on the classical period, roughly the fifth and fourth centuries before the current era. However, since I prefer to stress continuity within the ancient Greek world rather than change, the discussion frequently touches on events, institutions and evidence from periods before and after. Readers with a taste for paradox will note that this book about difference stresses similarities over time. On the other hand, the play of difference, itself a constant, might lead to innovations in some important areas, and I discuss these as circumstances require. Ancient dates without explicit indication of their era (as CE) are BCE. For ancient authors and works, I use the abbreviations of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* or of H.G. Liddell, R. Scott and H. Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (LSJ). Abbreviations of periodical titles follow *L'année philologique*.