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SCORING THE ANCIENT PENTATHLON: FINAL SOLUTION?

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The recently published source book on ancient athletics by Waldo Sweet, coupled with his earlier study in ZPE, has brought us closer than ever before to a true understanding of how victory in the ancient pentathlon was determined.¹ Sweet convincingly discredits previous solutions, especially those that use ambiguous ancient sources to devise a scoring system in which a second-place finish in individual events counted toward ultimate victory.² His own solution calls for the use of *repechage* if there was no clear winner after the first four events. This procedure is simple and fair, as Sweet claims, but that does not necessarily make it correct. In what follows I would like to suggest some modifications of Sweet's solution in the hope of bringing us even nearer to the truth.

There are two scenarios in which Sweet suggests that *repechage* was used by the ancients to determine the winner of the pentathlon. In the first one athlete wins two events, and two other athletes win one event each. The two with one victory each engage in a *repechage* match of an event which neither had won, and the winner of this match then advances to the final event, which we know was wrestling, to meet the athlete with two victories. The other scenario involves four athletes, each a winner in one of the first four events. Paired off by lot each pair undertakes a *repechage* match, again in an event which neither member of the pair had won in the initial contests. The winners of the two *repechage* matches then meet in the wrestling to decide the final victor.³

This method of determining advancement to the final event in the Greek pentathlon is unconvincing because it runs counter to Greek practice. Winning was everything, and at least at the Crown Games no prizes or honors were conferred upon those who did not come in first. We should not expect the pentathlon to have been conducted any differently, yet the *repechage* system requires an exception to standard practice. Contestants are given a second chance in events which they had previously lost. Thus an athlete who had won two of the first four events would find himself pitted against an opponent in the wrestling whom he had already twice defeated in preceding events. Such a situation might be acceptable in modern day sporting competition, but it hardly qualifies as an ancient Greek method of determining a winner.

¹ Sport and recreation in Ancient Greece, New York and Oxford 1987, 56-59; ZPE 50, 1983, 287-290.

² H.A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, Indiana and London 1966, 77-79; and G&R 19, 1972, 60-64, must be granted a great share of the credit for raising fatal objections to past solutions. He reminds us that with the Greek mentality of winner-take-all in athletic competition it is very unlikely that second place was ever counted.

³ There are two other possible scenarios after the first four events, and in them Sweet's solution are acceptable: one athlete wins three of the first four events, and so is the winner of the pentathlon; there are two athletes with two wins each after the first four events, and these two wrestle for final victory.

In the case of the two scenarios discussed above we should return, I feel, to the suggestion of H.A.Harris. Under this scheme there would be semi-final rounds of wrestling in order to qualify finalists for the last wrestling bout of the pentathlon. The winner of this final round would be the overall victor.⁴ There is much to be said in favor of Harris' suggestion. Wrestling was one of the most popular athletic events among the Greeks,⁵ while throwing the discus and javelin and the long jump did not enjoy a great deal of favor, and they never did attain independent status outside the pentathlon. A play off system, as Harris suggests, involving a very popular event, thus seems more plausible than one based on repechage of events which were not held in such high regard.

Sweet criticizes Harris' solution of scoring the pentathlon on the grounds that it unduly favored the big man, giving him a great advantage in the wrestling. Sweet feels that this is unfair and should be completely rejected. Fairness in athletics is an interesting subject but one that should not be strictly applied in discussion about the nature of ancient Greek agones. Our own beliefs about fairness in athletic competition have been conditioned and oriented by more recent aristocratic sporting attitudes coming from Victorian England and 19th-century America. Sweet makes the mistake of applying these modern beliefs back to a time when they did not exist. It mattered little to the ancients whether an athletic event was fair for those who participated in it.⁶ What mattered was that the activity be pleasing for both gods and mortals to watch. Harris' solution results in a pentathlon which satisfied both deity and spectator alike, even if it does not satisfy the modern wish of providing a fair test of the best all-round athlete.⁷

Seattle

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⁴ Harris modified his views between the time of his book and the article in G&R (supra n.2). It is the solution presented in his book that I find preferable.

⁵ For evidence of the popularity of wrestling, see M.B.Poliakoff, *Studies in the Terminology of the Greek Combat Sports*, Meisenheim 1982,7,14, n.22; *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, New Haven and London 1987,23,169, n.1.

⁶ A good example of this is the youth category of competition at Olympia, open to boys between the ages of twelve and seventeen; for the evidence cf. Th.Klee, *Zum Geschichte der gymnastischen Agone an griechischen Festen*, Leipzig and Berlin 1918,46-51. Nothing could be less fair than to pit a twelve- or thirteen-year-old boxer against one who was sixteen or seventeen. Furthermore, there are several maneuvers in the combat sports, such as choke holds and finger breaking, which today we consider so unfair that we prohibit them but which the ancient Greeks permitted; cf. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports* (supra n.5) 28, 30.

⁷ An uncritical reading of Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1361b, might lead to the conclusion that versatile athletes were very highly regarded and that the pentathlon was provided as an opportunity for them to distinguish themselves. For correctives to such a reading, see D.G.Kyle, *Athletics in Ancient Athens*, *Mnemosyne Suppl.* 95,1987,141.