

CHAPTER I

Ways of seeing Greek sport

Sometime early in 400 BCE, the remnants of the '10,000', Greek mercenaries who had served under the Persian pretender Cyrus, reached Trapezus on the Black Sea. What happened next is recounted by one of their leaders, Xenophon, in his *Anabasis* (4.8.25–8). In the commentary which follows, I try to maintain a balance between historiographical and literary approaches, assuming that Xenophon reports events reliably while shaping the narrative for purposes of his own (cf. Moles 1994:70); the dialectic of fact and representation is made more complex in this instance by Xenophon's position of influence, which may have allowed him to pattern what actually occurred as well:

After this they set to preparing the sacrifice they had promised; they had enough oxen to sacrifice to Zeus in thanks for their salvation and to Heracles for his guidance as well as to conduct the sacrifices they had vowed to the other gods. They also held an athletic competition right on the mountain where they were camping. To see to the track and to preside over the competition they chose Dracontius, a Spartan who had been exiled from his home as a boy for accidentally killing another boy he had stabbed with a knife. After the sacrifice, they handed the hides of the slaughtered animals to Dracontius and began to encourage him to show them where he had made the track. He pointed to where they were in fact standing. 'This crest', he said, 'is a very good place to run wherever you please.' 'But how can men wrestle on ground as hard and overgrown as this?' they asked. 'The one who is thrown will get hurt a little more,' came the response. Boys – most of them from among the prisoners – competed in the sprint, more than sixty Cretans in the long race, others in wrestling, boxing, and *pankration* . . . ; it was good to see. For many entered the events and, since the female camp-followers were watching, there was a great deal of rivalry. There were horse races too. The riders had to drive the horses down the steep slope, turn them around in the sea and then lead them back to the altar. Many rolled down, and on the way up the slope was so steep

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that the horses proceeded only with difficulty at a walk. There was a lot of shouting and laughter and cheering.

There is more involved here than simply rest and recreation. Trapezus is the first Greek city the '10,000' have reached on their long and dangerous trek, and they celebrate in prototypically Greek fashion, recalling as they do an earlier competition, for Lycaean Zeus, at the expedition's outset (*Xen. An.* 1.2.10). Sacrifice is the central act in Greek religious observance, athletic and equestrian competition a mainstay of Greek male culture; it has recently been argued that the combination lies at the core of Greek sport – an idea to which I will return below (Sansone 1988). And yet this is a very unusual competition. Captives, slave booty, run against free Greeks. Cretans run alone. While some of the events familiar from Olympia and the other great festivals are included, others are not (unless they have dropped out of the text after the *pankration*), notably those which distinguish the pentathlon: the long jump, discus and javelin throw. This is all the more surprising in that soldiers on active duty might be expected to demonstrate their prowess with the javelin at least as a weapon of war. Oddest of all, perhaps, is the horse race. In one direction, it involves a laborious climb towards the altar. In the other, however, horses and riders run or roll downhill, like barbarian Persians or Odrysians instead of Greeks (*Xen. Eq.* 8.6); and their inevitable missteps call forth cheers and merriment. Compare this to the accounts of other equestrian accidents in some other literary texts, especially to the chariot disasters of tragedy, in which Hippolytus and the imaginary Orestes crash to the horror of their onlookers and the sorrow of all who hear.

Is this, then, a kind of comic travesty of an athletic competition, Xenophon's deadpan way of making us share the relief of his fun-loving fellows and also, it may be, of suggesting that their time among the barbarians has made them, for now at least, less than Greek? The Cretans may occur to us here. Famous as runners from Orsilochus, fleet of foot (*Hom. Od.* 13.258–70), to Sotades, twice Olympic champion in Xenophon's own lifetime (Moretti 1957: nos. 390, 398), they were no less well known as archers, the role they played in Cyrus's army (e.g., *An.* 1.2.9); their ability to fight from afar and lightly encumbered was ridiculed as well as respected, and their speed earns them a rather undignified special detail in a fake ambush a little later on (*An.* 5.2.29–32). And certainly comedy offers an approach to the figure of Dracontius, whose choice of a

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track is less considered, as well as less comfortable, than his colleagues had in mind. That's what you get when your organizer is not only a Spartan, a breed thought to be thick as well as tough, but a man polluted by bloodshed, accidental bloodshed at that – the Spartan who couldn't stab straight. This is an attractive reading, but I think a misleading one. The hides, presumably to be distributed as prizes, recall a famous passage of the *Iliad*, Achilles' pursuit of Hector: 'It was no sacrificial beast or oxhide they strove to win – the usual prizes that men gain in a foot-race; rather, they were running for the life of Hector, tamer of horses' (Hom. *Il.* 22.159–61). Dracontius' role is Achilles' of course, reintegrated into his equally temporary community to preside over the funeral games for Patroclus in *Iliad* 23; but there is something of Patroclus about Dracontius too, the Patroclus who accidentally killed a playmate as a boy in Opus and had to flee to Thessaly and exile (*Il.* 23.83–90). These Homeric echoes persuade me that Xenophon's tone is not altogether mocking after all. But that is not to deny something subversive in the spectacle.

Let us consider again the competition among boys. Nigel Crowther has recently suggested that slaves could compete in the Athenian Panathenaea (Crowther 1992c). This is hardly plausible, given the law (ascribed to Solon) which forbade slaves even to oil themselves let alone compete in Athenian palaestras, and is anyway not a necessary inference from the text Crowther adduces in its support (cf. Kyle 1992: 208 n. 127). The Demosthenic *Eroticus*, commenting on various distinctive marks of the *apobatēs* competition (probably at the Panathenaea), notes that 'in the other competitions (*athlematōn*), both slaves and foreigners take part (*metekhontas*), but the *apobatēs* contest is open only to citizens' ([Dem.] 61.23). Crowther takes this to indicate that 'slaves participated in all athletic events except the apobates' (37), but in fact the Greek need not imply this. The reference is most likely to the use of slave jockeys and charioteers in the equestrian events; these might well be said to 'take part' in competition, though there was no question of their winning prizes in their own right. The *apobatēs*, then, is unique among equestrian events. (Understandably, as it involved running as well as horsemanship.) Slaves were given access to gymnasia in some cities as early as the Hellenistic period, and a passage in Artemidorus's dream book may imply that they could compete in games with value prizes. But the only sure evidence for their competing against free Greeks (an inscription republished in Gardiner 1929) comes from an

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otherwise unusual local festival in Pisidia as late as the second century of the current era. This contributes to the shock – the intended effect – when Demosthenes describes Philip running the Pythian festival through slave managers of the games (Dem. 9.32).¹

So this competition at Trapezus is very remarkable indeed. Xenophon and his comrades have maintained one of the usual distinctions in Greek athletics, the categorization of competitors as boys and men, while forgoing another. We may speculate as to why one distinction was maintained and the other abandoned in these specific circumstances. Boys, after all, were non-combatants, so it may well have seemed appropriate to mark them out in soldiers' games as well. But warfare had a way of enslaving the free, often suddenly and arbitrarily: the distinction so important at Olympia and elsewhere, between freeborn Greeks and all others, may have appeared less clear-cut on campaign. Whatever the explanation, this eccentric and little noticed competition is yet another indication of how varied the world of athletic and equestrian competition really was in ancient Greece; however, it also points towards one of its main constants, the production of difference. This must sound simple-minded. After all, creating difference is something competition, concerned as it is to establish winners and losers, is bound to do. I have in mind something more far reaching: Greek sport was enveloped in a series of hierarchies in which events, festivals, genders, nations and other groups were ranged and ranked no less than individuals. As elsewhere, it could be a vehicle 'of identity, providing people with a sense of difference and a way of classifying themselves and others, whether latitudinally or hierarchically' (MacClancy 1996:2).

That the games fostered unity among the Greeks is a cliché. An old cliché – Lysias in the early fourth century told his audience at Olympia that Heracles founded their festival in the hope of encouraging mutual amity among the Greeks – if still vibrant enough to inspire a new theory of the origin of Greek competitive festivals. The reality, of course, is that such amity was forged at the expense of other ties – or rather, through their rejection. Athletic exercise and competition marked Greeks off from their neighbours, and the great Greek festivals of athletic and equestrian competition excluded non-

¹ Solon: Aeschin. 1.138–9, Plut. *Sol.* 1.3; cf. the comments on the oil of the gymnasium as the smell of a free man in Xen. *Symp.* 2.4. Dream book: Artem. 1.62, second century CE; Langenfeld 1991:8.

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Greek outsiders, *barbaroi*; at Olympia, the most prestigious, married women at least were barred from the site (see below, Chapter 4). Every competition involved a series of statements about various categories of humankind, some marked off, some masked. The likelihood that such a scheme of differentiation was working on the Greeks at Trapezus (or at least on Xenophon's representation of their activities) may lead to a resolution of a textual problem in the passage I have translated above. Where I translate 'female camp-followers', most manuscripts read *hetairōn*, 'their companions'; some *hetērōn*, 'the others'. 'Camp-followers' renders *hetairōn*, an emendation ascribed to the sixteenth-century French scholar Brodaeus (Jean Brodeau), printed by Cobet in his school edition of 1859, defended by Löschhorn (1918, noting references to such camp-followers earlier at *An.* 4.3.19, 30), and accepted into (e.g.) the Teubner text of Hude (1931) and the selection edited by Antrich and Usher (1978). An account so concerned with distinctions of age, juridical status and national origin might well comment on gender too. With Brodaeus's conjecture, women are present and where they belong, watching from the sidelines.²

Another important distinction is not made explicit in Xenophon's account: social class. Nor was it marked in other competitions – no games included contests reserved expressly for the rich. But such contests there were all the same, the various equestrian events. At Trapezus, the soldiers ride their own horses, most of them, at this stage of their expedition, probably stolen. In general, however, the horse and chariot races of the Greeks were open only to those who could afford the extraordinary expense they required. In theory, they competed against allcomers; in fact, the pool of opponents was very limited, the chance of success correspondingly high, the probability of losing to a social inferior negligible. And the super-rich, or abnormally extravagant, could improve their odds through multiple entries, since they were not required to ride or drive for themselves or even attend the competition. One of the reasons horse races were an essential part of Greek athletic festivals was precisely to allow the elite to compete with each other without advertising the fact unduly, even after their communities (and to some extent other events) became more open to the participation of the poorer. And to compete longer

² Unity: *Lys.* 33.2, cf. *Isoc.* 4.43–6. New theory: Ulf 1991. Greeks and their neighbours: *Pl. Symp.* 182bc, *Luc. Anach.* 1–6.

than men who could only run, jump, throw and fight. (We may think of Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between popular sports, linked with youth, which are generally abandoned very early, and bourgeois sports, which are pursued much longer [Bourdieu 1984:212].) As Xenophon suggests, however, this privilege, or at least the response it was expected to evoke, might not always go unchallenged.

The discourse of difference in Greek sport and its consequences will be the main unifying theme of this book, revisited below in connection with victory and its rewards, age and gender categories and competitors' class origins. I should emphasize at the outset that this is just one approach to the subject. There are many others. The growth of the sport and leisure industries in the past twenty-five years has combined with the academy's new awareness of culture, ideology and representation to engender a profusion of studies and what one student of American sport calls a 'glorious disarray' of methods and models; brother, can you spare a paradigm? Totalizing theories – biological, environmental, psychological, sociological – vie with each other, while others affirm instead that sport takes its meaning from interrelations with other social institutions and practices in particular places and times.³

The unique nature of modern sport in the West is widely recognized, differently defined, disparately ascribed to modernization or industrial capitalism or Protestantism. In the most influential account, Allen Guttmann identifies seven intertwined features which work together to make modern sport (secularism, equality of opportunity to compete and in competition, bureaucratization, specialization, rationalization, quantification, the quest for records) and asserts that it arises from the scientific world view. Though some elements may appear in earlier cultures – 'we can turn to the Greeks for intimations of the modern . . . sports bureaucracy' (Guttmann 1978:45) – it is only today that they interact systematically. This accords with some anthropological approaches in which complex rules and competitions, elaborate equipment, the status of participants and spectator interest follow an evolutionary development from band to tribe to chiefdom and beyond (Blanchard and Cheska 1985:90–165). But though the author of another successful synthesis, Richard Mandell, agrees with Guttmann's characterization of

³ 'Glorious disarray': Struna 1985; other surveys in Rader 1979, Rojek 1992. Particular places and times: e.g., Somers 1972, Adelman 1986.

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modern sport, he insists more strongly on the cleavage between it and what came before: 'European sports had no continuity with the games and contests of the Greeks and Romans. They were . . . natural adaptations that sprung anew out of local peasant culture and from the need of the noble classes to demonstrate their ascendancy' (Mandell 1984:3, 197). Similarly, for Eric Middleton parallels between Greek and later European sport arise from like responses to urbanization and the presence of a leisured elite; it is 'a question of analogy rather than sequence, a matter of common denominators rather than a progressive evolution' (Midwinter 1986:10).⁴

Attitudes towards the nature and role of modern sport (and so to what preceded it) may vary as greatly even among those who concur on its definition and singularity. Where the ideas of Norbert Elias and his follower Eric Dunning have taken root, mainly in Britain, students of sport history have concentrated on the body as a nexus of power and on the gradual (and far from unilinear) growth of self- and social control of bodily functions and physical impulses from the Middle Ages on. Sport in this civilizing process is an appropriate and regulated outlet for tension and aggressive behaviour (at acceptable levels, against approved targets) and a source for the excitement humans need. It is thus relatively benign. Marxists, however, stress a darker reality. For them too the body is at the centre of analysis, but it is a body reduced to a machine: according to one flamboyant formulation, 'the intensive practice of sport is institutionalized celebration of the mortification of the flesh', an ideological apparatus of death, legitimating physical torture as politically neutral and entertaining. Furthermore, commercialized and dominated as it is by market forces, sport offers a new profit centre at the same time as it delivers images, passions, myths and fantasies to reproduce the dominant ideology on which capitalism feeds (Hoch 1972). Other social critics single out and elaborate counts in this indictment, for example, that mainstream sport imposes orthodox gender roles and sexual practices (though it may also double as 'a covert world of homoeroticism': Pronger 1990:178).⁵

All this work is unlikely to be of equal value for the student of

⁴ Seven features: Guttman 1978:15–89, cf. Guttman 1988:5–8; critique in Blake 1996:69–82.

⁵ Elias's ideas: see Dunning and Rojek 1992 for this outlook and its critics. Flamboyant formulation: Brohm 1978:23–8, cf. Brohm 1986, 1992:75–89, and the comments of Gruncea 1983:34–9, 1993.

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Greek sport. It is undeniably interesting to reflect that the ability to walk upright has opened many paths for humankind and that our sense of smell, weak relative to dogs', and our comparatively keen eyesight have pushed us away from orienteering, say, and towards ball games and others dependent on hand-eye co-ordination (Cashmore 1990). But biology only influences history; it does not determine it. We must still account for the recent development of competitive orienteering in some parts of the world and the relative neglect of ball games in others (like ancient Greece). The role of climate and the environment is sometimes obvious – it is no accident that Canadians play ice hockey – but always mediated by other realities. (So the hypothesis that Greeks practised the long jump, not the high jump or hurdles or pole vault, because 'Greece was no land of fences and hedges; the chief obstacles were streams and ditches' may seem simplistic; Gardiner 1930:144.) Why has Sweden flourished as a hockey power while Norway, otherwise a dominant figure in winter sports, has not? Partly because in this instance money talked Swedish: the Swedes had more resources to invest in indoor arenas when the game began to grow popular in Scandinavia.

Some indication of the complex interplay between environmental and social factors may be gleaned from the case of leisure time activities in pre-contact Hawaii. Certainly Hawaiians surfed. The elite, however, preferred to race in sleds over ground they owned themselves, a cumbersome and costly form of competition which advertised their special status, not least in being able to transcend their natural surroundings (G. Krüger 1990). We may be reminded that there is very little evidence for swimming races among the Greeks (and this only in connection with the cult and myth of Dionysus) and that even boat races are rarer than one would expect among a maritime people, though found at such major competitions as the Panathenaea and (perhaps) at Isthmia. Against this background, the choice of the Greek elite to own and race horses (like that of their Hawaiian counterparts to sled) represents a claim to rise above the restrictions of the environment as much as financial constraints, since the rough terrain and lack of horseshoes, stirrups and effective harness made the horse inconvenient for travel and transport.⁶

At the local level, close study of individual communities will

⁶ Swimming races: Paus. 2.35.1, Nonnus, *Dion.* 11.43–55, 400–30; Hall 1993:49–54. Boat races: Harris 1972a:112–16, 126–8.

always pay dividends, though of course a number of these is needed before general patterns emerge. One example: the fact that competition for teams of Athenian citizens at the Panathenaea (the boat race among them) were organized by tribe reflects the make-up of the tribe and its other functions in the democracy established by Cleisthenes in 508. These new and artificial constructs, corresponding to no previous kin or civic grouping and bringing together Athenians from widely separated neighbourhoods, were the basis of the committees vital to day-to-day administration at Athens and of the armed forces. Competitions provided tribesmen (in particular the boys and *ageneioi*, 'beardless youths', who took part) another venue to meet and to build the group solidarity essential in civic and, above all, military contexts. In addition, the distribution of the glory of victory, and its rewards, over a large group of contestants lessened the risk of exalting one individual over his fellow citizens – the aristocrat Cylon had tried to parlay a triumph at Olympia into a military coup in the late seventh century – while the agony of defeat was dissipated in the same way (Osborne 1993:30–2).

A second example of the resonance of local particularities: organized ball play was nowhere as important as at Sparta, where youths on five teams of about fourteen *sphaireis*, 'ball players', competed in an annual tournament in the city's theatre. The sport they played was probably a rough and tumble type of *episkuros*, in which teams tried to push each other past an end line by throwing a ball over their opponents' heads (Poll. 9.104). This is attested for ephebes, young men in military training, in many parts of the Greek world in later antiquity, but the Spartan version is best understood in the light of another local competition, this time unparalleled: an all-in battle between two companies of naked youths, again for possession of a field, an artificial island called Platanistas ('the Plane-tree Grove'), and of the city's geography (Kennell 1995:55–64). These competitors were somewhat younger, and Platanistas itself was not far inside Sparta's Hellenistic walls. The two group contests, then, much as they have in common, are to be distinguished as two stages in a progression towards adulthood, with the twenty-year-old *sphaireis* at the point of leaving youth and so also nearer to the city's centre.

Only the brevity of this book and the existence of excellent studies integrating sport into its community context dissuade me from pursuing this strategy here. Instead, I propose to discuss three issues of relevance to both ancient and modern sport. I will then make a

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short case for the value of my own emphasis on the place of sport in the Greek discourse on difference. First, then, sport and religion, sport and warfare, and the agonistic spirit of the Greeks.⁷

SPORT AND RELIGION

Twenty years ago, the American social commentator Michael Novak argued that ‘sports flow outward from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious’ and went on to describe football, baseball and basketball as a Holy Trinity and putting on shoulder pads as the equivalent of donning priestly vestments (Novak 1976:19). A strong position, strongly put. It is more common (as the title of Guttmann’s *From Ritual to Record* reveals) to associate sport and religion with earlier times. Certainly there is a good case to be made for such a link in ancient Greece; another American right-wing ideologue opines that ‘Greek philosophers considered sport a religious and civic – in a word, moral – undertaking’ (Will 1990:2). Athletic and equestrian contests normally took place at regularly recurring religious festivals, where they joined many activities, including other competitions, to celebrate and worship one god or hero or more. The most important competitive festivals made up a circuit, the *periodos*. Originally there were four; if we may judge from Aristotle, their chronological and temporal relationships were well known (Arist. *Metaph.* 2.994a24, 5.1018b18):

- (1) the Olympic games at Olympia in the region of Elis in the north-west Peloponnese, held in late July or August of every fourth year in honour of Zeus Olympios and supposedly founded in 776;⁸
- (2) the Pythian games, sacred to Apollo, celebrated every four summers since 586 or 582 at his oracular shrine of Delphi in central Greece (Mosshammer 1982, Brodersen 1990);
- (3) the Isthmian games at Poseidon’s sanctuary on the Isthmus of Corinth, founded in 582 and held in the spring or early summer of alternate years (Gomme *et al.* 1981:23–4);
- (4) the Nemean games, which took place in Zeus’s honour above all in the north-eastern Peloponnese, first at Nemea and then, for much of antiquity, at nearby Argos; these were also held in alternate years, in September, starting in 573 (Perlman 1989).

⁷ Excellent studies: Kyle 1987 on archaic and classical Athens, Hodkinson forthcoming on Sparta during the same periods.

⁸ For the month, see S.G. Miller 1975a; for the date, Chapter 2 below.