SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

# CHARIOT RACE IN BEN-HUR

Differences between the chariot race shown in the movie Ben-Hur and the races as they were run in the ancient Rome are examined in this article. Most dissimilarity is of technical nature and is mainly due to the needs of the plot. The movie has managed to communicate well two key aspects of true chariot racing: one is the enthusiasm of the spectators and the other is the importance that racing held in the daily lives of the people of the Roman Empire.

The plot though, having a high military commander as a charioteer, is unlikely real. I am OK with it because the movies are entertainment, right? Hollywood is not in the business of selling reality. We are well aware of that and yet we grumble when, say, we watch a movie after reading the book the plot is based on and the movie deviates from the original story.

Nevertheless, I have a problem when historical characters or events are not told with utmost accuracy. Mainly because, I am sad to say it, I am under the impression that a majority of movie goers learn the past from historical films.

When in the 1959 version of Ben-Hur the race had a Nascar-like running start, I cringed. I accepted that the entire plot was unbelievable and that we would not have Ben-Hur, the movie, without the two brothers competing in the race; however I wanted the race to be as accurately depicted as possible. So I was pleased when the 2016 version showed the starting cages.

Many other aspects of the race were still historically inaccurate in the latest version.

* The chariots began jostling for the position the moment they left the cages. In reality they had to follow a path marked on both sides with white chalk until they reached the starting line. Only upon reaching the start, chariots were allowed to move left or right.
* Chariots were flimsy carriages and built to be as lightweight as possible; they were made of reed and light wood.
* Charioteers were young, possibly short individuals, as lightweight as today’s jockeys. They were not burly, biker types as depicted in the movie.
* Only four teams, known as factions existed. Faction members wore team colors, red, white, green and blue. Their chariots and horses were also adorned with team colors. In an eight chariot race, each team had two team-members running.
* A team had a primary contender and a secondary one. The task of the secondary charioteer was to help the primary win the race.
* While the original races were dirty, chariots were not equipped with spears or other sharp instruments meant to damage opponents. OK, without it we would not have the movie.
* While racing was physically dangerous and life threatening and collisions were not uncommon, accidents were not encouraged. Often after a collision races were repeated.

On the positive side, computer graphics were great. The arena was well done; middle wall and its statues and the dolphins marking the laps were accurately depicted. However, Jerusalem might have had a small circus, but certainly not one that size. As I said earlier, spectators’ enthusiasm was pretty much on the spot.

I find interesting that the movie Ben-Hur is primarily remembered for its chariot race. See the movie posters. That the race has impressed today’s audience as much as it had for 1,000 years when they raced all over Europe, northern Africa and Middle East is telling that chariot races are fun.