SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

Porphyrius the Charioteer, book review

By Pasko Varnica

Alan Cameron begins the preface to his **Porphyrius the Charioteer** with “This is a complex book”.

So true! Let me assure you, the book is not an easy stroll through the park. It is a scholarly work, intended to be read by a few fellow academics.

**Porphyrius the Charioteer** is on the list of recommended reading on our Home page. I was compelled to put it there. As far as I can tell, it is the only non-fiction book about a charioteer that has ever been published. That said, I could not recommend it to anyone who is not a devoted historian.

This article summarizes Cameron’s findings and explores the parallels between the behaviors of sports enthusiasts of 15-20 centuries ago with those of modern times. I bet that it will not come as a surprise that little has changed in the realm of sports since those two guys came racing out of Africa. Maybe this article will give you an incentive to read the book. On the other hand, it may tell all you need to know about the greatest charioteer of all times.

From the title, one may expect the story line to be about the life of Porphyrius. While he is indeed the central character, the book is about two statue bases unearthed in Constantinople in the recent past. The bases supported the statues of Porphyrius erected by the chariot factions in his honor.

Alan Cameron, as every good historian is supposed to do, has provided a comprehensive and thorough interpretation of the images and epigrams carved on the statue bases. He has done a great job explaining them away and providing supporting material for his conclusions. I must say that I have two complaints: I wish that the epigrams and poems were translated into English. Only a few people are capable of understanding 6th century Byzantine Greek. The other issue is the footnotes. Would it have killed the author or the publisher to spell out fully the reference material instead of providing terse abbreviations that made me jump through hoops to untangle when I wanted to go to the source?

Complaints apart, I personally struggled through the book for you. Here is a brief outline followed by a list of similarities mentioned above.

Porphyrius was born in Libya circa 480 C.E. and retired around age 60. He raced for both the Blues and the Greens and both factions erected statutes to celebrate him. In Constantinople in the 6th century, Blues and Greens were the two major factions, Reds and Whites the two minor ones. The statues, which stood on the *spina* in the hippodrome, were in bronze and were melted down and turned into coins by the Crusaders in 1204. Very sad.

It seems that the only surviving statues that adorned the hippodrome are the four horses located today in the museum of San Marco in Venice. If you ever go to Venice, do not miss them. Originally, the horses were located on top of the cages (*carceres*), one per cage. That alone should tell us how elaborately the hippodrome in Constantinople was ornamented.

The statues put up by the Blues were placed on the spina in front of the Blues’ seating section, the statues put up by the Greens in front of their seating section. I imagine that factions were kept separate to avoid fan violence. This brings us to the first parallel with today’s customs (marked by P*n* bullets). I must point out that while the book was the source of the historical facts, the conclusions inferred here are my own.

**P1** Although not practiced in the States, subdividing stadiums into sections to keep rival fans away from each other is a common practice in soccer throughout the world.

**P2** The violence between factions is similar to the actions of today’s hooligans who attend soccer games for the sole purpose of getting into fights. The elevated number of casualties of the past, compared to today anyway, may be blamed on the lack of an organized police force in existence at the time. The large number of deaths of the Nika uprising in 532 and of the one in Antioch in 507 was probably caused by the use of military troops called on by the authorities to quell the riots. Neither now nor then is the military trained to cool heads.

**P3** As in modern times, many provincial towns hadtheir own arenas. Typical of most populous cities, Rome had two, Circus Maximus and another one nearby on the Via Appia known as Circus of Maxentius. I must add that I have not found any references that chariot racing took place at the smaller Circus Flaminius located in Campus Martius.

**P4** Arrival of chariots races must have been exciting for the inhabitants of provincial towns. Chariot teams travelled widely, as our baseball, football and soccer teams do.

**P5** In Constantinople factions and fans erected statues to honor retiring athletes. While statutes like those of Willie Mays and Juan Marichal located outside the ballpark in San Francisco are primarily outdoor embellishments, teams in modern times retire jerseys and numbers to commemorate retiring players.

**P6** Charioteers were introduced by their name and city of birth. Why was the city of birth so prominently announced? If you know sports, you understand civic pride of a home team and geographical rivalry. The city was announced to drum up support from those fans who had traveled to attend the races.

**P7** Several famous charioteers were sons of famous charioteers. Dynasties, that is, children of athletes taking up after their parents, exist in tennis but are still rare in our most popular sports. In baseball, we have the father-son example of Cecil-Prince Fielder. Our sports are young. Is it a matter of time before dynasties are created in our era?

**P8** Images of charioteers were seemingly everywhere, on mosaics, engraved glass, reliefs, sarcophagi, gems. Ha, need I say more?

**P9** Charioteers moved freely – but not often - between factions. Soccer, baseball and football teams trade players with ease. This brings me to the next point.

**P10** As in modern times, when charioteers moved betweenfactions, fan allegiance stayed with the team colors. Show me a Tottenham Hotspur’s fan who has switched to Real Madrid after Gareth Bale’s transfer and I will openly admit that I am wrong.

**P11** Today it is common to hear comments and complaints about how much athletes make. You may think that’s new. You should read what Juvenal had said about the exorbitant salaries of the charioteers of his time (refer to *Satire* 7.112-114)

**P12** Famous athletes were and are people’s idols.When fame, money and power are thrust upon individuals who are unable to handle the responsibility, the result is often abuse of power. Nero had to stop the practice of charioteers getting away with robbing people on the street. Abuses perpetrated by today’s athletes are common knowledge.

**P13** During the early years, wealthy individuals owned chariot racing teams. With time, the ownership changed to the emperors and consuls. Unsurprisingly, in totalitarian regimes now and then, governments tend to nationalize key industries that become politically essential.

**P14** One last item: an argumentative reader may point out that the above list blatantly ignores dissimilarities. I admit that there are differences. The most striking one is the number of teams. Around 30 teams play in top leagues in modern times.

Chariot racing had four factions throughout its lifetime (six factions were briefly in existence during the reign of Emperor Domitian). Thirty versus four, am I comparing apples to oranges? Not quite.

The difference is of an organizational nature. For example, Olympic Games of our age have many more events than the original games. The essence of the games though has not changed.

We possess the ability to handle more events thanks to the technological advancement that has ushered the information age. There are many geographically dispersed teams to like or dislike, many players to remember and many games to watch. We are fed instantaneously all the game scores we want to know.

Not so in the Roman Empire. Romans were not bombard with information as we are. Consequently, their enthusiasm for the races was limited to one of the most fundamental concepts known to a sports fan: the idea that a basic rivalry is between two teams. The characteristic of every rivalry and of every battle, political, religious or of the sexes has always been that magical number 2.

In conclusion, today’s message with our thirty plus teams, has a great quantity of data and as much noise. Regardless, the substance of the message has not changed since the day the Reds, the Whites, the Blues and the Greens raced each other around that oval.

I embrace our sophisticated evolution. Let us not quibble about the degree of our evolutionary progress and agree that humankind has advanced the last 2,000 years. It is true that some tendencies of the human character have changed, you pick your flower or your weed. Nevertheless, looking at the above list it appears that the enjoyment of and attitudes about sports and competition have changed a little if at all.

Is humanity a constant? Humanity is a complex word laden with meaning. In its simplest form, it stands for us, human beings. At its most complex, the word humanity presents an aura of quality that the human race possesses. Humanity is painted by science, literature, music, poetry and the arts. Love of sport and partisanship may be trivial when compared to the above magnificent painting but are expressions of the same humanity and should not be ignored. Alan Cameron, the author of **Porphyrius the Charioteer,** is one of very few academics who have taken a serious look at sports in antiquity. For that, I thank him.

More on this topic in the upcoming articles to be posted on Sports In Antiquity.