

In Praise of the Mortal Athlete: Ancient Sports and Modern Controversies over the Use of Performance-Enhancing Technologies

In this paper I demonstrate how modern controversies over whether and how to limit athletes' use of performance-enhancing drugs and other technologies can shed light on ancient attitudes, positive and negative, toward athletic competition. Specifically, I draw upon recent research in the philosophy of sport that attempts to define the concept of "artificiality" in reference to athletics—which governing bodies such as the World Anti-Doping Agency define as "contrary to the 'spirit of sport'"—in order to argue that, in several ancient anecdotes, athletes who died during competition received the highest praise from authors because they demonstrated the greatest possible "athletic authenticity."

My argument begins with a brief overview of some recent trends in the philosophy of sport, as it has dealt with issues of fairness in competition and the evaluation of athletic performances. Controversies of late over the application of state-of-the-art technology to sport—for example, the now-famous prosthetic "running blades" used by double amputee Oscar Pistorius, who qualified for the 2012 Summer Olympics only after he had previously been barred from competing with able-bodied athletes by the International Association of Athletics Federations in 2007—call into question the nature and purposes of athletic competition. To allow use of such technology in competition, it has been argued, privileges the research of scientists over the natural abilities of athletes (see discussion at Loland 2009 and Ryall 2012), and thus strains the very definition of sport. Further, the seemingly arbitrary rules various governing agencies have developed to regulate the use of different kinds of "artificial" technology threaten to undermine the value of any sport that is supposed to test an athlete's "authentic" physical qualities. As technology continues to advance beyond what the human body is naturally capable of achieving, so too the appreciation of sport itself must adapt: spectators and referees may then

base their assessments of athletic performance on different criteria entirely, namely on “those phenomenological aspects of being human” (Ryall 2012: 94)—the subjective, qualitative and aesthetic aspects of sport, rather than what objective, quantitative criteria new technology allows the human body to surpass.

In the second portion of my argument, I apply these modern observations on technological artifice and mortal authenticity to ancient anecdotes about historical athletes. Athletic “artificiality” and the responses to it of course entailed different kinds of technology back then than they do now; nonetheless, a number of Greek writers complained about the *technai* prescribed by athletes’ trainers, including specialized diets and strenuous training routines that seemed to them unnatural (see, e.g., the anecdotes and quotations given by Ath. *Deip.* x 412d-414d and König 2005: 254-344). The primary focus of this paper, however, is on what the modern notion of authenticity can teach us about the ancient athlete’s mortality. Beginning with the surviving literary accounts of the death of Arrhachion (Phil. *Im.* 2.6; Paus. 8.40), who was declared victor in the *pankration* at the very moment he was killed by his opponent, I argue that the glorification of the dead athlete presents an attempt to define athletics as an authentically mortal, and hence both natural and worthwhile, pastime.

Pindar frequently reminds us that the greatest athletes challenge the barrier separating the mortal and the superhuman; among the many implications of his advice, I suggest that the poet who praises the mortality of athletes seeks to defend the innate worth of sport against its critics.

Works Cited

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