SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

**Book Review: The Victor’s Crown**

By Pasko Varnica

Inheritance of ancient Greece has shaped the Western civilization. In the late 19th century, modern Olympic Games were reinvented to honor and celebrate the legacy of the Greek heritage. Format and pomp of both modern summer and winter Olympic Games were modelled after the original Panhellenic festivals.

Casting aside the religious significance, a topic for another essay, it is natural then that on the surface the ancient and modern games appear to have considerable parallels. Athletes in the ancient Greece competed for honor and for the prestige of the city-state they represented. Today’s games begin with a parade of athletes carrying flags of their nations and the medal count is sorted by country. The interest in the games is a global phenomenon and the winners are celebrated upon returning to their home countries.

Similarities though end here. The victors of the ancient games sought and received lasting glory. With a few exceptions, today’s winners are quickly forgotten. Let us pause a moment to compare Olympic soccer or baseball games to those played in a World Cup or World Series. The two sets of games are miles apart in involvement of the public and in the overall significance to the worldwide sports fans.

Parenthetically, I must add that there are other contrasts between ancient and modern games. For example, the instantaneous socialization of results and the ability to measure distance and time were unknown in the antiquity. Can we say then that the characteristic of premodern and modern sports differs? In my opinion, not really. These two examples are due to the evolution of technology and not to the spirit of sports. The essence of sports has changed very little, if at all, since the antiquity.

We often assume that the ancient Greek ideas were rather similar to our own. However, the universal interest and the passions inspired by modern football, baseball or soccer find parallels only in the chariot racing held in ancient Rome.

Sport is shaped by the society and culture in which it is practiced. By examining the history of sport in the Western civilization it becomes quite apparent that the present-day society has many more parallels and similarities with the Roman world than with the Hellenic one.

I recognize that this last statement will be argued and likely rejected, typical reactions whenever ideology meets world realities.

The study of history of sport is the study of society.

In **The Victor’s Crown,** David Potter, professor of Greek and Roman history at the University of Michigan, traces the history of sport in the Western hemisphere.

The book’s subtitle promises “A History of Ancient Sport from Homer to Byzantium”. The subtitle is a concise compendium and a comprehensive summary of the subjects covered. By referencing Homer, the reader learns that the topic begins in early Greece. The presence in the subtitle of Byzantium, which is synonymous with the Eastern Roman Empire, indicates that ancient Rome is included and that the book ends around late antiquity.

As one would expect from the subtitle, the first half is dedicated to sports in Greece. Roman Games, title of Part 4, begins at page 160, exactly in the middle of the 320 pages long book.

The author is completely at ease with the history of sports in ancient Greece. An extraordinary amount of ground is covered. Part 1 is about funeral games listed by Homer in book 23 of Iliad and about Crete’s Bronze Age bull-leaping. We are approximately 1,000 years B.C. The funeral games described by Homer are chariot racing, boxing, a foot race, wrestling, throwing of large stones, duels between spearmen to first blood, archery and spear throwing.

Part 1’s title includes the wording “Origins of Sports”. I take an exception with the term “origins”. Sport as an organized and competitive activity was also practiced in the preliterate world. It is our nature to spend leisure time competing seriously or not among ourselves. This section of the book is not about the origins but about the first written sources of sporting activities in the Western world.

Part 2 is dedicated to Olympia. The first chapter is about the myth of Olympic Games. The subsequent chapters begin with 480 B.C. when first written records of the games are available. These chapters guide the reader from the selection of the athletes, through participating in events, to winning and the celebration of the victors. The last chapter elaborates on the transformation of funeral games in pre-Homeric times to the cultic (religious) dedication of the Panhellenic festivals.

The world of the gymnasium follows in Part 3. This is a strong and lively section. I quote: “the gymnasium was the central institution for the shaping of the male identity in the Greek world.” The first chapter expands on this point. Rules governing gymnasia found inscribed on a stone in the city of Beroia (modern Veroia in northern Greece) are discussed at length. The last chapter describes the steps to turn pro. We learn that in addition to possessing athletic talent, it was essential to select a good trainer and to have access to a substantial amount of money necessary to establish a winning record of accomplishments. Greek city-states offered monetary rewards to athletes: “an athletic victory was useful to a city because the virtues of a good athlete were considered manly and thus could be an example to others.”

This ends the first half of the book. Although the title of Part 4 is the “Roman Games”, we are still in Greece. The topic of the first two chapters is the effect of the domination of the Roman Empire on the many competitions and festivals held in the Hellenic world.

The chapter titled “Actors and Gladiators” is next. It begins with the words: “*although not strictly speaking an aspect of the history of sport*”. I appreciate the author’s doubt. I emphatically insist that the history neither of the stage nor of the gladiatorial combats has anything to do with the essential characteristics of sports.

By definition, sport must be organized, competitive and physical. War battles meet this definition. But are they sport? They are not. Gladiatorial combats are an extension of war and not of sports.

Why is the second half then concerned with actors and a good portion of the rest of the book with gladiators? Did the author struggle to find subjects to fill in the page? He did not have this problem in the first half of the book. This tells me that the author is more comfortable with the history of Greece than that of Rome. I found favoring ancient Greece over Rome common in the academia.

Maybe the difference between spectacle and sports is unclear. The book **Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman Empire** edited by the author with D.J. Mattingly, also mixes the spectacle of gladiatorial shows with organized sporting events. Still, that book is about entertainment, a general heading under which theatre, gladiators’ shows and sports are three separate running branches. This book should be exclusively about sports.

In any case, I understand there is an ongoing fascination with gladiators. If you love gladiators as much as Romans did, the book will not disappoint you.

A set of short chapters, each 4 to 5 pages long, each describing an aspect of chariot racing, follows. The chapters are “Watching, The Fan’s Experience, Expectations, Crowd Noise and Dreaming of Sport”. I find the selection of these topics appropriate. They expose the reader to the experience of chariot racing and they do a good job at that. However, the book does not describe chariot racing in general terms neither beforehand nor later in the book. In later chapters that are dedicated to the charioteers, it appears that the author took for granted reader’s familiarity and knowledge. The foundational context necessary for comprehension of the various topics that pertain to chariot racing is missing. I think that the book would benefit from an overview of the organization of chariot racing and of chariot factions.

In the book’s epilogue, David Potter makes an interesting point about the demise of gladiators’ combats and chariot races. The prevailing present-day thought asserts that the advent of Christianity and its ascetic preaching brought the games to an end. According to the author, while the influence of the Christian Church should not be minimized, the collapse of the wealth was likely the primary cause. Access to the games was free of charge. Maintaining chariot-racing factions or putting up gladiatorial spectacles, perhaps with wild animals, were extremely expensive. The political advantage of sponsoring games had dissipated by the third century C.E. The state demanded to be reimbursed if it had initially subsidized the events. At the end, lack of financing and changing tastes, probably due in part to the new morality thought by the Christian doctrine delivered the last blow. Gladiatorial shows, having a limited geographical appeal, were first to stop. Chariot racing, with its Empire-wide influence, survived for several more centuries. According to the book, “the last race took place in the eleventh century”.

**The Victor’s Crown by** David Potter is a well-researched book, written in an erudite but readable manner. It has an extensive bibliography of modern and classical sources and over forty pages of footnotes. It is enjoyable to read and easy to absorb unlike many a tome about history. Probably because it is about sports, a frivolous topic.