SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

Myths, legends and common fallacies

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Religious in origin

Say, 2 or 5 or even 10,000 years from today a cataclysmic catastrophe hits Earth. Most living creatures, other than a handful of humans, perish. The planet is barren of vegetation.

Imagine a post-apocalyptic world of nothing but dust, a vision familiar to climate change alarmists. It keeps them up at night.

Fast-forward another 2, 3 or 5,000 years. The civilization is back. Books are being written about people who have lived in the antiquity. That would be us, for your information. By the time a historian sets about to study the game of football as we know it, most other aspects of the ancient life have been well documented. That football has not been examined yet is unsurprising since sport is generally neglected by the academia. Among the many discoveries, our imaginary future historian finds that the majority of football games in the antiquity were played on Sundays. From other studies, he has learned that Sunday was a day of worship. Consequently, he affirms that football was religious in origin.

Well? How is that different from saying that chariot racing has religious origins since it was held on the day of the religious festivals? They raced on religious festival days [[1]](#footnote-1) (see footnote) because those were the days when the Romans did not work, for crying out loud!

Of course, the races had religious undertones. Those were pagan, pre-Christian times. There was a divinity for everything and everyone. Every minutia of Roman lives had religious connotations, including chariot racing. There were altars in the arenas and races were dedicated to one or perhaps two pagan gods. However, the extraordinary passion that the Romans had for chariot racing was not of a religious nature; it was due to the undeniable fact that chariot racing was a sport. What else do you think could have sufficiently distracted Sabine men? [[2]](#footnote-2)

Let us return to our historian from the distant future. In a postscript, he adds that his next project is to investigate the evidence a football game held on the day following Sunday, a game known by the mysterious abbreviation MNF. He will be greatly disappointed when he discovers that M stands for Monday and that Monday was not in the least bit a religious day.

Thank heavens for those Etruscans and the Greeks

Thank heavens, indeed. If it were not for those clever Etruscans and the Greeks, the Romans would be sitting around bored. Heck no, not sitting, they would be standing, back aching, knees wobbling until a traveler returning from Greece showed them a chair. You see, the Greeks had chairs before the Romans did, hence the Romans must have copied the idea.

In their zeal to be accurate, the historians are proudly displaying their knowledge by pointing out whatever evidence they discover about life before Rome. If something, you name it, anything points to the Etruscans or the Greeks having it or doing it, then the Romans must have borrowed it or copied it or been influenced by it. By following this line of thought, if it were not for the Etruscans and the Greeks the Romans would have never have held chariot races. Bored to death, indeed.

If you rear horses, you are going to race them. If you race horses, you are going to go in a straight line unless you have spectators. If you have spectators, you are going to stick two turning posts in the ground and race in an oval. If you race in an oval, you are going to go counterclockwise because that is the natural directions horses run.

Would the Romans have raced anyway if it was not for the Etruscans or the Greeks is a moot point. Rome mingled with and with time absorbed the Etruscans. There is no doubt that the Romans took up some of the practices of the Etruscans. As the Roman civilization advanced, people enriched or discarded certain Etruscans customs. Racing horses was not abandoned. Thanks also to the blending with the Greek culture the mechanics of chariot racing improved. As it is typical when cultures mix, Rome and Greece influenced each other. With time, Roman chariots became lighter, their horses faster and their racing technique reached a never again paralleled level of sophistication. After becoming extraordinarily popular in the West, chariot racing expanded to the Eastern territory of the Empire.

Endlessly remarking the difference between the races held in Rome and those in Greece is historically pointless. For example, wrapping the reins around their waist is a testament to the skill of the charioteers in Rome. Pointing out in the same sentence (see Wikipedia) that the Greeks held the reins in their hands ignores the natural progression of human endeavor.

Rather than perpetuate the myth that chariot racing was copied from the Greeks, scholars should examine how chariot racing in Rome improved thanks to the mixing of the two cultures. An excellent suggestion for a future essay.

We know that the Greeks held other athletic events in Olympia. None became as popular in Rome as chariot racing. The reason is simple. They were boring. Chariot racing offered competition, thrill of a fun race and fans could identify with teams colors, sentiments that are embedded in human nature. Chariot racing was a real sport. Love of sport is the real origins of chariot racing.

Circus is no amphitheater

A great number of people with at the least a cursory knowledge of history know that the ancient Romans raced chariots. When asked where, the most frequent answer is the Colosseum. Very few are familiar with the Circus Maximus.

Small wonder. Colosseum is the symbol of tourism of contemporary Rome while Circus Maximus today is a flat field with very little archeological evidence of the original arena left standing.

In every book about the life of ancient Romans, chariot racing is relegated to the back of the chapter about entertainment. Our fascination with gladiators has placed the description of the Amphitheatrum Flamium, ordinarily known as Colosseum, in the forefront of history telling. Chariot Racing held at Circus Maximus was clean amusement. It does not have the appeal of retelling of the debauchery of Roman emperors and of the image of those deprived spectators with arms extended showing thumbs up or down during gladiatorial combats.

Nevertheless, the Circus Maximus attracted hundreds of thousands to events that were held much more frequently than the gladiator combats at the Colosseum.

Gambling

Much evidence, both archeological and literary, about the gambling in the Roman Empire has been found. From the historians we know that chariot racing events were an orgy of gambling. The common view is that gambling at the Circus Maximus was the result of a compulsive addiction among the population of the Empire.

I am not going to go into the psychology of sports gambling. Suffice to say that sports’ gambling is a way to personalize the competition. By placing a bet on a team, a person becomes personally involved in the outcome of the game. He or she feels engaged in the event; the bet transforms the person from a spectator to a participant. The amount of gambling that went on in the stands of Circus Maximus was in great part due to the extraordinary interest and passion the Romans held for chariot racing.

Conclusion

These are the most common myths and fallacies held today about sports in ancient Rome. I am sure that this essay will be expanded as I identify and read more articles and books about this neglected topic.

1. Ludi Apollinares, Ludi Ceriales, Ludi Florales, Ludi Martiales, Ludi Megalenses, Ludi Plebeii, Ludi Sevirale and Ludi Taurii [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Romans invited Sabine to watch chariot racing, counting on most men to show up and remain glued to their seats during the races. As we know, the plot worked. We are still celebrating the kidnapping today by lifting our brides over the threshold. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)