

Aristotle was a big fan of the Ancient Games, describing a young man's ultimate physical beauty as: "a body capable of enduring all efforts, either of the racecourse or of bodily strength...This is why the athletes in the pentathlon are most beautiful." (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*1361b)

Gymnastics Philosophers

Ancient Greek philosophers of Greece, such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, believed wholeheartedly in the concept of *mens sana in corpora sano* (a healthy body is a healthy mind), and subsequently followed a regimen of both mental and physical training. Ancient Greeks of all ages, including these famed philosophers, regularly attended a 'gymnasium' to exercise their bodies, and to debate philosophy in order to exercise their minds.

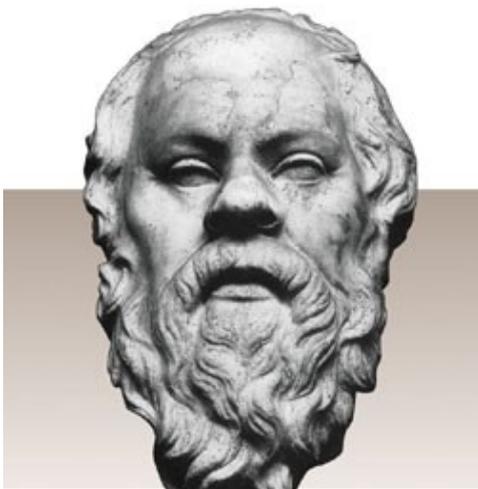


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Observe the words of the famed philosopher Epictetus that represent well the attitudes of the intellectual classes towards physical training at that time:

'You would fain be victor at the Olympic Games, you say. Yes, but weigh the conditions, weigh the

consequences; then and then only, lay to your hand--if it be for your profit. You must live by rule, submit to diet, abstain from dainty meats, exercise your body perforce at stated hours, in heat or in cold; drink no cold water, nor, it may be, wine. In a word, you must surrender yourself wholly to your trainer, as though to a physician.'

In the paragraph above Epictetus identifies the importance of complete focus in training for the Ancient Games and asks the reader if they think that doing so would profit them, and if so, whether they believe that they are capable of such focus and sacrifice.

'Then in the hour of contest, you will have to delve the ground, it may chance dislocate an arm, sprain an ankle, gulp down abundance of yellow sand, be scourge with the whip--and with all this sometimes lose the victory. Count the cost--and then, if your desire still holds, try the wrestler's life. Else let me tell you that you will be behaving like a pack of children playing now at wrestlers, now at gladiators; presently falling to trumpeting and anon to stage-playing, when the fancy takes them for what they have seen. And you are even the same: wrestler, gladiator, philosopher, orator all by turns and none of them with your whole soul. Like an ape, you mimic what you see, to one thing constant never; the thing that is familiar charms no more. This is because you never undertook aught with due consideration, nor after strictly testing and viewing it from every side; no, your choice was thoughtless; the glow of your desire had waxed cold.'

Epictetus's words share a similar sentiment to that modern-day, populist Rocky theme; 'Eye of the Tiger', in that he is warning about entering the fighting disciplines just for the glory, without the desire to engage in necessary hard work that is requisite for great performances and victories to occur. It is also greatly entertaining to see how he is warning against resorting to theatrics in wrestling; clearly a common modern phenomenon!

'Friend, bethink you first what it is that you would do, and then what your own nature is able to bear. Would you be a wrestler, consider your shoulders, your thighs, your loins--not all men are formed to the same end. Think you to be a philosopher while acting as you do? Think you to go on thus eating, thus drinking, giving way in like manner to wrath and to displeasure? Nay, you must watch, you must labour; overcome certain desires; quit your familiar friends, submit to be despised by your slave, to be held in derision by them that meet you, to take the lower place in all things, in office, in positions of authority, in courts of law.

Weigh these things fully, and then, if you will, lay to your hand; if as the price of these things you would gain Freedom, Tranquillity, and passionless Serenity.'

Clearly Epictetus is echoing the words of every great coach and athlete, and every committed recreational athlete, who understand the mental toughness required to engage in sport as we know it today. Epictetus goes on to say that if due consideration has been given, and that the individual has decided to train for Ancient Olympic

disciplines, bearing these factors in mind, then they should apply themselves fully, with the goal of freedom, tranquillity and serenity. These are interesting goals, as the neurological adaptations that occur in the body as a result of exercise include tranquillity and serenity as a result of increased levels of endorphins, serotonin and dopamine. Epictetus and his compatriots would have had no way of medically ascertaining such facts but clearly experienced them enough to pass such an accurate judgement. (from [Epictetus Golden Sayings CIV](#))

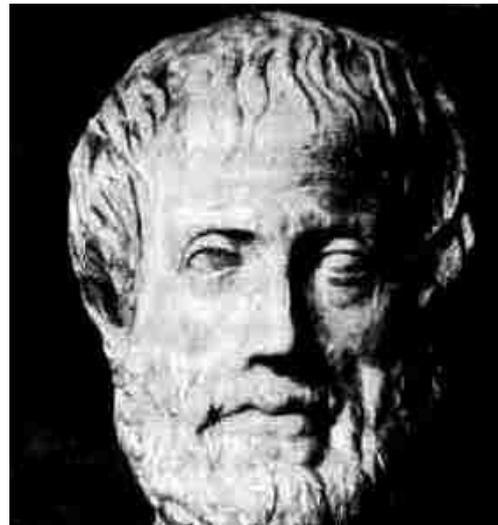


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Considering the Words of Plato

The famed philosopher Plato waxed lyrical against the concept of professionalism (as we would refer to it today). In Plato's conceptualisation, professionalism would be the name given to any individual who dedicated his life to training for the Games, and who did not have any other job. Plato felt that this was detrimental to the individual because their life style (pronouncing the physical and omitting the intellectual) would prove counter-productive to the well rounded individual.

The Greeks exercised to be strong and healthy, both mentally and physically. Maintaining superior physical health was undoubtedly of primary importance in an age where medicine had not yet notably progressed in the way that it has done today. The need to naturally maximise the capabilities of the individuals' immune system was of tantamount importance. However, the most obvious need for exercise amongst the Ancient Greeks was actually military in nature. The history books tell us that The Battle of Marathon (490 B.C.) saw an army of 10,000 Athenians, Spartans and allies defeat 50,000 Persian troops; a David versus Goliath tale attributed in large part to the superior fitness of the Greeks.

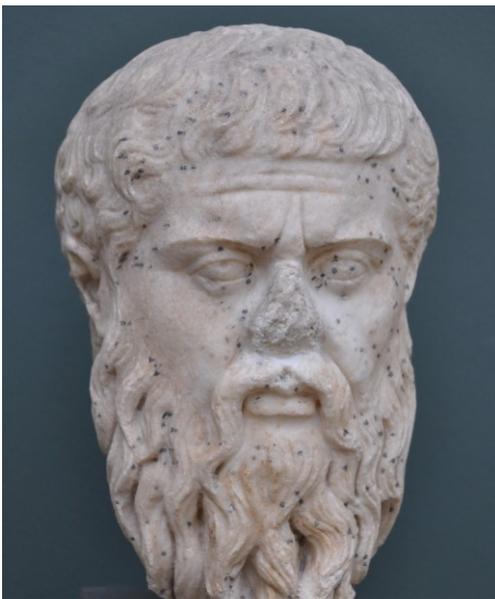


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Plato also believed in the character building potential of sport, considering that "common meals and gymnastic exercises have been excellently devised for the promotion both of temperance and courage" (Plato, Laws I). Plato also believed that virtues of the soul are not innate and that they can be learned, or, more specifically, "can be implanted later by habit and exercise"

(Plato, Republic 403). Plato explains that *gymnastic*, his word for physical education, "preside[s] over the growth and decay of the body, and may therefore be regarded as having to do with generation and corruption" (407).

START THE DISCUSSION

- What observations do you think the great philosophers may make about the modern Olympic Games? Do you think that they would be in favour of them in their current conception?
- Taking the concept of *mens sana in corpora sana* identify and discuss the physiological reasons why a healthy body really does enable a healthy mind.
- The concept that 'sport builds character' is often voiced. What do you think that this means, and how might sport act as a mechanism by which to enable the development of 'character'?
- How has the meaning of 'philosopher' changed since the time of Aristotle?
- In Ancient Greece, how inclusive were the Games?

FIND OUT MORE

Aristotle Rhetoric (online)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.html>

Plato's Republic (online)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>

Plato Laws 1 (online)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/laws.1.i.html>

Epictetus Golden Sayings (online)

<http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/goldsay.1.1.html>

CREDITS

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