SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

Fantasy Chariot Races

[ *De Ludi Circenses Imaginarî* ]

By Pasko Varnica

Part 4: Diocles arrives

A burst of hooting and hollering from the spectators made me look up. One of the horses running around the track had trampled a slave. Lazy slave! With one less slave to clean and one more body to carry off, I expected the crowd to turn irritated.

Chariots competing in the 8th race lined up in the cages before the slaves had finished pouring sand and leveling the track. Whether the presiding magistrate decided to appease the impatient mob or whether it was planned, although it did not show on the race card, Diocles, with his lead horse Pompeianus, stood conspicuously on his *quadriga* in the second cage. I watched, palms of my open hands holding my chin up, fingers spread across my cheeks. As more and more people realized that Diocles was going to race next, Circus Maximus quieted down for the first time today. Spectators were in an almost religious trance. When the white flag dropped and the gates opened, Circus Maximus exploded. Clamor coming out of the Circus, louder than a hundred of Jupiter’s thunders could have been heard throughout the entire city of Rome. Two chariots from each faction competed in a double race. There is nothing more thrilling in the world than watch eight *quadrigae* barrel down the track and make tight turns around the *metae*.

All eyes were on Diocles. To the spectators he appeared as melting with, he seemed as one with his chariot and his horses. In his typical fashion, prodding the horses with the reins and not relying on the whip, Diocles came from behind in the last lap and won the race without needing much help from his team’s secondary driver.

Diocles raced six more times, including the 24th and last race, winning them all. Points accumulated by Diocles in our fantasy game gave Calvus the win. I ended up second thanks to the wisdom given to me by Minerva for picking Diocles' Reds faction. I gave the winnings to Calvus.

Ovation from the last race has not died down yet and my heart was still pounding fast in my heaving chest when Diocles returned from the stables. Dressed in a blood-red tunic, he drove a red and gold colored *biga* drawn by horses draped in red. His entire team, stable handlers, groomers, chariot builders, horse trainers and owners, all dressed in red tunics, followed him on foot.

At the entrance the *praetor* handed him a palm frond and the victory wreath. Diocles placed the wreath over his head and rested it on his broad shoulders. Two slaves sent by the presiding magistrate waited under the podium. A silver vase full to the brim with gold coins stood on top of a small pedestal next to them. Diocles, at the head of his entourage moved down the track in the direction of the Triumphal Arch. Under the podium he picked up the silver vase with both hands and lifted it over his head. Then, smile beaming from his handsome face, he turned from side to side to show the vase off to the adoring crowd. The exhilarated spectators, shouting praises and adulations to Diocles, spun madly over their heads their togas or tunics or towels or handkerchiefs or, a few, even their loincloths. Imagine the scene if you can, although I doubt that a mere human can conjure a mental picture of a quarter of the city’s population in a state of euphoria squeezed in a small valley between *Mons Aventinus* and the Palatine Hill.

I looked at my friends. Calvus, wearing an expression of muted satisfaction on his face, stood with his arms crossed over his chest. Attalus and Bassus were caught by the excitement. I was happy in my exhaustion. My mind drifted to the next race. I was certain that I will draft Diocles if I have the first pick. When I dream, I do not dream of money; I dream of first round picks. As my hand extended to reach the race card in the satchel my countenance changed. I stripped my toga off and bunched and twisted it into a fold. Then I started spinning it over my head while bellowing on the top of my lungs in the direction of Diocles.

Soon thereafter the Reds’ victory procession reached the steps at the foot of the Triumphal Arch. Diocles drove his horses up the steps, entered the middle gate and disappeared from my view. Spectators sitting around the top of the curves adjacent the Arch leaped to the top of the stands to catch one last glimpse of him. The lucky ones who have reached the top wall and had a view of the street below begun yelling and gesticulating with both arms. Diocles must have come into their view.

Afternoon was waning. I imagined that Diocles, bathed by the setting burnished yellow sun on the road leading to the Palatine Hill, must have seemed made of gold. A moment later, another loud roar came from those perched on the wall. Diocles had turned around, looked up and waved at them marking, with that last wave, the end of a glorious day at the races.

**Author’s note**

Inscription on Diocles’ memorial records his 1,462 victories with 4-horse chariots. Gaius Appuleius Diocles raced in the 2nd century C.E. He began his career with the Whites team and finished his racing years with the Reds team. In late republican and early Imperial times, races were held by four chariot factions. They were known by the colors of the tunics worn by the charioteers. The four colors were red, white, green and blue. “Passions aroused in favor of one or other of these colors could divide families and wreck friendships” wrote F.R. Cowell in his “Life in Ancient Rome” (1961).

Some claim that Diocles may have been the highest-paid athlete of all time. This assertion is based on amount of sesterces he earned in his lifetime inscribed in his memorial. It is difficult to argue whether Diocles was the highest-paid or not because of the lack of evidence of other charioteers’ earnings. What we know is that indeed the best charioteers were the highest-paid athletes of all time. They were showered in gold after winning a race. To put things in perspective, add the salaries of all 6,000 or so professional baseball players active today. Yes, everyone’s salary! The final sum total of all the salaries pales when compared to the fortune accumulated by Diocles by the time of his retirement in 146 C.E.

The original version of the Author’s Note contained the bibliography of the sources used to write this fictional short story. The bibliography and historical references are gone. I have removed them. I am not an academic who needs approval for his tenure nor is my intent to impress the reader with my knowledge of the topic.

That said, I am challenging the reader to find possible historical inaccuracies. Let’s get in touch if you find an error or even an imprecision or should you have any questions about this short fiction. I am looking forward to a friendly chat about Chariot Races. Poetical license has allowed me to be semi-inaccurate with the use of an imperative verb.…I will say no more….find it.