

The Olympian: A Tale of Ancient Hellasan excerpt

by E.S. Kraay

The natural tendency for man is to walk. Though all Hellenes are taught to run from birth, few overcome the instinctive and less tiresome predisposition to walk. For those few that do, they appear at a more comfortable gait when they run than they appear when they walk. I noticed this as the contestants proceeded to the east end of the stadium. The runners' bodies appeared stiff and awkward as they struggled to maintain the slow pace of the *Hellanodikai* who led them to their starting point. These men ached to free their bodies in fast, fluid motion. Their lives are focused on these fleeting seconds in time when each would unleash his speed to fly down the smooth, dirt stadium of Olympia to the finish line, matching the core of his life against the fastest men in all of Hellas. Each was here to demonstrate his mastery of the simple act of running. The thought is over-powering and for that reason, I hold the athletes who compete at the games in great respect, notwithstanding the insolence with which the young Theagenes greeted me the night before.

I'll not bore you with the details of the two, preliminary heats that determined those twenty runners who would compete in the final race to win the Olympic crown except to relate one incident to show you that we do not take these competitions lightly or, in your words, Khepri, frivolously. You'll recall that when each athlete takes his oath, he swears to follow the rules of the games. As the runners took their places for the second heat at the starting line behind the *husplex*, each was tight like the pulled string of a bow, his senses sharp as he anticipated the fall of the wooden gate. One runner, a man from Crete who had a long, thin neck snapped and leapt forward before the gate was released. He fell to his knees in shame

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while the crowd hissed its disdain at his fault. Two *Hellanodikai* promptly ushered him to the foot of the hill where we sat. He was bound in cord and whipped with thatch. The beating was not physically brutal, though I'm sure it brought some pain to his back. More, it was humiliating, and the shame was far more painful than the blows to his hide. Such is the fate for any who would seek unfair advantage over his opponents, though certainly this man's intention was not to cheat or gain unfair odds, but only to time his start with the opening of the gate. Today, I oddly remember a story told to me by a friend who counseled with the Athenians during the Great War. The wise Themistocles urged quick action against the invaders. In response to his plea, a Corinthian general said, "At the games, the runners who start before the gate drops are beaten." My friend told me Themistocles was quick to respond, "Those left behind win no crown." It is a fine art to time your actions well, being neither too soon, or too late. The consequence can be unacceptable in either event.

After a short rest, the 10 top men from each of the heats were ready for their final race. They took large quantities of water and some had been wrapped in wet blankets to keep their bodies cool. The moment had arrived for these twenty men who had dedicated their lives to be the best they could possibly be. The world watched, eager to see who would claim the crown. One by one, the runners were called to the starting line, each one's name and home announced by the *Hellanodikai*. The information was passed quickly from spectator to spectator so that we all knew whom the participants were. My eyes were drawn to the runner from Kroton for I had seen him race before. Like his rivals', his body was lean and taut, but he moved to the line with a noticeable bounce in his step as if he struggled more than the others to contain the burst of pure energy that would propel him down the course. From where I now stood, I could see old marks on his young back, which suggested that he might have had his share of false starts.

There was no wind that day. These twenty would create their own gust as they exploded from their starting point. The ancient priest

that remained at the altar of Zeus at the east end of the stadium waited until the name of the final runner reached him. In that way, he could be sure that the thousands who waited now, holding their breaths for the race to begin, knew the names of all runners. A large bull stood proud and tethered on the pile of ashes on the altar. There was no doubt when the sacrifice was made, for the huge beast fell to his knees as his life-blood drained from the deep cut applied to his throat. In a short time, he crumbled to the large fagot beneath him, and the priests lay upon him with special, consecrated knives and dismembered his once powerful body. The beast never uttered a sound but accepted his fate in silence as if knowing his death was made in honor of the mightiest of gods. His demeanor was different than that of the ram.

The priest had a clear view to the end of the stadium where the runners waited for his signal. My eyes moved quickly from the priest to the Kroton, and back. The crowd was silent and waited. The priest dipped his torch in a vessel of consecrated oil and raised it fully over his head, waving it, unlit, from side to side. The runners prepared themselves. It was time, and each drew his muscles tight like the bow of Odysseus in the instant before the great archer released his shaft. The priest lowered his torch and fire was applied. All of us, spectators and contestants alike, could see the black smoke rise from the fired torch. In one even motion, the priest raised the flaming torch directly over his head, and a trumpeter, behind me on top of the hill, blew a single, loud, powerful note to begin the race. As the note resonated through the valley, the *husplex* was released, the gate dropped and the runners leapt from their starting stances and exploded down the length of the stadium.

The strongest were a full step ahead of the others within seconds, and I and spectators near me gasped as the Kroton stumbled and struggled to regain his balance while he saw the backs of all nineteen of his competitors pull away from him. In a race that lasts no longer than 30 beats of a resting man's heart, I knew his initial error would be disastrous for this man who had trained so long to be the first to the finish line at Olympia. But as my heart plunged for

him, I saw that he was made of tougher stuff than I and the thousands of others who resigned his position to last in the race. Within 50 meters, all runners had found their pace. It was blistering. Arms and legs pumped smoothly but almost violently as blood rushed through their veins at breakneck speed. At 100 meters, halfway through the race, the Argive led his competitors, but all could see that the runner from Kroton had actually passed half of the field and the distance between him and the Argive had grown noticeably smaller. What courage pulsed through his heart to spur him beyond his physical limitations and to achieve what appeared impossible? He had won the crowd to his side. As the distance between him and the Argive continued to decrease, the roar from the spectators increased. The noise was so loud it froze thought in all that could hear it. We clung only to the image of the twenty athletes racing down the course.

I would guess that you have never seen a man run with the grace, the power and fluidity of a horse. I can tell you that this man, the one from Kroton, did. He caught and passed the Argive with less than ten strides to the end of the stadium and his momentum carried him to the base of the altar of Zeus where the priest waited with the flaming torch. The man's name was Astylos.

The crowd's approval was unrestrained as all men were on their feet cheering wildly. Astylos struggled to maintain his balance. His muscles burned from their exertion. He stood at the foot of the altar, hunched over, propping his hands on his knees. He didn't even have the energy to turn and watch as the runners who finished behind him fell to the ground in abject disappointment, but still knowing they had been defeated by the stronger man. There was no glory for second place. Only one man was the victor, the others had failed, but in their failure there was no shame for each had given his best effort, his heart and soul to the task he faced.

The winner's trainer approached him shortly, smiling broadly like a happy child and as breathless as his champion. He carried with him his *aryballos* and *strigils* with which he gently scraped the oil, sweat and dust from Astylos's body before his runner could accept

the fired torch from the high priest. The multitude waited for the trainer to complete his chore while the athlete rested. When the trainer had finished, Astylos turned to the priest who waited patiently with the torch.

“You have run for your life, Astylos, and won. All Hellenes share in your victory.” The crowd bellowed and thundered as an attendant tied purple ribbons around the winner's forehead, arms and legs. These would mark him as a victor for the remaining days of the festival and make him recognizable to everyone who saw him. “Yours, now, is the greatest honor: to complete the sacrifice of an entire people to the highest of their gods.” The priest handed the torch to Astylos who waited while the wine was poured into the sacred cup that the priest now held. We all began to chant, “*Sponde! Sponde,*” in anticipation of the libation and sacrifice.

Some say the victory in the single-course is perhaps the most prestigious of the games at Olympia. Not only would the victor receive his crown of olives at the temple at the end of the festival, but he had also won the right to complete the sacrifice to Zeus. No other athlete at Olympia could claim such honor. Astylos raised the torch above his head and stared at the flames momentarily as all eyes focused on this single man. With his arms raised, he walked slowly and deliberately around the altar and the sacrificial pyre. The voice of the appreciative crowd raised slowly, a heavy rumble at first that swelled into a delirious sound of joy as Astylos set the torch to the wood. When he did, we prayed while the priest poured the blessed wine onto the pyre and into the flames. The dry kindling at the bottom caught quickly and rose with a life of its own to consume the bull and take it to Olympus. Those close to the altar backed away from the intense heat. The smell of the burning fat drifted through the *altis* and men waved their hands to draw the smoke to their nostrils feeling that it made them even more a part of the victory and pulled them to the bosom of Zeus.

