SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

# SPORTS? WHAT FRIVOLITY – Part 1

Book Review: **Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman Empire**, Edited by D.S. Potter and D.J. Mattingly

“**Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman Empire**” [[1]](#footnote-1) is frequently found in the bibliography of recent literature about Roman history. The book is edited by D.S. Potter and D.J. Mattingly. Its back jacket states that the volume offers a *starting point in understanding the extraordinary range of Roman society.*

“Entertainment” in the title lead me to look into the book’s treatment of sports. Sport was a major component of the daily life of the Roman people. On the one hand, I was suspicious given the trend to consider sports unworthy of scholarly studies. On the other, I was curious and optimistic because the jacket advertises *latest developments* and *diverse subjects*.

**Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman Empire** is a collection of essays. This review pertains only to the last two essays. They are: “Amusing the masses” and “Entertainers in the Roman Empire”. Other essays are about Roman family, demography, religion and the feeding of the City. They are out of the scope of this review. This examination is limited to the subject of sports.

The first of the two essays under review, “*Amusing the masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World”* is exactly about what the title states. It is an architectural study. It presents the characteristics of theatres, amphitheaters, stadiums, hippodromes and bathhouses and it briefly describes the events held there. The author’s admiration for the structures built by the Romans exudes from the pages. I wish that the author also cared about the original reason these buildings where constructed.

I imagined that a subject as exalted as architecture was deployed to dress up topics such as chariot racing and pantomime that are unworthy of a serious treatment. Casting my cynicism apart, I must concede that a short account is better than total neglect - see **Sports! What frivolity – part 2**.

The essay begins with a trite cliché by referencing Juvenal’s aphorism that Roman people cared for nothing but bread and circuses. A footnote adds that *this is obviously an* *oversimplification* without providing any further elucidation or any contextual explanation. J.P.V.D. Balsdon[[2]](#footnote-2) observed that an attempt to portray Roman people by bringing up Juvenal’s quip is akin to describing modern English as only obsessed with free medical care and the football pools. It is quite apparent that the author struggled to launch the topic. Could it be that the last thing the author wanted is to become familiar with something as trivial and frivolous as sports and found an easy introduction in Juvenal?

The essay comes across as contemptuous and insulting by implying that only the uneducated and unsophisticated mob was interested in entertainment as depraved as chariot racing and gladiatorial shows. Little wonder that the title of the essay is “*Amusing the masses*”. One is to deduce that the Roman elite were above such entertainment.

That conclusion is patently wrong. Fans of chariot races and pantomime came from all social classes. Equites and senators had their seats reserved in the front of the race arenas. Even the Vestals had their personal seats, right below the Emperor’s podium. Most emperors, both from the Western and the Eastern Empires, professed their partisanship. Undoubtedly, each emperor had his own degree of interest. Some were avid fans, like Nero.[[3]](#footnote-3) Emperor Anastasius publicly favored a minor faction probably to avoid controversy.[[4]](#footnote-4)

If you are into drawings of building plans, this essay is for you. Otherwise, do not bother with it and move on.

The last piece of the collection is “*Entertainers in the Roman Empire*”. It consists of three sections: Actors and Athletes, Chariot Racing and Gladiators, Beast Hunts and Executions.

I would pair Actors and Gladiators. In fact, actors performed in a theatre and gladiators in an amphitheater. Their performances were spectacles; they entertained the audience and, at the end of the show, they disappeared from the minds of the spectators. Unlike chariot racing which was a competition and had loyal and lasting fans. The pain or joy of witnessing your team winning or losing is a radically different emotional experience than being merely entertained by attending a spectacle such as a theatrical presentation or a gladiatorial show.

In my opinion, the author placed actors and athletes in the same section because it gave him an opportunity to elaborate at length about their Greek origins. It is apparent that he was more at ease with Greece than with Rome. His fascination with Hellenism is obvious. The section about chariot racing, which the author admits was *peculiarly Roman*, even describes the races held in Greece.

Granted, there is nothing wrong with a historical perspective. Nevertheless, a book about the Roman Empire should strive to dedicate all of its available space to Rome. This is a minor quibble. The biggest sin is yet to come.

The essay begins the section about chariot racing by describing the Nike revolt of 532[[5]](#footnote-5). They raced for a 1,000 years and this is how the author introduces the topic to a novice? Starting with the Nike revolt strikes me as journalistic sensationalism. I wonder what impression a person new to chariot racing can infer about the sport when the first thing he reads about it is a bloody revolt. The novice is already familiar with the brutality of the gladiatorial shows. No doubt, the savagery of the Roma society must be firmly impressed in his mind by now. Most of whatever follows about chariot racing is probably lost on him.

The final section is about gladiators. I abhor mixing chariot racing, clearly a mass *spectator* sport, with gladiatorial shows, which are unadulterated spectacle. Those who combine gladiators and chariot racing in the same sentence do not understand the essence of sports, the partisanship and the rooting for one’s home colors. The difference appears lost on the author who must dismiss sports as any other distraction.

True, plays, gladiator shows and chariot races belong to the category of entertainment, but only because they are not work. However, in the minds and the hearts of the Roman people there was a clear distinction. One was *munus* (gift, offering) while racing was *ludus* (game, sport).

For example, Nero set up a single gladiatorial show, at the beginning of his reign, when he was still under the influence of Agrippina.[[6]](#footnote-6) Otherwise, he staged theatre and chariot races. During the course of the events, he distributed presents to the spectators, an act that made him popular.

When in the later centuries emperors moved the capitol of the Western Empire away from Rome, the imperial palace complexes built in other cities regularly included hippodromes. If you perceive life as a constant class struggle as the author does, then expansion of chariot racing to Roman provinces becomes another attempt to impose Roman’s way of life on other people. I see it as a nice gesture to improve people’s quality of life.

The author strived to present the topic of entertainment within a social and political structure. Distracted by personal prejudices, he failed to point out that hippodromes were indeed centers of political discourse.

During the intermission between chariot races, people proclaimed their sentiments in the emperor’s presence. It became a common practice for the people to make requests of the emperor which, being presented in such a public venue – Circus Maximum could potentially hold up to 250,000 spectators – had political implications. According to Josephus[[7]](#footnote-7), Caligula’s behavior at a chariot race, when he ordered his guards to put to death anyone who shouted to have taxes reduced, hardened the resolve of those who plotted his murder.[[8]](#footnote-8) Caligula was assassinated a few weeks later.

Even if intended as *a starting point*, as **Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman Empire’s** jacket states, I expect the telling of history to be done with an open mind, reflect the values of the period and not those in vogue during the author’s lifetime and, dear to my heart, inspire in the reader the love for the topic. Instead, I encountered a textbook; read it, take the exam, pass the test, put it aside, forget about it and go on with your life.

To the novice interested in the life and leisure of ancient Romans, I recommend Balsdon’s book referenced in the footnote above. His book can be purchased from the usual retail channels.

1. Published by the University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, copyright 1999 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J.P.V.D. Balsdon, **Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome**, first published by The Bodley Head, Great Britain, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Suetonius, **Twelve Caesars** (Nero). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alan Cameron, **Circus Factions - Blues and Greens in Rome and Byzantium**, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A lot has been written about the Nike Riot. To the reader interested in reading about that historical week in 532 in Constantinople, I recommend **The Nike Riot: A Reappraisal** by Geoffrey Greatrex published by the Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 117 (1997), pp 60-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eulogio di Nerone (In Praise of Nero), by Gerolamo Cardano (1501 or 1506 – 1576) written in 1562, published by Claudio Gallone Editore, Milano, Italian edition, no English translation available. Cardano provides a list of the many kinds of gifts distributed by Nero in the theatre and the race arena. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. First century Roman-Jewish historian born in Jerusalem [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Refer to Josephus’ **Antiquities of the Jews**, book XIX, chapter 1, paragraph 4, freely available on the internet at <http://sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/ant-19.htm> translation by William Whiston. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)