

The National Herald, June 19-20, 2004.

Training Body and Mind for Arete

By E.G. Vallianatos

Stephen G. Miller, Ancient Greek Athletics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 288pp

With the Olympics returning to Athens after more than a century of making the rounds among a few Western and technologically advanced non-Western cities, it is necessary to go to the roots. Greece gave birth to the Olympics, but where did this global athletic competition come from? What was the original purpose of competing in running, throwing the discus and the javelin? Does the modern Olympics, embedded as it is in the multi-billion dollar industry of television, commerce, and the commodity of the athletes themselves, have any virtue, which one can trace to its ancient Greek origins?

Answers to these timely questions are not easy. However, it helps to know the history of Greek athletics. Then you can compare and contrast not merely the athletic games in ancient Greece and the modern world, but the societies reflected by these games. Remember, however, that the Greeks competed in the nude and their athletic competition was primarily an expression of piety to their gods. These basic characteristics put Greek sports on a team unmatched in history. All the Panhellenic and local games took place at the sanctuaries of the gods: Zeus was the god of the Olympics and the Nemean games; Apollon was the god for the Pythian games and Poseidon was the patron of the isthmian games.

Stephen G. Miller, professor of classical archaeology at the University of California-Berkeley, is of enormous help in the history of Greek sports. His “Ancient Greek Athletics” is an absorbing story and a great work of learning of when, how, and why the Greeks started the Olympics and the other local and Panhellenic athletic games. Miller is a meticulous researcher who knows how to reconstruct, from the surviving evidence, the facilities Greek athletes used for education and the practicing of their passion – running, jumping, throwing of the discus, the javelin, wrestling, and horse chariot racing. He worked for some thirty years excavating the stadium at the sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea, one of the four Panhellenic athletic centers of the Greek world. This personal involvement with Greek athletics -- teaching, writing, and

digging and restoring Greek sports antiquities -- gives his book the rare feeling of authentic knowledge and passion for things athletic and Greek.

One may disagree with him, like I do, on issues of interpretation, but the facts he presents suffice to painting the best picture we have of the life of athletics in Greek civilization. Yet his vision of athletics among the Greeks is unnecessarily restricted, primarily, to utilitarian ends. He sees the athletes using athletics in order to display their prowess, their manly courage, *arête*; society entertaining itself with the annual or quadrennial athletic festivals; and the polis exploiting the propaganda value of the athletic games. True, athletics are not simply about competition for a prize or for the achievement of perfection or an expression of the Greeks' piety to their gods. It's all that and more. Greek athletes dreaming of going to Olympia had first to graduate from a "gymnasion-palaistra." This was a school for the education of nude athletes, an academy where "paidotribai" (trainers), musicians, philosophers, and grammarians trained their bodies and minds to practice *arête*, excellence in both sports and life. *Arete* was courage, nobility, and virtue. So, despite the shortcomings of the athletes, and the unseemly behavior of some poleis, the Olympics and the other local and Panhellenic athletic celebrations never became sole venues for entertainment. Says Miller, "athletic competitions were not essential to the health and welfare of the city." On the contrary, athletics were central to the well being of the Greeks, their religion, art, education, deep yearning for a political union, and for the celebration of their common culture. The Olympics is a perfect mirror of the Greek spirit -- joining the divine with the human in honest athletic competitions, bringing forth the virtue of courage and perfection. Miller argues convincingly, however, that Greek nude athletics went hand in hand with the development of Greek democratic institutions, especially in pioneering democratic poleis like Kroton, in southern Italy, and Athens.

Miller was also instrumental in the foundation of the Society for the Revival of the Nemean Games, which, in 1996 and 2000, brought the Nemean games back to life, at least, reviving a version of a foot race that pleased 1,300 participants from 45 countries. The third Nemead is scheduled to take place on July 31, 2004. Call in Greece: 0746-024125 and in the United States: 510-642-5924.

Miller's book deserves to be read, particularly by Greeks and Greek Americans. Like his life, it is the summary of a profound experience with a great civilization. It is also Miller's narrative story paralleling a source book

he edited about Greek athletics: “Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources” (University of California Press, 2004). But, above all, “Ancient Greek Athletics” is a page of Greek history, well written and richly illustrated with Greek vase paintings, which provide a beautiful picture of the evolution of athletics in the Greek world. It bothers me, however, that most of the vase paintings documenting the history of Greek sports come from vases in foreign museums. And this is another reason modern Greeks ought to learn their history in order to prevent more plunder of their culture. Miller’s book is an eye opener. Read it.

E.G. Vallianatos (evallian@umd.edu), a writer on ecopolitics and Greek history, is a visiting professor of agrarian policy and the global environment at the department of Natural Resource Sciences at the University of Maryland.