Roman Athletics
Classical Antecedents to the National Mania

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I: Contrasting Attitudes: “Modern” versus the Antique

In the Michaelmas term after leaving school, Tom Brown received a summons from the authorities and went up to matriculate at St. Andrews’ College, Oxford. He had left school in June, and did not go up to reside at Oxford till the end of the following January. Seven good months, during a part of which he had indeed read for four hours or so a week with the curate of the parish, but the residue had been exclusively devoted to cricket and field sports.” (T. Hughes, Tom Brown at Oxford [London: Macmillan & Co., 1862].)

In attempting to discuss as slippery a subject as Roman athletics a number of distinctions should be established at the outset. In the first place, there are athletics and there are sports. Of the latter, which covers a multitude of transgressions against the law, there are inevitably found, if one cares to rummage under the heading such diverse pastimes as hunting, whoring, cursing, eating, sleeping, fishing, attending races and games mainly for purposes of betting, then the field sports and spectacles, and amplellary dalliance (cf. Webster’s New International Dictionary, 2nd ed., “sport,” 6). Apart from the latter, only the field sports required much outlay of personal energy, the rest fell under the heading of passive “spectator activities” and will not be part of the present discussion. Most of these bear on the subject as a whole. So, out go circuses, gladiatorial contests, mock naval battles, animal bautings, arena hunts, and the public execution of prisoners.

Field sports are another matter. From the evidence of the surviving literature and its reflection in the paintings and mosaics, particularly of the high empire (AD 70–190, see Figs. 1–2), the ancient Romans were addicted to the rustic and relatively innocent pleasures of hunting, racing, and hunting. Under the empire, what had been a private sport enjoyed in the wild was transformed into the arena spectacle of the urban renewal in which large numbers of animals were displaced in a wide variety of exotic amphitheater settings. The large cats, including lions, leopards, tigers, and hyenas, were especially favored but so were bears, bulls, rhinoceros, hippopotami, ostriches, crocodiles, elephants, and giraffes. The emperor Commodus (r. AD 180–192), whose deviant obsessions with blood sports are familiar reading, personally shot in a single morning 100 lions and bears from walkways constructed for his safety above the sand of the arena.

It is in fact hard to avoid concentrating on the excesses of a few individuals when discussing the Romans, but an effort should be made to resist the temptation. There is some evidence to support the conclusion that everyday folk from many walks of life enjoyed athletic sports and games in respectable moderation. The difficulty lies in separating “observation” from participation. The doers tended to keep their activities within sensible limits, while the watchers were seemingly preoccupied with the majority of their waking hours taking in amphitheater, theater, and circus spectacles, which in turn made them attractive targets for the satiric writers who provide much of our information about daily life.

The distinction that one would really like to draw between athletics and sports would be to distinguish personal participation on the one hand from collective watching on the other, but such a separation of roles hardly holds up. To frame the question slightly differently, would Tom Brown, himself a dated and rather rustic parody of the modern world’s passion for sport, have felt at home in ancient Rome? A key to this problem lies in the annual cycle of ludi (games) held in Rome. These were, amongst other things, formal gladiatorial contests often deriving from religious observances that predated the foundation of the Republic. In times these came to number more than 40, and by the reign of Claudius (AD 41–54), the Roman calendar contained 159 days expressly designated as holidays (feriae), of which 95 were taken up with games paid for by public funds and much, if not most, of the activity generated by such an outpouring of spectacles had to be provided by professionals, as opposed to “gentlemen” amateur athletes.

An overgrowth of the religious substratum is visible on the surface of these ancient ceremonies which the Romans perceived as performed though they had long since forgotten their significance.” (J. Carcopino 1968, p. 93).

On June 7 the city praetor (senior magistrate) presided over an official fishing contest that ended at the site of the Velabrum in the forum with a fish fry. According to Festus, writing in the late 2nd century AD, this so-called fish fry represented a sacrifice to Volubanis of fish instead of human victims. Carcopino went on to provide an even more graphic example. Each fall on October 15 a horse race was staged in the foramen. The winning horse was immediately sacrificed by the flamen (sacrificial priest) of Mars, in whose presence all the gates of Rome were thrown open. The site was the Via Sacra, leading from the Forum to the Capitoline, the home of the Roman and the Pontifex Maximus. Its sacred bond was then turned over to the inhabitants of the Subura slum district, who fought a pitched battle for the honor of who would display the October Horse on their walls, an atavistic practice that seems to have originated with an ancient purification ceremony to cleanse the city and protect its inhabitants with the fealty of a horse skeleton. Religious belief with a somewhat lesser sanction included the festival of the Bacchae, which featured foot races in honor of Dionysus, the god who averted midwifery (nide), and the Consulatia on August 21, with its races on foot and on horseback in honor of the ancient Italic deity Corvus, who presided over secret plans and counsels.

Even gladiatorial contests possessed at the outset a kind of religious veneer, representing, as we see it today, the survival of Etruscan and Campanian (southern Italy around Naples) funeral games in which men were killed to provide the souls of the deceased with brave spirit companions, or perhaps to appease their craving for blood. The suggestion has even been made that the purpose behind the early gladiatorial contests was to stir a high level of emotion amongst the living spectators to replenish the drained-off energies of the deceased. The first such spectacle was staged in Rome in 264 B.C. when three pairs of gladiators fought at the greenside of D. Brutus Per. The pretext of their association with funerals was finally abandoned in the early empire when their purpose became largely commercial, as well as, in practical effect, diversions.

Another form of athletics attested for the annual festivals at an early time is boxing (lippikato), which seems to have been imported from Greece. Livy (35) says that in the inaugural celebration of the games held by the emperor Turgidius Priscus in the 6th century, boxes were bought from out-of-town prisoners, and there was an old tradition that paganism flourished in Etruria at an early date. During imperial times Caligula (AD 37–41) invited the best Campanian and African pugilists for the gladiatorial exhibitions.
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Nermon byrona crateria showing the europes participating in carolingan常常的 Herner and burner, pl. 1s, no. 210.

The games, while Strabo (111. 3) records that the Lusitanians (from western Spain and Portugal) disapproved. In Virgil's description of the funeral games of Anchises (Aeneid, v. 360) the gigantic Trojan horse Diomedes is challenged by the aged but large and sinewy Eumelus, Etelam, from whom he was not, however, to retreat. This scene from the contemporary arena in which the two protagonists are described is handled as barbarian professionals.

While foot races and even races on horseback suggest some amateur participation, the games staged in Rome's various circuses again must have been performed largely by professional jockeys and drivers and therefore lie outside the subject of this brief article. It may be noted in passing, however, that the city's major circus tracks were four in number: the Circus Flaminius built in 221 B.C. in the southern Campus Martius; the Circus of the Acqua and Nero built under the site of St. Peter's by Caligula as a private track for chariot races; the early 4th century A.D. Circus of the Maccari erected outside the city walls north of the Via Appia; and finally the oldest and largest of the lot, the Circus Maximus which occupied the marshy valley floor between the Aventine and Palatine Hills. While one traditionally thinks of these as accommo-
dating only chariot races, we hear of circuses built that included naked female athletes, for the ballet of the goddess Flora. The Jovian, an ancient Italic institution for the training of young men, and the Venusian, the rival of the Flavian, were staged in 160 B.C. by Marcus Fulvius Nobilior, who imported large numbers of Greeks to perform in Rome. A century later the dictator Lucius Cornelius Scipio managed to establish a implements and to have supplied physical endurance, team work, and courage were hallmarks of the modern Greek sport. Indeed, the Jovian and Venusian were staged in 151 B.C. by Marcus Fulvius Nobilior, who imported large numbers of Greeks to perform in Rome. A century later, the dictator Lucius Cornelius Scipio managed to establish a gymnasium in the city, which meant that in 151 B.C. (the best that Olympia could put on for its games was the foot race), sports were assisted by Pompey, Julius Caesar and Augustus.

Both Barcelona and Claudius staged gymnastic competitions for the Roman people, using foreign athletes, and the last emperor to provide Greek sports with their most sincere and enthusiastic support was Nero. Nero's interest in Greek sports was shown in his A.D. 50 at the Isthmian or Youth Games, in which nobles were again encouraged to enter. Nero's personal participation, the upper classes in a variety of aquatic events and recitations of poetry and song, and his own riding of a horse in the Neronian, to be staged every four years after the model of the Greek games. He had a Greek style gymnastic complex in A.D. 62, called as part of his baths or gymnasia that on the occasion of his victory on the Panathenaic, that was the first such structure to be erected in Rome.

That the reaction of Nero's more conservative contemporaries to these games was not entirely positive may be gauged by Tacitus' description of the reception the crowds at the age of 17. Of the career did not prevent people from acting in Greek or Latin style—from from the originalators of effeminate gestures and songs. Eminent women, too, re-used indecent parts. Places such as the Forum were built, and every stimulus to vice was displayed for sale. Prominently so, decadence and degradation. Thrice did Piso tell us that "the morals had long become insane, but never was there so favorable an environment for debauches as among this filthy crowd" (Ann. pp. 310—11, M. Grant trans.). Perhaps, the insinuations of sexual transgressions were no longer in the air, but we do hear of one Pulfrians Sura, son of a consul, wrestling naked with a girl from Sparta.

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Apart from music, Nero's greatest passion was for horses, riding a well as driving them, an interest that ex-
citedly steamed from his childhood. During his reign he defended his unprecedented (for an emperor) obsession with chariot racing as being kindly, ancient, and sanctified by religion and the ancient poets. Artists and literati were instructed to suppress the rough behavior of some of the circus drivers by sub-
stituting dog for horse races. Nero intervened on behalf of the drivers. In A.D. 50 he personally drove a team of horses in the Egyptian circus before a private audience. Soon after, despite Senatorial disappro-
val, the public was admitted to repeat performances. In later years the emperor's hair was clipped in steps like a charioteer's. Much of his career was devoted to chariot racing in Greece. He fell during the Olympic games and could not finish the course, but the judges prudently pronounced him the winner anyhow and pocketed a large prize. Back in Rome he hung his trophies in his bedroom but with the giving a public exhibition of all 1,908!

After Nero's death the games faded away until Diocletian replaced them in A.D. 301 with the Augusta Capitoline at its Circus Agora-
alis, on the site of the present-day Circus Maximus, in the hope of holding some thirty thousand spectators. Like the Nero, these games were sponsored by the government, and although they were held for three days, the professional athletes were recruited by this time largely re-
cruited from among Greeks and the population of the empire.

E. N. Gordon cites the careers of one Titus Flavius Artemidorus of Athens and Cilicia, who won the priz-
ings in the first Capitoline Games in A.D. 36, as well as the four major Panhellenic Games in Greece and in numerous other imperial centers.

Prizes were awarded personally by Domitian, who presided over the contests wearing a Greek purple mantle and Greek shoes; on his head he bore a golden crown with the image of the Capitoline Venus, Minerva, Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. The events themselves were an odd mixture of traditional Greek athletic and artistic performance, with prizes given out for foot races and chariot races as well as for poetry, dice-throwing and Greek poetry, javelin casting and music. It was Domitian who dictated the terms of Donatus' death and, the subject of such emperors as Hadrian and Trajan. His Olympic Games (A.D. 138—141), lasted down to the 4th century, their appeal and that of other games diminished the games, exten-
sively because of the nakedness of their participants, but more likely because they found them a bore. Despite this fact, or perhaps even because of it, the foreign athletes were granted special privileges in Rome and the right to form their own guilds called sympos. The games were transferred from Narbo Martius to Rome, especially because they found them a bore. The games were transferred from Narbo Martius to Rome, perhaps during the reign of Ha-
drian, and it was provided with its own gymnasium on the Esquili-
The big, imperially sponsored baths, such as those of Titus, Nero, Trajan, Caracalla (Fig. 4), and Diocletian (Fig. 5), have been called "thermal cities" because of their sprawling size and extraordinary range of facilities. Apart from every type of bathing installation imaginable (short of paenulae), they included libraries, sitting rooms, art galleries, formal gardens, covered walks, and . . . palaestrae."

III. Sports Fever

So Tom gave himself up to the contemplation of the rooms in which his fortunate acquaintance dwelt.

There was a queer assortment of well-framed paintings and engravings on the walls, . . . Phidias winning the Derby; the Death of Gribblou (the famous steeplechase horse—not poor Joe) in a Trotting Match, and Joe Belscher and Dolf Bobe in attitudes of self-defense. Several tandem and riding whirls, mounted in heavy silver, and a double-barreled gun and fishing rods, occupied one corner, and a polished copper cask, holding about five gallons of mild ale, stood in another. In short, there was plenty of "everything except books." (Tom Brown at Oxford, 23-24.)

The evidence developed thus far for a specifically Roman interest in personal athletics is altogether sparse, but what there is suggests that its principal appeal lay, at least during the Republican period, in developing military skills and fostering a patriotic spirit. Accurate as far as it goes, this reconstruction would be incomplete without a word about the thermae or baths, which, during the empire, provided for Romans of all ages what the 19th-century British public schools and universities gave their cloistered youth—a haven and an excuse for a virtually unlimited indulgence in exercise and athletics. These establishments, built for public use on increasingly greater scales of lavishness and size, numbered in the capital city as many as 170 by 33 B.C. when Agrippa took a census of their number. A century later Flavius the Elder found them too numerous to count, although it has been estimated that something approaching a thousand thermae existed in Rome alone before its decay in later antiquity.

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The Game of Trigon

"All at once we saw a bald old man [Dumplin—Ed.] in a red Riding Habit playing at ball with some long-haired boys. It was not the boys that attracted our notice, though they deserved it but the old gentleman, who was in his hose-shoes, sturdily engaged with a green ball. He never picked it up if it touched the ground. A slave stood near him with a bagful and supplied them to the players. Two coppers were standing at different points in the group. One held a silver Jordan [wide-necked jar]; one counted the balls, not as they flew from hand to hand in the rigour of the game, but when they dropped to the ground (Universal, Sat. p. 39, Leech trans.). This game has been identified as trigon, which seems to be depicted on a wall painting in the Baths of Trajan in Rome (Fig. 6). Each player was posted at the corner of the triangle. The object was to throw balls back and forth as fast as possible, catching them with one hand and tossing back to one or the other of your opponents with the other.

The Baths of Diocletian in Rome (Botham and Ward-Perkins, p. 301, Fig. 190).

Plan of the Baths of Diocletian in Rome (Botham and Ward-Perkins, p. 301, Fig. 190).

Restored interior of the Great Hall of the Baths of Caracalla, built between A.D. 217 and 223 (see Folkes, pl. opp. p. 370).
lined up on the ground; the latter game seems to combine features of playing marbles with bocce. A 3rd century A.D. sarcophagus (Figs. 8, 9) in the Lateran Museum in Rome depicts, on the left, cupids rolling hoops with sticks. In the center children ride piggy-back ("chicken fight") and play with nuts or marbles, while to the right they hurl balls with throwing sticks (Roman jai-alai?). None of these children's games, however, necessarily took place within the thermal palestras.

A different sort of palestra exercise, borrowed from the training programs for army recruits and gladiators, involved shadow-fencing with a rapier either against a pole (ad palum) or a dummy. Martial mentions a woman engaging in this particular form of exercise. Yet another form of exercise made use of a ball called the eqpes, which was filled with either earth or flour and then pummelled. The Greek version of this may be what is represented on the familiar mid-4th century B.C. bronze Ficoroni cista (cylindrical covered box) from Praeneste that depicts one of the Argonauts punching a stitched bag hanging from a tree, to the evident amusement of his silent companion (Fig. 10). Running, running and rolling a hoop (trichina) at the same time, and...
occupy the lower ground, wearing loin cloths marked with their names, Titus and Cassius, in the vocative case. The figure to the left holds a brush and bucket (for applying the dust?). The figure on the right (Fig. 12) wears a tall conical hat which may represent a victory trophy. While some scholars describe the large figures as boxers, none wear the coriace or loaded boxing glove, and they are better interpreted as wrestlers. Despite their Roman sounding names, to Roman eyes these figures would have had the brutal appearance and overdeveloped bodies of proletarian, non-Hellenistic foreigners and are therefore surely professional performers as opposed to amateur athletes.

This brings us at last to the famous floor mosaics (Figs. 13–15) in the Vatican Museum, found in 1824 in a semicircular exedra (recess with raised seats) of the Baths of Caracalla. Their date is probably the 3rd century A.D. These mosaics portray, in individual panelled settings, victorious athletes and gymnast officials. Of the recognisable types there are a boxer wearing the cestus, a javelin thrower, a discus thrower, and what is probably a wrestler. Each is placed on a low mat-like plinth that suggests that they may represent statues rather than actual victors. Smaller squared panels depict busts of additional athletes and victory crowns, decorated with raised images of doves, which recall a Roman crown with the images of the Capitoline Triad and further suggest that the victories here may have been achieved in the
Agones Capitolines. Incidentally, the mosaic crowns are roughly similar to the crown worn by the 4th century marble head of a priest from Turkish Caesarea (Kayseri) in The University Museum’s Roman gallery. Despite their bathing establishment provenience, these brutal depictions of heavily developed men, with slightly moronic expressions, closely cropped hair, and projecting top-knots of hair (ciari in cerute), must portray professionals who made their living in the imperially sponsored games rather than amateurs, who would in any case never have boxed with spiked, “limb-piercing” caestus.

As so often is the case, it seems that the professional athlete was far more frequently of public interest than the amateur.

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