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A JONATHAN CAPE BOOK

(From the Morning Post Literary Page.)

The Greeks were the first to cultivate athletics as part of the art of living, and the history of their organized meetings extends over twelve centuries. The Olympic register of winners in the foot-race, as drawn up by Julius Africanus and preserved intact by Eusebius, begins in 776 a. c. (the year of the first Olympiad) and goes on to 217 A. D. The Gothic invasions in the Third Century of our era seem to have put an end to the Olympiad Games as a permanent institution, but it was not until 393 A. D. that Theodosius I, probably on the advice of St. Ambrose, abolished the famous festival by Imperial edict, the last Olympic victor known to history being a certain Armenian Knight named Varastad, a man of superhuman strength. The long life of the Olympic Festival is a strangely impressive fact, showing us how a social institution may present through a long series of great political changes. Some of the chief events in the modern sportsman's calendar—the Derby, the Cup Final, the Boat Race, all of which are now well rooted in—may survive political vicissitudes as yet undreamed of, but it is difficult to think of them as flourishing in the weird world of a thousand years hence, when, in all probability, all the physical activities of mankind today will have been entrusted to ingenious mechanisms.

At the height of its popularity the Olympic Festival must have been a sort of Greek Wembley. The games were to the ruling families of Elis (writes Mr. F. A. Wright in a delightful little book on Greek Athletics) what the oracle was to the ruling families of Delphi, a source of honour, profit, and wealth, and every effort was made to glorify and embellish the precinct of the Olympian Zeus. In the Altis, as it was called—it is now a pasturage for goats—stood the Temple of Zeus, built to house the sitting statue of the god by Pheidias; the Temple of Hera, one of the very oldest of Greek shrines; the Council House; and the Treasuries of the various States. The stadium, 230 by 32 yards, where the athletic contests took place, was just outside the precinct at the north-east corner. The spectators were accommodated on raised embankments of earth (very like the terraces on our football fields, no doubt), which would provide standing room for 45,000 men. Women were not allowed to be present in any circumstances. A victor had a right to have a statue of himself set up in the Altis; and so, as Walter Pater says: "In the courts of Olympia a whole population in marble and bronze gathered quickly—a world of portraits, out of which, as the purged and perfected essence, the ideal soul, of them, emerged the Diadumenos and the Discobolus." The splendour of these occasions is preserved, to shine for ever, in Pindar's verse that is all of gold and historic wine and flowers, setting to song the glory of white-pillared cities beyond the Aegean and Sicilian seas, the glittering speed of whirlwind chariots, the holy, naked grace of the Panhellenic champions, the white, gleaming gods and goddesses brought down from Olympus by the sculptor's spell to dwell with men and smile on them eternally.

Professionalism killed the true Olympic spirit; the withdrawal of the Spartans, who saw that the specialised athlete and the crowd of slackers cheering him on were useless in war, marks the fatal turning-point. It is absurd to pay too much

attention to the "literary gent" when he begins declaiming against the "athletic craze." Still, Euripides was not far wrong when he expounded the uselessness in after-life of the professional Greek athletes: "In early manhood they seem fine fellows and strut about, the darlings of the town; but when old age comes like worn-out cloaks they are flung aside." So the amateur spirit in athletics passed from the splendid statue-thronged precinct of the Olympian Zeus to the simple exercising grounds in every Greek city, great or small, where young men prepared themselves for the one indispensable, inevitable sport—warfare. War was the rule, peace the exceptional in the life of ancient Greece, and the young man who wished to hold his own in the crash of plumed and armoured hoplites had to be as well-trained as an international forward in Rugby football.

But what of the technique of Greek athletics? our information is scant and imperfect, unfortunately. But, so far as jumping and running are concerned, I have no doubt whatever that a team of Victores Ludorum from our Public Schools could wipe the floor, so to speak, with a bunch of Olympic victors. The Greeks were a short-legged race, and not well built for sprinting. To judge by vase-paintings, their methods of starting with the feet close together and finishing with the arms raised above their heads would cause them to be outclassed in the 200 yards and 400 yards, if they could be set to compete against modern sprinters. The Greek long-distance runners seem to have been short, rather thick set, fellows; they were not unlike the Flims in build, and may have had good staying-power. Still, our long-legged, long-striding youngsters would have beaten them, I feel sure, over the three-mile Olympic course. Of high jumping they knew nothing—perhaps because, as Mr. Wright points out, there were no hedges in Greece for soldiers to jump over. Their long jumping was done with weights, very like our dumb-bells, from a take-or-into a pit. They often did more than 20 ft., but the 55ft. attributed to Phayllus is an absurd exaggeration—unless it was done downhill, like ski-jumping. No doubt they were skillful throwers of the javelin and the discus, but we may be sure it was not the throw itself, but the harmonised movements that led up to it, which were the all-important matters with a race that made the human body its chief work of art.

The Greeks had a reasoned technique both of wrestling and boxing, and textbooks existed in the Hellenistic period. Every district in Greece seems to have had its own peculiar form of wrestling, just as we have our Cumberland and Westmorland, Lancashire, and Cornish styles. In Greek boxing there was no ring, no interval between rounds, no classification according to weights. Body-hitting was neglected, and a smashing blow to the face settled most contests. The heavier the man, the better his chance; so that champions were almost always huge, meaty fellows, except in the earlier days when the soft wrappings used to protect the hands had not yet developed into weapons resembling modern knuckle dusters. The description by Theocritus of the great contest between Amycus and Polydeuces is evidently the work of an expert, who can enter into the feelings of the combatants and understand the fascination of a struggle between a fast, scientific boxer and a huge fighter who can merely take and give a punch. It is as good in its way as

Borrow's fight in the Dell between Lavengro and the Flaming Finman.

But the Pankration or all-in contest must have been the most exciting of the Olympic contests. Strict rules were enforced by umpires, but they seem to have been frequently broken. Biting and gouging, for example, were forbidden. Yet Alcibiades used his teeth, and when his opponent cried: "You bite like a woman," he replied (between mouthfuls, apparently), "No, like a lion." There is a picture on a cup in the British Museum in which one combatant has inserted his finger into his opponent's eye, while the umpire rushes forward with uplifted rod. You were allowed, however, to kick your man in the stomach, to break or dislocate his bones, or even strangle him. Pindar calls it "the fairest of all contests," and was a sound preparation no doubt, for the battle medley which was fought, of course, under what we call bayonet rules. I should like to see it revived, having joyous memories of all-in fights long ago out West.

All these games and field events were intended to make men good stuff for warfare, able to boast with Archilochus, that lyric soldier:

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My spear is bread, white kneaded bread, My spear's Ismarian wine, My spear is food and drink and bed, It makes the whole world mine.

FARM POINTERS

(From Department of Industrial Journalism Oregon Agricultural College.)

Special precautions are necessary with early hatched chicks to prevent leg weakness, according to O. A. C. poultry authorities. Feeding raw egg yolks, or pure cod liver oil—one pint to 100 pounds of dry mash—helps to make up for the lack of exercise and sunshine that later hatched

chicks get.

Fresh air for young chicks is second in importance only to heat, says the experiment station. Moisture leaves the chicks by way of the lungs which necessitates good ventilation to insure a dry brooder house.

In planning the program for the planting of vegetables for market for the coming season, the Oregon grower should be guided by general market demands, the experiment station reports. As far as possible, investigations are made as to the crops which are most likely to be successfully sold.

Various counties in Oregon have recently adopted a planting program, specializing in such crops as the soil, climate conditions and markets best determine.

Hot bed sashes are not so expensive these days, but that the Oregon gardener can well afford to use them in his gardening work, says the experiment station. Good standard three by six foot sashes already glazed cost \$2.50. Under these it is possible to grow many plants such as cabbage, 648 to the sash, at a distance of two inches apart each way. The sashes are inexpensive considering the length of service.

Successful poultrymen do not overfeed their chicks. Young chicks need to eat often, but should not be allowed to fill their crops until the evening feeding, say station reports. Overfeeding tends to limit the exercise which is likely to result in leg weakness.

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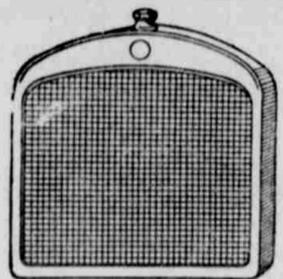
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