

Discuss Training for Athletic Competitions in Classical Greece

My character Zosimos, son of Apollonios (the younger), has entered a pederasty relationship with Nikanor, son of Timon. Zosimos has been approached and offered by a friend of Nikanor's to train to become an athlete in the next Olympics. Zosimos can be financially supported by living with Nikanor while training. This is socially acceptable and Zosimos the elder has agreed to this arrangement. This has opened a pathway for my character to climb the social ladder as well as be able to succeed as an athlete. My character will have to go through training and follow a diet in order to become as fit as he possibly can. Due to Zosimos already attending the gym, this will be beneficial to his start.

A victory won at the Olympics was considered the highest of all triumphs in the Greek games. The awareness of this is confirmed by the frequent emphasis of this competition in victory inscriptions. The glory of Olympic champions was high enough that they would receive victory odes, which were written for them. They would also have commemorative statues, inscriptions and occasionally coins, with the victors', this was found to be from the middle of the 6th century BCE onward. At the time of Solon, in Athens, Olympic champions received a victory prize of 500 drachmai. There are 23.5% of the adult and 13.5% of the juvenile Olympic athletes known by name. Very successful wrestlers include Milon from Croton and Hippothenes from Sparta with six wins each and the greatest champion in running sports was Leonidas from Rhodes, who was triple victor four times in a row.¹

Athletes had to stick to a hard training routine in their hometowns that lasted around 10 months prior to the Games. They also had to swear an oath in order to train as an Olympian. Like the modern-day athletes, they start from a relatively low level of fitness and build it up over the course of the training months.² Although Plato mistrusted the over-specialization of a diet and the training routines of athletes, as he thought it would lead to over-sleeping, fatigue and stops the athletes' unadaptable to other sports.³

Athletes had to go to a gymnasium and go through trials in order to pass their training and enter the Olympics.⁴ However, there is a source that claims that these wrestling training sessions do not bring any benefit to the athletes' bodies nor any harm. It also claims that the trainers have no actual knowledge of how the sessions could help the body or athletes' techniques.⁵

In Athens, they developed a specialist facility for the training and practice of wrestling. They believed in an accomplished and educated man would practice and enjoy wrestling as an adult, making wrestling a very popular and important sport in their society. Ancient wrestling reached a level of practical complexity tactics that are described in modern day coaching manuals.⁶ In Athens, wrestling training was viewed as the most critical factor of physical education there was. Boys were often told or taught to use ruthless tactics to

¹ Decker and Wolfgang, Olympic Champions, consulted online on 07 October 2019.

² Swaddling, The Ancient Olympic Games, page 51.

³ Spivey, The Ancient Olympics, 2005, page 32.

⁴ Pausanias, Geography, page 143.

⁵ Galen, Philosophy, page 359.

⁶ Poliakoff, Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture, page 23-33.

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guarantee a victory such as strangleholds.⁷ To training as a professional wrestler in the Olympics, training consisted of athletic and military drills and exercises. These exercises can also be combined with verbal and literary education. There was also an option to attend a specialist facility, known as wrestling schools.⁸ While training or practicing wrestling with friends there is no need for a referee, and this wasn't uncommon to have in ancient Greece.⁹

In ancient wrestling they never developed a system of awarding points for strategies and successful tactics like they do in modern day wrestling. Being pinned down also did not happen in the ancient world like it does in the present day. To win in Greek, as well as Roman wrestling, the opponents had to hold the other in a controlling position in which they could not escape from. Once stretched out or totally tied in the hold, they have lost. Wrestlers were usually, if not always, naked.¹⁰

In conclusion, although it was difficult to find sources in which contained information on exactly what was done during wrestling training for the Olympics, some sources state how it is usually practicing techniques, holds and tactics. There is no specific diet that was specified in any source. Compared to what there is available today, this is practically nothing and perhaps not professional in the eyes of modern athletes. This is what was expected before any research was constructed. The confirmation from the research provides evidence of no real training which could be thought of as training in today's terms and ideas. The research also shows what the ancient Greeks could do in terms of preparing for athletic competitions and how they could do it without modern day technology. Fundamentally, training for athletic competitions in classical Greece, was essentially practicing the athletes specific sport(s) repeatedly.

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⁷ Nardo, Ancient Greece, 2009, page 66.

⁸ Philostatus, Antiquarian, page 337.

⁹ Miller, Submission Fighting and the Rules of Ancient Greek Wrestling, page 13.

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