SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

Book Review: Sport in the Ancient World from A to Z

By Pasko Varnica

**Sport in the Ancient World from A to Z** by Mark Golden, first published in 2004 by Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group

For the sake of transparency, I must disclose that the picture of a gladiator on the book’s cover turned me off. The book is about sports in the ancient world. I have argued on several occasions that gladiator shows should not be classified as sport.

I can only guess that it was not the author but the publisher who due to the ineffable draw and mystic of gladiators selected the cover picture.

The book’s cover is the first thing that one sees. After purchasing the book, I read the introduction. Do not skip it; the intro contains several enlightening points. A question in the introduction left me speechless, so to speak. The author asks if gladiatorial combats can be, and I quote “considered sport at all”.

That question was a pleasant surprise. I have yet to find anyone critically examining the context of gladiatorial shows. They are blindly placed under the heading of sport by publications about entertainment and life in ancient Rome. No other book about sport in the antiquity - that I have read, mind you - deals with the issue or offers any reflections, analysis or thought, you name it, on the topic. Nikephoros, the highly touted journal for sports and culture in antiquity, has never raised the issue.

The author goes on by explaining that he chose to include gladiatorial combats in the book because a) they were a real competition with unpredictable results, b) the combatants followed conventions and rules, c) the winners received significant rewards and, finally, d) in the Greek portion of the Roman Empire, they were assimilated into sport. Gladiators considered themselves athletes and the combats were sponsored by the same people who put up Greek athletic games. To this list, I would add the presence of a manager/coach in *lanista*, the owner of a gladiators’ school and the existence of said schools, which could be viewed as teams of modern times.

Nevertheless, I remain of the opinion that gladiatorial shows were a popular entertainment, an extravagant spectacle, a skilled performance and a brutal contest, but that they were not sport. Not because I find gladiatorial combats repugnant, they were, or for any moral dilemma. An essential aspect of a sport is to have fans, enthusiastic devotees, who are faithful to their team and have established a life-long emotional connection. They identify themselves with a team, wear the colors, aspire to emulate the best athletes and look forward to root and cheer during games. Watching our favorite team compete brings out our passions. All of that was true for chariot racing factions and not for gladiators’ schools.

I commend Mike Golden, the author, for bringing up the topic. He is one of few academics and historians who have an understanding of sport, a rare combination.

The editorial review of **Sport in the Ancient World from A to Z** on Amazon states that “it is a good read….which keeps the page turning” is misleading. This comment implies that the reader would begin with page 1 as any other book and would continue reading by turning pages. That can hardly be the case. You would access this book for consultation only as any other standard reference work.

WARNING TO THE READER: This is not a book, but rather an encyclopedia or, as the official description states, a dictionary-format volume.

Good, bad or indifferent, I wanted to bring it up should the buyer have different expectations.

The publisher must have compelled the author to write in an “A to Z” format as it matches other books in the same series. That format may fit other topics, but it fails for a history subject. You must know who or what you are after. Then you would thumb though the book to find it. Let us think about it. How would you become interested in a historical sport figure or event? I guess, by reading about it in another history book. Why you would then consult this book? For a better description? To double-check? Personally, I am not sure how to use and access this book.

I think that a better format with top headings and subheadings would make it much more useful. One top heading could be, say, Olympic Games, subheading Winners, another top heading could be Chariot Racing and so forth.

That said **Sport in the Ancient World from A to Z** is effective in its intent to list sport figures and events from the antiquity. It begins with Abigeus, a Roman chariot horse and ends 179 pages later with Zygios, member of a Greek four-horse chariot team. In addition, it contains a chronology of important dates and an index of topics. Descriptions are well written, concise and clear. As far as completeness, it reflects the predilection of the academia for Greek sports over the Roman ones. The reader gets the impression that the author is versed in Greek sports and weak in the Roman ones. Admittedly, it is easy to criticize a reference volume by saying that it is too short here or too long there. We have our own biases and I favor sport in ancient Rome over Greece. It must be noted that the focus is the Western world, that is, Greek and Roman.

One last item: with the internet today, does anyone really need this book? Hardly, but, hey, at a $1 for a used copy, if you are even remotely interested in sport in the ancient world, you ought to have it.