

If the recent Olympic extravaganza failed to fill you with enthusiasm for athletics, you're in good company: some of the most illustrious of ancient minds also stubbornly refused to be impressed. Plato, for example, thought that athletes would be inappropriate leaders in his ideal Republic because their obsession with physical training detracted from proper care of the soul (and drained their energy, making them sleepy and vulnerable to illness). The Roman philosopher Seneca, likewise, dismissed athletic training and urged his friend Lucilius to devote his efforts to the exercise of the mind through philosophy. Here I shall offer the views of some early Greek poets on both sides of the question: one whose job was to praise the victorious athletes, and a couple of others whose verses are not likely to be

recommended reading in the chambers of the IOC (no matter how much money may be offered in bribes) or in the athletes' dressing rooms (no matter what drugs they may be taking).

But first, the positive opinions. Above all the other pan-Hellenic athletic festivals (the Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian games were arranged at two- and four-year intervals so that no year passed without at least one major competition) and the numerous local athletic contests in each region, the Olympic games were the most ancient and prestigious. The first games were held at Olympia in 776 BC, and their renown was spread throughout the Greek world by such poets as Pindar, who made a career out of composing epinician odes—poems celebrating the athletic triumphs of his wealthy and noble patrons.

*If of athletic games
you wish to sing, my heart,
look no further than the sun
for another, warmer star
bright in the day's empty sky,
nor let us proclaim any contest
greater than Olympia.*

These are some of Pindar's most famous lines from his First Olympian Ode, written exactly three centuries after those first Olympic contests. Pindar writes in other poems that Olympia is the 'mistress of truth' and that the Olympics are 'the most sublime of games'; by winning a victory there, a man may 'achieve the utmost, and grasp the pillars of Herakles'.

There is no secure evidence to suggest that Trampoline or Beach Volleyball formed any part of the Olympic programme in ancient Greece, but alongside such glorious events as the prestigious chariot race and the bloodthirsty *pankration* (an 'anything-goes' combat sport in which only biting and eye-gouging were forbidden) we find the lowly and unglamorous mule-car race. This seems to have been an ill-conceived experiment which was eventually abandoned after half a century of competitions, and the epinician poet Simonides apparently refused to dignify this event with a song until he was offered extra money. (Even then he couldn't bring himself to utter the word 'mules', but preferred to address the ignoble beasts with the lofty verse 'Hail, daughters of storm-footed steeds!') But even the mule-car race can provide an Olympic enthusiast like Pindar with the occasion for his Sixth

Olympian Ode; it is a feast for the senses with its colours, honey, breezes and bowls of song, and it begins with a metaphor for the poetic 'construction' of the fame of a victorious athlete:

*Placing golden columns to support
the strong-walled porch of our chamber,
let us build a wondrous palace; for once a work
is begun, its face must be made far-shining.*

But long before Pindar was doing his bit for promoting the Olympic ideal, other voices had already been raised in protest. The seventh-century Spartan poet Tyrtaios believed that athletic pursuits were simply not macho enough (at the time he was writing, the mule-car race had not yet had its brief moment in the limelight); a real man's duty was to fight and die on the battlefield. One of Tyrtaios' poems (fragment 12) begins:

*I would make no mention or account of a man
for his excellence in running or wrestling,
not even a man of Cyclopean size and strength,
and able to outrun the North Wind ...*

This 'excellence' (*aretê*), athletic prowess, is of little use; the best kind of *aretê*, says Tyrtaios, is the ability and determination to fight in the front rank, defending one's comrades and city-state (*polis*), winning the respect of one's fellow-citizens and undying fame. 'Even when he is beneath the earth', says Tyrtaios of his ideal man, 'he is immortal'. By the tenth line of this 44-line poem, the subject of athletics has been dropped altogether so that the poet can concentrate on military excellence, which is 'a common good for the *polis* and the whole people'.

The question of what is 'good' or 'useful' for the state, then, is important to Tyrtaios; athletic prowess does not meet his standard. A similar observation, though with a different conclusion, is made by the sixth-century philosopher and poet Xenophanes of Kolophon. One of his poems (fragment 2) begins by cataloguing some of the benefits bestowed upon Olympic victors:

*If someone were to win by the speed of his feet
or in the pentathlon, where the precinct of Zeus
lies by Pisa's streams in Olympia, or in wrestling,
or enduring painful blows in boxing,*

*or that terrible contest they call the pankration,
he would be a glorious sight for his fellow-citizens,
he would win a front-row seat at the contests,
he would have food from the public storehouse
of the city, and a gift for him to treasure –
and he would get all this, too, if he won with his horses,
though he deserves it less than I do.*

The custom of bestowing such honours upon victorious athletes is misguided and irrational, says Xenophanes a few lines later, because 'it is not right to prefer physical strength over good *sophiê*'. The Greek word *sophiê* is conventionally translated as 'wisdom' (as in *philosophy*, 'love of wisdom'), but it also has connotations of 'skill' or 'expertise', and particularly poetic craftsmanship; the early Greek poets use this word to describe their own artistry. Tyrtaios said that athletic excellence was inferior to a soldier's excellence, but here Xenophanes gives the gold medal to poetry. This *sophiê*, he says, is 'better than men's or horses' strength', because it brings good order to the *polis*; Olympic victories cannot do this, and it is therefore wrong to treat victorious athletes as living heroes (the honours listed by Xenophanes are reminiscent of those claimed by Sarpedon in the *Iliad*). In the end, he says,

*not much joy would come to the city
if a man should win in the games by Pisa's banks;
for this does not fatten the city's treasury.*

This lack of benefits (both material and moral) to the citizen body as a whole, in Xenophanes' opinion, makes both the games themselves and the lavish treatment of the victors a pointless pageant; it would be far better, he says, to honour 'wise' poets like himself for the good they do in public life. Through their songs, they can encourage reflection on the nature of community and morality, teaching the people to be good citizens so that the *polis* as a whole can prosper. I said earlier that Xenophanes' poem would not appeal to Olympic bureaucrats or athletes, but perhaps it deserves a place on the reading lists of politicians who sneer at the study of literature—particularly of the ancient Greek variety—and fill the air with panyrics of world-class Olympic mega-cities.