SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

Rules for chariot racing

By Pasko Varnica

I was motivated to write this article by the answer given to a question that appears on [www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com). The home page of the Answers.com web site proudly tells us that, I quote, “Answers.com is a top-20 comScore site that empowers consumers with the authoritative and trustworthy information they need to make better-informed decisions”.

The question I am referring to asks, “What are the rules for Chariot Racing?” The reply, copy/pasted here for your enjoyment, states that “apparently, there are arent any! basically its the first chariot round the track 7 times that wins. there was no such thing as cheating, causing crashes was a legal and encouraged tactic!”

The WikiAnswers® Community provided the answer. WikiAnswers is a community-generated social knowledge Q&A platform, using wiki-based technologies.

The answer provided by WikiAnswers is manifestly wrong. There were many rules and crashes were not encouraged. Utmost fairness was of key importance to both the ancient Romans who organized chariot racing and the spectating public.

Let’s first review the laws governing the start of a race. To begin with, chariots waited in aptly called *carceres* (Latin for cages) that enclosed one end of the oval. The rules assured that each chariot had the same opportunity to reach the starting white line independently of the location of his cage.

* The praetor, that is, the presiding magistrate, by dropping a small white flag, marked the start of the race.
* While this may be similar to the gunshot that signals the start of today foot races or to the semaphore changing from red to green light for car competitions, horses did not leave the cages at the drop of the flag. To ensure that all horses started at the same instant, iron gates held the impatient horses inside cages. The dropping of the flag was the signal to activate a complex mechanism of pulleys that opened all eight gates simultaneously.
* The cages were constructed in an arc to ensure that the distance to the starting line is absolutely the same from each cage. The picture at the top-left of this page shows the design of the circus. Both pictures are from Roman Circuses, Arenas For Chariot Racing, by John H. Humphrey, University of California Press, 1986.
* The wall, known as euripus or spine, that ran the length of the arena to separate the laps laid off-axis. Off-axis position can clearly be seen in the pictures of the model of a circus taken at the Archeological Museum in Barcelona and available on this web site. The article in question is titled “Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya”. I invite the reader to access the pictures. The purpose of an off-axis construction was the same as above, that is, to ensure that the distance to the starting line is absolutely identical in length for all racing chariots.
* Once the gates were open and the horses have left the cages, the chariots were compelled to follow a designated path to the starting line. Each cage had the path marked by two white lines; see the top-right picture. This drawing shows a hypothetical representation of the lines leading from the cages to the starting line. Any transgression would invalidate the race and force a re-start. Incidentally, since the horses reached the starting line galloping at full speed, this arrangement allowed a highly spectacular running start. The race begun after the starting line was crossed.

This description of the construction details was not limited to the Circus Maximum in Rome. All circuses and hippodromes built in antiquity and in late antiquity followed an almost standardized blueprint. There were two driving forces behind the conformity of the design; one was the need for fairness as we have just seen. The other prerequisite for standardization was the endurance capacity of the racehorses. The length of the track and the fact that a race consisted of seven laps was the outcome of ancient Roman’s knowledge and understanding of racehorses. They knew that if forced to run at the break-neck speed beyond their limit, the animals could be permanently damaged. There were smaller arenas around the Empire, but never longer ones.

Horses bred for chariot racing were held in high esteem. They were celebrities in their own right. All had a pedigree, have received extensive training and each had a proper name recognized by the general public. The daily program distributed to the spectators on a wooden tablet among other details identified the horses by their name. Betting was based not only on the fame of the charioteer but equally on the prowess of his horses. Consequently circuses and hippodromes were built in accordance to design rules that ensured that the race sponsors and stable owners did not lose their precious possessions to overexertion.

Given all that, how is it possible to suggest that crashes that could potentially kill horses were encouraged? I can only guess that due to the utter ignorance of the chariot racing in general and a prejudiced attitude due to the well-known violence of gladiatorial combats, WikiAnswers® Community assumed the spectators would enjoy watching crashes. The reality is that chariot racing for most Romans was a sport while gladiatorial combats were a spectacle. Clarifying the differences between sports and spectacles is beyond the scope of this article. While it is undeniable that the Roman society was more violent than the modern day one, even fights between gladiators rarely ended in death.

Charioteers were famous personality’s equivalent to modern sports and movies stars. They were paid extremely well and their presence attracted crowds. A crash, called by the Romans *naufragio* (Latin for shipwreck), endangered the lives of both the charioteers and his racehorses. Encouraging accidents would be counterproductive and against the interests of the race sponsors.

And yet, collisions inevitably happened. Charioteers carried a knife to cut the reins that were wrapped around their waists in case they fell from the chariot to prevent being dragged by the horses. And yes, few charioteers lived to old age. However, the crashes were encouraged by neither the sponsors nor the spectators nor did the drivers intentionally cause them. There are no extant records suggesting that crashes were a legal and accepted tactic.

Readers interested in expanding their knowledge of chariot racing are encouraged to peruse this web site.