Bodily Exercise: The Gymnasium in the First Century

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Athletes performed their exercises and competed without any clothing throughout much of Greek history. The root Greek word for gymnasium, *gymnos*, means "naked." The beginnings of this practice are obscure, although two stories account for the practice having begun before 700 BC. In the Olympic games of 720 BC a runner's shorts fell off and he won the race. The runners for the next race stripped, thinking being nude helped the first runner win. A similar accident happened to a runner in games at Athens, but he fell and died. The ruler ordered all athletes to compete naked.

Although physical exercise and sports were important in several ancient cultures, the Greeks gave the most serious attention to these activities. Homer's account of the funeral games in the *Iliad* is the earliest record of organized sports. Eventually, the Greeks organized sports competitions into events such as the Olympic games at Olympia, the Pythian games at Delphi, the Nemean games at Argos, and the Isthmian games at Corinth (see "The Olympic Games" Winter '79). The games occurred at a stadium, but the training occurred at a gymnasium and a pa-

Lesson reference:
CUS: 1 Timothy 4:8
before his bath. A room for boxing practice, the korykeion, had punching balls or bags hung from the ceiling. The outdoor, open areas of the gymnasium provided space for running, jumping, throwing the discus and javelin, riding, boxing, and the pancratium. The pancratium was a type of no-holds-barred fighting which allowed wrestling, boxing, kicking, and gouging.

Our word “gymnasium” comes from the Greek gymnasias, meaning “exercise.” The noun occurs in 1 Timothy 4:8, the verb in 1 Timothy 2:7.

Left: The interior of a Roman gymnasium at Hierapolis. Note the vaulted roof, still intact despite the centuries.

Below left: Athlete tying a ribbon around his head; 1st cent. AD; marble. Below right: The laurel went to the victor. This bronze replica is of oak leaves and acorns.

Physical education was an essential part of the overall education of a Greek boy or young man. Its overall purpose was to develop a man of action, one who could be a soldier when necessary. Preparation for war was the primary concern for the early Spartans, but the Athenians also saw the joy of athletic competition and the intrinsic value of physical fitness. The Spartans encouraged physical education for girls, but in Athens girls only received instruction at home. Although women could not participate in the main competitive games such as the Olympics, they did develop their own games, such as the Heraean games, which included footraces, wrestling, and chariot races. Late in the pre-Christian period some events for women were added to the men’s games.

Later in Greek history, physical education was affected by professionalism and specialization. Beginning about the fourth century BC, sports became the concern of a few professional athletes who prepared exclusively for competition. The gymnasium often became institutions that focused more on intellectual than physical education. Gymnasia even added libraries and lecture rooms for philosophical discussion. Some gymnasiums became more like social clubs.

Although athletics had begun to decline in the later Greek world, the Romans revived the interest in sports, especially in the contests. The older games were celebrated and new games were begun. Caesar Augustus and Nero especially had a genuine interest in athletics, at least partly for political reasons. The Olympic games, the Pythian games, the Isthmian games, and the Nemean games again flourished, while new games were begun in Italy.

But Romans disliked actual participation in the games. To appear naked in public was degrading to a Roman citizen. Ennius said, “To strip in public is the beginning of evil-doing.” Some Romans felt that gymnasia could be centers of homosexuality. The general public only wanted to watch contests that were dangerous and brutal. Even the events in Greece and farther east in the empire became spectacular and commercial.

The average Roman enjoyed mild exercise, but athletics did not have a role in education similar to what it had in Greece. The attitude of many of them was that physical fitness was essential as preparation for war, but to exercise—especially in the nude—was unnecessary. The Roman attitude toward physical activity is obvious in their attitude toward athletic competition. The Greeks held contests; although spectators were significant, the Greeks’ emphasis generally was that the events were held for the sake of the competitors (and the gods). In Roman society, however, the games were held primarily for the spectator. The games were for amusement, entertainment. The competitors often were slaves or prisoners of war.
Perhaps the main exception to this pattern was the development of athletic clubs for boys or youths in most of the cities of Italy and many of the provinces of the empire. Generally the physical training was done at facilities much like the Greek gymnasium or palaestra. Augustus seems to have encouraged this development. These clubs probably were similar to modern Boy Scouts. Although a club included physical training, military training and horsemanship were more important.

Overall, however, the Romans of the first century preferred to watch athletes rather than participate in physical activity. The practice of "bread and circuses" was promoted by the emperors in order to satisfy this desire. The traditional Greek sports such as running and jumping were tame; Roman masses preferred gladiators, chariot races, sham naval battles, and other such events sponsored by the politicians. Although the Greeks and Romans long had seen the value of physical training and fitness, some critics had pointed out the dangers of excessive concern with development of the body to the neglect of other aspects of life. For example, Tuppi has criticized the professionalization of Greek athletics: "Of all the countless evils throughout Hellenic none is worse than the race of athletes. . . . Slaves of their bellies and their jaws they know not how to live well. . . ." In the sixth century BC, Xenophon argues that wisdom was better than physical strength. Plato, in his Republic, warned of the danger of excessive physical exercise: "Yes, he said, I am quite aware that the mere removal of the sign of the circumcision surgically, Paul may have had this event in mind when he wrote to the Corinthians about the unimportance of circumcision (1 Cor. 7:18-20). Indeed the Great also promoted Greco-Roman athletics and built several stadia and gymnasias in Palestine. The Jewish historian, Josephus, noted the strong Jewish reaction to the games. The Jews disliked the nudity of the athletes, the games were dedicated to pagan deities, the gladiatorial contests were cruel, and idolatry was suggested by the giving of trophies to the winners (Antiquities 15.8.1; 16.5.1; Wars 1.21.8). For these reasons, Palestinian Jewish literature in the first century AD generally is negative toward athletics and does not use athletic imagery to illustrate the life of faith. The early Christians reacted ambivalently to the Greco-Roman tradition of physical exercise and sports. On the one hand, some Christian writers criticized these activities for reasons similar to those named by the Jews. Many in the late first century and second century criticized the gladiatorial events and the persecution of Christians in the arena. Churches would not baptize a gladiator unless he renounced that occupation. Christians who attended the games were often excluded from the church. Most of these criticisms were addressed at the violence of the Roman spectacles rather than the concern for physical fitness. Several New Testament writers, on the other hand, used athletic imagery to illustrate various aspects of the Christian life. Paul was especially fond of such sports illustrations. His fullest example is 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, where he mentions running, boxing, and the victor's prize. Paul refers to running (Rom. 9:16; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 3:14) and to other sports (1 Tim. 4:4-8; 6:12; 2 Timothy 2:5; 4:7-8). Sports imagery is also evident in James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; Hebrews 12:1-2; Revelation 2:10; and 3:11. These New Testament writers rightly assumed that their audience was familiar with athletic imagery and would understand the relevance of the illustration to the Christian life. Significantly, much of this imagery is on the earlier Greek events such as running and boxing. The violent events such as the gladiatorial combats and chariot racing popular in Roman times are avoided. Moral philosophers such as the Cynics and the Stoics had used similar athletic illustrations to describe the godly life. Considering the strong dislike of anything Greek in Palestinian Judaism, it seems likely that Paul used Hellenistic athletic imagery so often. Paul, however, wrote to congregations composed primarily of Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles, people who likely were more receptive to his illustrations. The other New Testament writings that use athletic imagery are also addressed to Christians outside of Palestine. Paul's attitude toward bodily exercise was typical of early Christianity. Just as Jesus had said man does not live by bread alone Paul suggested that man does not live by the body alone: "Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is valuable in every way, because it promotes life both for the present and for the future" (1 Tim. 4:8, GNB).