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The Racing Ethos of the Homeric and Modern Athlete

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Abstract:

The racing spirit since ancient times, has been one of the main characteristics of ancient Greeks. According to Homer, in which the first description of sports competitions is found, the sporting mood that manifests itself in every form of social life, is also strongly reflected in athletics too. What ethical values of the era does the sporting activity reflect during the Homeric period? What are the characteristics of the system of values of Homeric society, which forge the bravery of brave men and warriors? To what extent are the athletes of Homer inspired by the heroic ideal, that they act as «agathos» (the noblest and most valiant) and «aristos» (the best in rank, birth, nobility and morality)?

In Homeric society, athletic distinction and physical «alki» (strength) are the means for demonstrating the «aretē» (virtue) of man. Races are not aimed at performance, as they are nowadays, but they are real battles, that engage in meanings of lasting cultural and moral character. On the contrary, today, sporting activity is influenced by the economic nature of modern technocratic culture. This results in the athlete concentrating on his physical performance in a unilateral way, that does not favor the all-round development of man. For this reason, the modern athlete is called upon to overcome any unilateral and self-centered tendencies, and to seek the spirit of authentic sport, structuring a symmetrical relationship between soul and body.

Keywords: Homeric athlete, modern athlete, ethos, feat, commercialization

1. Introduction

The Homeric and modern athlete abstain from each other for about thirty centuries. The purpose of this paper is not the comparison between these two athletic personalities, since such an attempt - since we refer to a culture that we have not experienced - cannot be objective. The aim of the paper is to highlight the traits of each athlete as a consequence of his relationship with the society in which he lives and which is clearly reflected in the athletic activity. The selection of Homer's epics, and especially of Iliad's as a source of pumping information on social and athletic ethos, is born out by their considerable literary value, as these are the most ancient surviving texts of European literature (Snell, 1997; Latacz, 2002). But most importantly, it begins from their historical and cultural significance, as Homer's descriptions of sports are the only objective narrations of the Mycenaean period for the sporting activity (Goggaki, 2003).

2. The Homeric Athlete

In the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Greeks are inspired by three, mostly, ideals. The first is the superiority (Goggaki & Stravakou 2009), that is the pursuit of optimal distinction, as it is expressed in the famous phrase αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων¹ (Iliad Z 208). The second is the honor and the respect for the ancestors, according to the phrase μηδὲ γένος πατέρων αἰσχυνέμεν², (Iliad Z 209), while the third is the devotion and the love for the homeland in εἰς οἴωνός ἄριστος, ἀμύνεσθαι περὶ πάτρης³(Iliad M 243). This ideal trilogy depicts the heroic code of the Homeric society, from which the virtues of Homeric athletes come from (Wilson, 2002).

The Homeric era is a period in which war is the usual way to resolve differences between cities and is the main means of survival (Griffin, 1980). This fact results in the formation of a martial and heroic ideal that is reflected in all social events (Vlachos, 1985). The model of the Homeric athletes stems from a heroic morality, the moral of honor, which pushes the heroes to the direct pursuit of virtue (Maronitis & Polkas, 2007; Richardson 2007). Within this social context, heroes and warriors with intense combative mood are being strengthened, which is manifested in every form of life (Redfield, 1975) and ultimately reflected in athletics.

¹ Always excel and overcome the others.

² Do not embarrass your gender.

³ One is the best omen, to defend our homeland.

In Homeric epics, the words «athla»⁴ and «athlitis»⁵ is testified for the first time (Goggaki, 2003). The words indicate the spirit of the era, as the feat has the meaning of struggle, effort and accomplishment. The contests are nothing more than the representation of the battle between two opponents, while the athletes repeat the moves they would implement in a war confrontation. The athlete constitutes the continuation of the warrior of the heroic years, since both himself and the sports are influenced by the military ethos and the technique of war (Goggaki, 2003). Therefore, the Homeric hero is a good athlete and a brave warrior, who pursues as nothing else, his glory and dominance in the athletic races as well as in the field of battle (Finkelberg, 1999).

Athletes are strong men, courageous and thirsty for glory. They are excellent and eager for every sacrifice that have set as a goal, an honoring distinction (Muellner, 1996). The athletic victory does not belong to them personally, but belongs to their gender and homeland. They constitute symmetrical personalities, as they have both physical and mental strength, elements that complete the image of the hero (Stravakou, 2010). Moreover, the adjectives used by Homer for the description of the warriors-athletes, such as «dios»⁶, «isotheos»⁷, «diotrefis»⁸, highlight not only their physical thew, but mostly, their magnitude and majesty. It seems, therefore, that the Homeric athlete possesses the appropriate prudence and virtue, so that he is «agathos»⁹, «kallistos»¹⁰, «alkimos»¹¹ and «megathymos»¹² (Goggaki, 2003; Goggaki & Stravakou, 2011).

3. The Modern Athlete

The value of sport has been greatly appreciated in the progression of human history, however until nowadays it has undergone many and profound changes. In the modern world, the development of the technology, the overproduction and overconsumption have dominated on the moral values to such extent that consumerism and the pursuit of profit are found as the main purpose (McNamee, 2007). In the modern way of life, obtaining has dominated more than the substance, as comfort, luxury and abundance, in combination with the inadequate education, are promoted as life models. The human is depersonalized, he ceases developing his personality and is concentrated on the course of the reckless consumption, losing the sense of measure and balance (Gantheret et al., 1982). As a result, he faces the goods not as a means of improving his quality, but as a target that directs his existence.

Athletics, as a social activity, could hardly escape from the influence of a technocratic and acquisitive society. Nowadays, the modern athlete is shaped by moving between scientific progress and commercialization. Particularly the developments in biology and genetics create a strong concern, as they also affect athletics too (Goggaki, 2005; Tamburrini, 2007). The naturalness of the body has been greatly reduced, as chemicals and hormonal substitutes enhance the muscles and physical condition (Goggaki, 2013). Although such large-scale degenerative practices relate to the top athletes' choices, however they reflect the modern value system which affects the simple athlete, who reaches the point of risking his own health to redeem socially and financially his physical performance (Goggaki, 2002).

The above result in the athlete not being a carrier of his abilities, as the body is downgraded to a mechanical tool by calculating its movements and performance. Furthermore, his athletic alienation is peaked with the legs', hands' or other "precious" parts of the body insurance (Goggaki, 2010a), while at the same logic the huge sums of transfers and prizes are added (Goggaki, 2002). So, the modern super-athlete is appeared, as captive of the profitable character of athletics, an opinion that stems from the vulgar spirit of the society. Not to mention that, over-qualification and championship quantify the healthy athletics, by limiting it to his performance (record) and to the timer (Sampedro, 2016). Thus, to a certain extent, time becomes everything, sometimes reaching the limits of coercion, through the systematic exercise (Goggaki, 2010a).

4. Selected

The Homeric athlete has clear differences from the modern professional superathlete. The Homer athlete struggles for the social ideals in a war society (Goggaki - Mavrodakos, 2010b), while the second one as a member of a profit society chooses the corresponding sporting action. More specifically, the Homeric consideration can be attributed to: "society - hero - athlete", as the society is built from the heroic ideal, based on warriors who engage in athletics with the hero's morality. On the contrary, nowadays it has been modified to: "society - individual feasibility - superathlete", as bliss and consumer spirit have shifted the value system of the modern human with the result that the athlete has turned into a product of an industry, which is set up next to him in order to use his own work (Goggaki, 2010a).

Through this particular consideration of the Homeric and modern athlete, the dimension that exists becomes obvious at the level of the racing ethos of these two. This dimension also exists between the glory and the money award, or between the natural strength and the commercialization of the body. Athletics, however, is directly related to human life and contributes to its quality, while it consists one of the greatest humanitarian values. Therefore, it is needed, to be exempted from anything negative that follows him (Goggaki & Kalogerakos, 2014). For these reasons, the modern athlete is called to focus on the athletic ideal, remoted from the self-interest and single-mindedness of technocratic culture, as

⁴ Ἀθλα, feat.

⁵ Ἀθλητής, athlete.

⁶ Δίος, Zeus.

⁷ Ἰσόθεος, equal with god.

⁸ Διοτρεφής, fed by Zeus.

⁹ Ἀγαθός, the noblest and most valiant.

¹⁰ Κάλλιστος, the best of the best.

¹¹ Ἄλκιμος, strong.

¹² Μεγάθυμος, magnanimous.

these not only do not favor but also prevent the all-rounded development of the human. Thus, he has to overcome any feasibility, and seek the spirit of authentic athletics, structuring a symmetrical relationship between the soul and the body.

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