Definition: **athlete** from *Collins English Dictionary*

1 a person trained to compete in sports or exercises involving physical strength, speed, or endurance

2 a person who has a natural aptitude for physical activities

3 chiefly *Brit* a competitor in track and field events

[C18: from Latin via Greek athlētēs, from athlein to compete for a prize, from athlos a contest]

Summary Article: **Athletes**

From *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*

The ancient world has left illuminating, albeit incomplete, records of its athletes. Inscriptions, monuments, and texts document who participated and sometimes their career records and socioeconomic backgrounds. Not unlike modern societies, ancient cultures differ widely, even within themselves, regarding the appropriateness of the athletes' regimen and the rewards and emoluments they receive.

In ancient Egypt, competitive sport was part of the lives and self-image of the upper classes, the military, and the pharaohs themselves; although there is visual evidence of widespread popular participation in athletics, there is no evidence to confirm or deny that there were organized popular sporting competitions. Pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty made their exaggerated feats of archery and chariot driving part of imperial propaganda: Thutmose III and his son, Amenophis II, boasted on monuments that they shot an arrow through a thick copper target. Carvings of Egyptians defeating foreign opponents in wrestling show sophisticated techniques, with captions emphasizing native superiority (Decker 1992:19–59, 78–82; Olivová 1984: 40–61). The use of royal athletic victory as propaganda is also evident in Ptolemaic statuary in the Hellenistic era (Kyrieleis 1973).

There is evidence that Near Eastern kings participated in sport, and in the case of the late second millennium Sumerian king Shulgi, hymns praise his proficiency in many sports, including wrestling, archery, and running, with commemoration of his spectacular long-distance racing even 150 years after his death. Exhibitions in which the Assyrian king killed lions, carefully controlled by his soldiers, in front of his nobles suggest the possibility of prearranged outcomes of kingly athletic events as well. Sumerian and Hittite texts document wider popular participation in organized sporting events (Crowther 2007: 15–21; Lamont 1995).

Athletes held high status in Hellenic civilization, and there is important evidence in historical, philosophical, and literary texts about them. Victor lists kept at Delphi and Olympia were researched, albeit with controversy about their accuracy, by such major figures as Hippias and Aristotle (Plut. *Num.* 1; Diog. Laert. 5.26, 8.51), and they furnished historical reference points (e.g., Thuc. 3.8, 5.49). The victor's family or his city might commission a statue and inscription; Pausanias cites many such examples at Olympia and elsewhere, and many are still extant. Wealthy victors at Olympia, Delphi,
Nemea, and the Isthmus might also commission victory odes, and the poems of Pindar and Bacchylides offer important evidence about the lives of athletes.

A victor was identified as a citizen of a particular city, and cities competed to attract important athletes. Astylos of Kroton, victor in footracing, allowed himself to be proclaimed a Syracusan at his second successful Olympiad, infuriating the Krotoniates. More frequently, cities hosting major games might pay a large advance to a famous athlete to compete in their games (Dio Chrys. 66.11; Lib. Ep. 1180, 1182).

A remarkable feature of Greek athletics was its openness to competitors from all social classes. The wealthy had the advantage of being able to afford professional trainers, but there is evidence of steady participation and success by Greeks of humble birth, even at Olympia. The many small, local festivals offered opportunities to win prize money, allowing athletes of limited means to work their way into higher levels of competition. Even in later antiquity, however, athletes from eminent families continued to compete in all events, including the dangerous combat events (Pleket 1974: 68–9; Young 1984: 115–76).

There were many athletes of prodigious accomplishment. In the sixth century BCE, Milo of Kroton won six Olympic crowns, seven at Delphi, nine at Nemea, and ten at the Isthmus (Paus. 6.14.5); half a century later, Theagenes of Thasos won between 1,200 and 1,400 victories (Paus. 6.11.5, Syl. 3; Plut. Mor. 811e) including two at Olympia and over twenty crowns at the other most important festivals. Both Theagenes and his boxing rival Euthymos of Locri, a three-time Olympic victor, received hero cults after their deaths (IG 12.8 Suppl. 425; Paus. 6.6.4–11). Diagoras of Rhodes, a victor celebrated by Pindar, had three sons and two grandsons who all won Olympic crowns (Pind. Ol. 7; Paus. 6.7.3).

Athletes' devotion to training prompted both praise and criticism. Plato took note of Ikkos of Tarentum for his discipline and continence (Pl. Leg. 839e–40c), yet elsewhere criticized overtraining (Resp. 3.404a). In the second century CE, Dio Chrysostom similarly used the boxer Melankomas to exemplify fortitude and continence (Or. 28, 29). The second century physician, Galen, excoriated the overtraining that produced muscle-bound and overfed athletes and decried the permanent damage suffered by athletes in the combat sports (Gal. Protr. 11–12 (1.28–32 K.)).

By the Hellenistic era, guilds of athletes appear. Modern labels, such as "professional" or "amateur" athlete are inapplicable, given that Greek athletes in all eras accepted money and other material rewards. The guilds, moreover, included men of aristocratic and wealthy families, further eroding the distinction between those who made their living from athletics and those who did not need to do so (Pleket 1974: 73–6). The inscriptions they set up for distinguished athletes stressed not only their records but also their wisdom, moderation, and virtue (Poliakoff 1987: 132–3, 186 n. 38).

Roman attitudes toward athletes were mixed. Although one finds polemics deeming them effeminate, lazy, and decadent (Cic. Tusc. 40.33; Luc. 7.270–2; Plut. Quaest. Rom. 40; Tac. Ann. 14.20), athletes were not subject to restriction of civil privilege (see Infamia), like actors and gladiators (Friedländer 1908–13: 2.126). Though Roman athletes seldom came from well-born families, and victors at athletic festivals in Rome, like the Capitoline Games (see Sports) were rarely Roman, there were exceptions (Friedländer 1908–13: 2.117–25). The populace and even several emperors took strong interest in athletics, and the headquarters of the world athletic guild was in Rome. A number of provincial athletes held high social status in Greek cities and Rome (Pleket 1974: 78). The inscription honoring the first-/secondcentury CE pankratiast Tiberius Claudius Rufus of Smyrna (IvOl 54/5), for example, notes that
he was known to the emperors: athletic prowess continued in his family, and by the third century it boasted Olympic victors and Roman consulship (Merkelbach 1974; Poliakoff 1987: 127–8). Favorite competitors were often depicted on mosaics, and frequently with their names as captions (Newby 2005: 58–75). The emperor Alexander Severus, like Nero and Domitian, took a keen interest in sport: the mention of the contemporary pankration and wrestling champion, Aurelius Helix, in Philostratus’ On Athletics, along with his appearance on an Ostian mosaic seems to reflect the athletic culture in Severan Rome (Newby 2005: 74–6). The emperor Gratian was known for skill in running, wrestling, jumping, javelin-throwing, and riding (Auson. Grat. Act. 14), though there is no evidence of his participation in contests. Chariot drivers were often slaves or men of lower status, but those like Gaius Appuleius Diocles or Crescens the Moor, or Publius Aelius Gutta Calpurnianus, gained prodigious amounts of money: Diocles won nearly four million sesterces and Crescens over one and one half million (Balsdon 1969: 321–3).

In addition to such renowned charioteers as Constantinus and Porphyrius, Byzantium produced a king, Basil I, renowned for wrestling skill, which he used, prior to his ascension to the throne, to humiliate a Bulgarian visitor to the Byzantine court (Theophanes Continuatus 5.12; Genesius 4.26, 39–40), continuing a long tradition of the king as athlete.

SEE ALSO:
Gymnasiarchal law (Beroia); Gymnasium, Classical and Hellenistic times; Olympia; Panathenaia; Pindar.

References and Suggested Readings


Michael B. Poliakoff
Harvard

MLA
