SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

Fantasy Chariot Races

[ *De Ludi Circenses Imaginarî* ]

By Pasko Varnica

Part 2: The First Race

The alley outside the tavern was lit as daytime by the many torches carried by the throng on their way to Circus Maximus. Despite the heat and smoke rising from the torches the night was pleasant as generally the weather was in Rome around this time of the year.

This brings me to today. The calendar posted in the Forum indicated that it was the fifth day before the *ides* of *Julius*. *Ludi Apollinaire* were in full swing. After waiting nearly half a month for today’s races, we anxiously joined the crowd. To reach Circus Maximus we must traverse the labyrinth of narrow alleys that is the Subura, cross the Forum Romanum, go down the Velabrum and cut a corner of the Forum Boarium. Once at the gates of the north end of the Circus, we go around its western façade. Our preference is to sit on the west side to avoid having the afternoon sun shine in our faces.

Pace was slow at the beginning and then it gradually picked up along the way due to the excitement of watching the races mixed with fear of not finding seats until it became a mad rush with everyone pushing and shoving their way. The near end of the Circus was normally inundated with people even before dawn. Everyone wanted to be close to the finish line. The middle portion on both sides of the podium was usually filled with slaves who have spent the night at the Circus to save seats for their masters. We are known to have pushed aside a puny slave in our younger days, but recently most slaves were bodyguards with gladiator physiques. So, we rushed along the western side, scrambled up the stairs under a gate near the far end of the spine, elbowed our way through the corridors and begun a frenzied search for room wide enough for four people. I habitually looked for a female body to sit beside. If I must spend an entire day stuck shoulder, hip and thigh to another human body, that body might as well be a female one. Since that opportunity seldom comes, my next choice was to sit next to anyone who went to the baths the day before and did not reek of *Cloaca Maxima*, Rome’s great sewer tunnel.

We found seats in a row above a group of rowdy fans of the Whites faction, next to a tall and lanky fellow who kept poking with his knees the back of the guy in front. Wanting to be neighborly, I turned my head to face him and flashing a 32-tooth grin I said to him: “Citizen, it is going to be a nice day”.

His head straight up, eyes fixed across the Circus, palm of his hands on slightly spread knees, my neighbor scowled and said nothing.

“*Futui* him.“ If he is sorry now that we sat next to him, he will be sorrier later on when I jab him in the ribs as I score the races on my wax tablet. Could it be that after spending the night at the tavern we smelled like four jars of Falernian wine? No, not the Falernian! Falernian is a good wine. We probably stunk as four newly emptied jars of cheap swill.

Sun was not up yet. The sky has begun turning pale blue behind *Caelius*. The mass of people, dressed in white togas or white stolas, was fast filling up the last available seats around the curved ends of the Circus. To a distant observer from the top of *Mons* *Aventinus*, the Circus might have appeared as a white flower spreading its petals to the rising sun.

This time of a day at the races was the most boring. There is nothing to do but wait, first for the consul and his retinue of hundreds to arrive followed by the priests at the head of a procession of slaves carrying incense burning urns and statues of gods and goddesses and then for the chariot teams to present themselves and lastly for the musicians to take their place on the towers flanking the cages.

Did I say “lastly”? That was wrong. The last to arrive was invariably the emperor who would leisurely saunter to the podium from his palace behind the Circus. Then and only then the races could start.

Each new arrival was greeted by a tremendous applause, with everyone standing on their feet. I have seen it all a hundred of times ever since my father took me to my first race in the month of *Martius* of my 16th year, the day I wore my first toga *virilis*. When the consul arrived, while everyone was standing turned sideways and clapping in his direction, the hip of the guy above me nearly pushed me down the stands. The guy was short and had a mid-drift wider than the seat. I took a sideway glance. My head was on the level his large round behind. I feared that the night before he might have had something for dinner that gave him gas.

We sat and waited for the emperor to show up for what seemed to be an eternity.

“Why are your eyes squinting Decimus? Who are you looking at?“ Asked Bassus with a sneer while coloring his voice with a touch of ridicule.

“He is looking at the Vestals.“said Attalus shaking his head.

I could not deny it. The Vestals were taking their seats in the front row of the emperor’s podium.

“They are virgin. The only sure virgins in Rome in these days“ I muttered. While true, my words made no sense. Let them snicker, I thought. They will forget about it by the time the first race begins. I can only hope that the emperor makes his appearance soon.

Aroused by the collective impatience and excitement, the first race is always thrilling. Customarily the most capable drivers and the best-trained horses take part of the first race after the *Pompa*. Indeed, what a race that was!

It was a single race, with one 4-hourse drawn chariot competing from each faction. All eyes were on the *praetor* who held a white flag in the hand of his extended right arm. Calvus was looking in the directions of the cages. I noticed a worried expression on his face. Diocles did not line up. Was he injured? He appeared fine while riding in the procession. I can already hear Calvus yelling that we put a curse on his team. Well, yesterday before we met at the tavern each of us bought a curse table. That is pretty much to be expected. But nobody would put a curse on our idol.

Only one of the charioteers drafted by our fantasy teams, a certain Consentius who was picked up by Bassus and who raced for the Whites was lined up inside the starting cages. Impatient to run, horses stomped the ground. Trumpets blared. My body trembled. As far as I could tell, everyone in the Circus was on his toes, maybe even the emperor. Horses attacked the iron gates with their front hooves. The white flag dropped out of the *praetor’s* hand. Gates opened. Horses leapt out. The Blues was ahead, but soon I realized that was an optical illusion caused by the angled lines of the lanes. The moment the lanes ended it became apparent that the Greens was in the lead. As the four *quadrigae* converged and bunched, the Greens squeezed the Reds chariot against the spine, while the Whites and the Blues pushed the Greens from the right. By the first turn, the Greens, Whites and Blues were in the front row. Taking the turn too wide, the Blues fell behind. At the end of the first lap, the Greens had a horse nose advantage over the Whites. A cloud of dust and sand lifted by the hooves and rotating wheels whirled behind the chariots. Whips lashed at the horses. If my neighbor did not stop gesticulating and if he hits me in the head one more time, I am going to punch him in the nose. Third lap and the Greens tried to hook his wheel inside the wheel of the Whites’ chariot in an attempt to pull Whites’ wheel off. The driver of the Whites avoided the attack with a deft rotation of the reins wrapped around his body. Whites fans from the row below, jumping up and down on their wooden seats, sent curses and profanities in the direction of the Greens. The Whites and the Greens were parallel now. Was it going to be the Whites or the Greens? Bassus’ fists where clenched so tight that his palms almost bled. Fifth lap, was it going to be the Greens or the Whites? Greens’ whip hit the head of Charcoal, the all-black lead horse of the Whites. It appeared that the Greens had attempted to gouge Charcoal’s eyes with the tip of his whip. Roar from the crowd rose to a deafening level. With its ears bent down and head lowered, Charcoal drew the Whites into the lead. Sixth lap and the Whites was half a *quadriga* ahead, Bassus was uncontrollable, the Whites or the Greens? Seventh lap, the last lap and it was the Whites, it was the Whites, the Whites, Whites, WHITES.

I raised my arms and shouted “Sweet *Jupiter*, twenty three more races today, will my heart survive? “ Then I collapsed back to my seat. Even my dour neighbor turned to look at me and smiled.

“You can touch happiness.“ cried Attalus gleefully

“Those who gambled and won can certainly touch it“ the practical Roman in me retorted.

Bassus had moved to the lower row, talking to the Whites team fans, exchanging congratulations, shaking hands, replaying with words over and over every detail of the race.

Musicians have begun playing. Acrobats and jugglers performed for all on the track. People were placing bets and milling around, some going to buy food at one of the many *tabernae* around the Circus, some others to relieve themselves along the walls.