

## 40-Minute Version

### Slide 1

## SPORT AND WAR IN DEMOCRATIC ATHENS

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### Slide 2

#### 1. The Sporting Passions of the Athenian People

Today I am going to consider the neglected problem of elite sport in classical Athens. Athenian democracy may have opened up politics to every citizen but it had no impact on sporting participation. This ancient state's sportsmen continued to be drawn from the elite. Therefore it comes as a surprise that non-elite citizens judged sport to be a very good thing and created an unrivalled program of local sporting festivals on which they spent a staggering sum of money. They also shielded sportsmen from the public criticism that was otherwise normally directed towards the elite and its conspicuous activities. The work of social scientists suggests that the explanation of this paradox lies in the close relationship that non-elite Athenians perceived between sporting contests and their own waging of war. The disturbing conclusion of this talk is that it was Athenian democracy's opening up of war to non-elite citizens that legitimised elite sport.

The Athenian *dēmos* ('people') lavished time and money on sporting contests. With justification they believed that they staged more festivals than any other Greek state. **Slide 3** Most of their competitive festivals were established in the democracy's first 50 years. Athletics-contests featured in 2 thirds of these festivals. It did so much more often than the other types of *agōnes* ('contests'). The popularity of athletics thus clearly paralleled the flourishing of Athenian democracy. The most extensive program of contests was staged **slide 4** as part of the Great Panathenaea. In the 380s this 4-yearly festival for Athena had *agōnes* for individuals in 27 athletic, equestrian and musical events. In addition contests for groups were staged for pyrrhic and dithyrambic choruses and for tribal teams of **slide 5** torch racers, sailors and manly young men. These events were more numerous than those of the ancient Olympics. Eight other Athenian festivals also had sporting contests.

The Athenian *dēmos* forced its elite citizens to pay for a large portion of the fixed-operating costs of these sporting festivals. The torch racers of the Great Panathenaea, the

Hephaestea and Prometheia competed and trained as part of teams that had been drawn from the Cleisthenic tribes. The cost of training each of these 10 teams fell to an elite citizen serving as a **slide 6** *gumnasiarkhos* ('athletic-training-sponsor'). A *chorēgos* or chorus-sponsor did the same for each of the choruses that competed in the state's dramatic and dithyrambic contests. During the 350s **slide 7** these festival liturgies added up to 97 annually, rising to 118 in the years of the Great Panathenaea.

In antiquity the complaint was occasionally made that the ancient Athenians actually spent more on festivals than on wars. Since **slide 8** August Böckh some ancient historians have viewed this ancient complaint as fully justified. It is undeniable that Athenian democracy spent a large amount of money on *polis*-level festivals. But careful comparison of its actual spending on them and on what it spent on the armed forces shows that this complaint is plain wrong. Indeed what the Athenians spent on war manifestly dwarfed all other public expenditure combined. For example, **slide 9** in the 420s public spending on war alone was 1500 talents, that is, 39 tons of silver, on average, per year. During the 370s **slide 10** the average total of all spending on the armed forces was more than 500 talents or 13 tons of silver per year.

In spite of this, the Athenian *dēmos* still placed a high priority on generously funding their festivals. They spent **slide 11** 25 talents or 650 kilograms of silver on each celebration of the Great Panathenaea. The entire program of *polis*-administered festivals probably consumed no less than 100 talents, that is, 2.6 tons of silver, every year. This was a lot of money: **slide 12** it was comparable to the cost of Athenian democracy itself and the entire annual budget of an average-sized Greek state. The *dēmos* may have treated warmaking as their top public priority. But they still clearly spent a large sum on their sporting festivals.

Athenian democracy also put great store in the public infrastructure **slide 13** for athletics. Thus leading politicians clearly got ahead in their *agōnes* ('debates') for pre-eminence by taking care of the state's publicly owned sports fields. For example, in the fifth century Cimon spent his own money on providing proper running tracks and landscaping for the Academy, while Pericles used public funds to renovate the Lyceum and Alcibiades proposed a law concerning Cynosarges.

This public support of athletics was also clearly reflected in old comedy. Surviving comedies can give the impression that simply everyone in the public eye was a victim of comic abuse. But an important study of the targets of the old comedians by Alan Sommerstein shows that one group of conspicuous Athenians escaped such

personal attacks: Athenian athletes. In addition, in contrast to their treatment of other elite activities, the comic poets did not subject athletics to sustained parody or direct criticism. They manifestly assumed that athletics was an unambiguously good thing. For example, in *Clouds* **slide 14** Aristophanes coupled the ‘old education’ – of which athletics was the main component – with norms of citizenship and manliness. Better Argument suggests that traditional education flourished at the same time as 2 of the cardinal virtues of the Greek state, namely justice and moderation, and nurtured ‘the men who fought at Marathon’.

In Athenian democracy playwrights and public speakers generally depicted athletes and athletics in the same positive terms. Playwrights – of course – were members of the upper class. But their plays were performed as part of the dramatic *agōnes* **slide 15** of two *polis*-sponsored festivals for Dionysus. The judging of these contests was formally in the hands of randomly selected judges. But victory ultimately depended on the vocal responses of the predominantly lower-class theatregoers. The result was that the comic and the tragic poets had to tailor their plays to the outlook of lower-class citizens. Under Athenian democracy litigants and politicians faced a comparable performance-dynamic: **slide 16** their *agōnes* (‘debates’) were decided by the votes of lower-class jurors, assemblygoers or councillors. Consequently they too had to negotiate the perceptions of poor Athenians.

Therefore the overwhelmingly positive treatment of athletes and athletics in Athenian popular literature is clear evidence of the high estimation that the Athenian lower class had of sport. The preference that non-elite citizens showed for athletic *agōnes* in their state-sponsored program of festivals and their careful management of the public infrastructure for athletics can be attributed to their very positive evaluation of athletes and athletics.

## **Slide 17**

### **2. The Paradox of Elite Sport under the Democracy**

For Athenian boys and young men training in athletics took place in the regular school classes of the *paidotribēs* (‘athletics teacher’) **slide 18**. Isocrates explains how athletics teachers instruct their pupils in ‘the moves devised for competition’. They train them in athletics, accustom them to toil, and compel them to combine each of the lessons that they have learnt. For Isocrates this training turns pupils into competent athletic competitors as long as they have enough natural talent.

Athletics teachers were most frequently represented in classical texts or on red-figure pots giving lessons in wrestling or in the other so-called heavy events of boxing **slide 19** and the *pankration*. This is not unexpected because many of these teachers owned a *palaiistra* ('wrestling school'). What is unexpected is that we also find them training their students in the standard 'track and field' events of Greek athletics **slide 20**. For example, in his *Statesmen* Plato outlines how there are in Athens, as in other cities, 'very many' supervised 'training sessions for groups' where instructions are given and *ponoi* ('toils') expended not only for wrestling but also 'for the sake of competition in the foot-race or some other event'.

Athenian democracy, importantly, did not finance nor administer education. Consequently each family made its own decisions about how long their boys would be at school and whether they would take each of the 3 traditional disciplines of education: athletics, music and letters. The Athenians understood very well that the number of disciplines that a boy could pursue and the length of his schooling depended on his family's resources. Money **slide 21** determined not only whether a family could pay school-fees but also whether they could give their sons the *skholē* ('leisure') that they needed to pursue disciplines that were taught concurrently. Contemporary writers make clear that most poor citizens were unable to afford enough household slaves. Consequently they relied on their children to help them to run farms or businesses. These writers were aware too how this child labour restricted the educational opportunities of boys.

In *Sport, Democracy and War in Classical Athens* **slide 22** I collect the evidence that shows how – as a result of such socio-cultural barriers – poor Athenian families skipped music and athletics. They sent their sons *only* to the lessons of the letter teacher **slide 23** because they believed them to be the most useful for moral and practical instruction. Therefore it was only wealthy boys who received training in each of the 3 disciplines of education. Because the Athenian people firmly believed that training in athletics was indispensable for creditable performance, lower-class boys and youths would have been disinclined from entering sporting competitions in the first place. Therefore in the most fully developed democracy of pre-modern times athletes continued to be drawn predominantly – and possibly even exclusively – from the state's upper class.

There were, of course, other activities in classical Athens, such as the drinking party **slide 24**, pederastic homosexuality, political leadership and horsemanship, which

were also exclusive preserves of the wealthy. Yet, these upper-class pursuits differed from athletics in one critical respect: they were regularly criticised in old comedy and in the other genres of Athenian popular literature. Poor Athenians hoped, one day, to enjoy the lifestyle of the rich. But they still had problems with this social class's exclusive pursuits. Wealthy citizens, for example, were criticised for their excessive enjoyment of two elements of the *sumposion* ('drinking party'): alcohol and prostitutes. The Athenian *dēmos* believed that expenditure on such a party came at the expense of a wealthy citizen's ability to pay for festival liturgies and his other taxes.

The *dēmos* of classical Athens, apparently, never ended up condemning pederasty outright. Otherwise it is hard to explain why politicians occasionally used this elite pursuit for metaphors to describe political behaviours that they viewed as positive. Nevertheless **slide 25** the judgement that lower-class Athenians made of this pederastic homosexuality was largely negative; for public speakers – along with the comic and the tragic poets – usually depicted boy-love as a source of anxiety, associated it with stereotypical vices of the upper class, and misrepresented the relationship of an *erastēs* ('lover') with his *erōmenos* ('beloved') as the same as the relationship between a customer and a male prostitute. It would therefore appear that athletics was not only highly valued and practically supported by Athenian democracy. It also escaped the otherwise persistent criticism of upper-class activities in Athenian popular culture. Why this is the case has long been an *unanswered* question.

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### 3. Popular Ideas and Modern Theories

Obviously there have been competing popular ideas about the impact of sport on war. These ideas have led to a wide range of modern theories on this relationship. The Duke of Wellington **slide 27** may have *never* said – as he is famously reported to have said – that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. But it is true that from the nineteenth century boys at English elite private schools were made to play organised sport for the sake of their morality. Sports, such as rugby, cricket and athletics, were widely thought to teach them the personal values that they needed to run business, to administer the British Empire, and to fight for king and country. Elite contemporaries in Europe and North America actually saw these school-sports as a secret reason for Britain's economic success and worldwide empire. Consequently they sought to establish amateur clubs for playing them in the hope of raising the fortunes of

their own countries. These clubs quickly formed national organisations. Out of them were fashioned international sporting bodies. A good example is the International Olympic Committee. The IOC established itself in Paris in 1894. As the leading proponent of its establishment Pierre de Coubertin **slide 28** believed that revived Olympics would bring hostile countries together and encourage world peace.

Drawing explicitly on his own negative experience of an English elite private school, George Orwell **slide 29** came to different conclusions about sport's impact on war in a newspaper column that was published in December 1945. The Soviet Union had recently sent to England one of its premier soccer teams in order to play local clubs ostensibly for the sake of maintaining peaceful relations between the 2 wartime allies. But things – as they say – did not go according to plan **slide 30**: after controversies over team-selection and refereeing, violent confrontations on the soccer field and unsporting behaviour from the English soccer fans, the Soviet team left England prematurely after only 2 games. For Orwell **slide 31** this debacle of the Moscow Dynamos vindicated scepticism about the potential of international sport to foster peaceful co-existence. 'Even if', Orwell wrote, 'one didn't know from concrete examples **slide 32** (the 1936 Olympic Games, for instance) that international sporting contests lead to *orgies of hatred*, one could deduce it from the general principles.' Orwell suggests that the linking of a sporting team to 'some larger unit' inevitably arouses 'the most combative instincts'. At the international level this encourages spectators – along with entire nations – to believe that 'running, jumping and kicking a ball are tests of national virtue' and to allow winning at any cost. As a result, Orwell concludes, **slide 33** 'Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is *war minus the shooting*.'

Needless to say, the International Olympic Committee **slide 34** has never accepted any such criticism of its belief in sport's fostering of peace. De Coubertin's successors have continued to believe that promoting world peace and reconciling warring nations are the chief purposes of the modern Olympics. In doing so, however, they have never explained exactly how sporting participation achieves this peace-making result. Fortunately, coherent ideas about sport's impact of sport on aggression have long had currency in the western world's popular cultures. For example, coaches of American football believe that playing sport is a safe way to reduce aggression, reinforces socially

constructive values, such as teamwork, and hence reduces the likelihood of war. Sports journalists **slide 35** even believe that simply *watching* sport can reduce aggression.

Within the social sciences this popular view of sport as a safety valve for aggression has been integrated into different theories of catharsis. These theories go back to Freud and, ultimately, Aristotle. Possibly the most influential of them is the so-called drive-discharge model of catharsis. This model was invented by Konrad Lorenz **slide 36** in the 1960s. As a pioneer of ethology Lorenz argued that aggression is an innate drive. It constantly accumulates in animals or humans as aggressive tension. For Lorenz this accumulation is similar to the operation of a steam boiler. Aggressive tension builds up to a point where it must be released either as an uncontrolled explosion or in a series of controlled discharges. Consequently aggression can be safely vented through socially acceptable activities such as sport.

This drive-discharge model of catharsis is still sometimes used by sports historians. But it is now thoroughly discredited within the social sciences. For their part, social psychologists have shown that what Lorenz's model predicts about competitive sport and aggression are entirely unfounded: far from an inverse relationship, sport manifestly increases aggressiveness. For example, a social-psychology study of students at Indiana University **slide 37** found that the level of *unprovoked* aggression among players of American football was much higher than those who played no sport whatsoever.

Sport seems to have a similar impact on spectators. Interviews at an Army–Navy gridiron game in Philadelphia showed that male spectators were much more aggressive after the event, regardless of whether their team won or lost. A similar study achieved the same results with *Canadian* spectators of ice hockey: **slide 38** watching this sport not only significantly raised the general aggressiveness of males *and* females. It also diminished their ability to interact cooperatively with others. These results, the study concludes, 'call into question an assumption that sports events are necessarily rich social occasions where goodwill and *warm* interpersonal relations are fostered'.

Another social-science discipline to have challenged the drive-discharge theory of catharsis is anthropology. Anthropologists assume that human aggression is not an innate quality. Rather it something that is learnt or, at least, entirely shaped by socio-cultural factors. Some anthropologists also assume that common values inform disparate social activities and that large patterns of a culture tend to support each other. Claude Lévi-Strauss **slide 39** for one assumed that different structures of meaning in a culture tend to 'overlap, intersect and reinforce one another'. Finally Günther Lüschen infers

from anthropological case-studies that ‘sport is indeed an expression of that socio-cultural system in which it occurs’. For Lüschen sport not only evokes a society’s norms and values but also ‘socialises’ towards them. Sport thus helps to articulate and to legitimise social structures.

In a widely acclaimed study Richard Sipes **slide 40** draws these assumptions together into a new theory about sport’s impact on war. He calls his theory the cultural-pattern model. This model views the ‘intensity and configuration’ of aggression as ‘predominantly cultural characteristics’. It assumes ‘a strain toward consistency in each culture, with similar values and behaviour patterns, such as aggressiveness, tending to manifest in more than one area of culture’. As a result, behaviours and cultural patterns ‘relative to war and warlike sports tend to overlap and *support each other’s presence*’. Sipes’s model predicts a direct relationship between warlike sports and war: warlike sports are more likely to occur in warlike societies than in peaceful ones.

## **Slide 41**

### **4. The Cultural Overlap between Sport and War**

The classical Athenians thought of athletics and battle with a common set of concepts. No ancient writer comments on this cultural overlap. But Sipes’s cultural-pattern model suggests that this overlap may explain the paradox of elite sport in Athenian democracy. The most fundamental cultural overlap was that battle and an athletic competition were considered an *agōn*, that is, a contest decided by mutually agreed rules. In the last 20 years western democracies **slide 42** – including my own – have sometimes waged war contrary to international law. Therefore it can be easily forgotten that war in the western world was once regulated by widely discussed conventions and was viewed as a legitimate way to settle disputes between nation-states. The regular hoplite battle of classical Greece was no exception, being as it was – to quote Jean-Pierre Vernant **slide 43** – ‘a test as rule-bound as a tournament’.

Consequently a Greek state informed another of its intention to attack by sending a herald. By agreement, their armies met in the topography that was best suited for Greek land warfare: an agricultural plain. After hours of *hand-to-hand* fighting, the decisive moment was the *tropē* (‘turning’), when the hoplites of one side broke up and ran for their lives. The victors pursued them only for a short distance before turning to what they had to do on the battlefield. There they collected the bodies of their dead comrades, stripped the bodies of the enemy, and used some of the weapons and the armour that

they had captured to set up a *tropaion* ('trophy') **slide 44** on the exact spot where the *tropē* had occurred. When the defeated had time to re-group, they sent a herald to those controlling the battlefield in order to ask for a truce to take back their dead. Custom dictated that the victors could not honourably refuse this request. But asking for a truce was recognised as a decisive concession of defeat.

For classical Athenians the *agōnes* ('contests') of athletics and war also tested the moral fibre and the physical capacities of individual sportsmen and soldiers. Both activities were thought to involve *ponoi* ('toils') and *kindunoi* ('dangers'). This popular view of athletics as dangerous was well justified. For example, **slide 45** the hand- and arm-bindings of a Greek boxer were designed – like knuckledusters – to protect his hands and to injure his opponent, while the winner of a boxing-bout emerged only when one boxer gave up or was bashed unconscious. Boxers were, in fact, occasionally killed. The frequent depictions of them on black- and red-figure pots – as we see here – showed blood streaming from their faces.

The classical Athenians believed that victory was also due to the *aretē* ('courage') **slide 46** of athletes and soldiers alike and the *kudos* ('divine aid') of *polis*-protecting gods and demi-gods. By contrast, the defeat of a sportsman and a soldier was put down to his cowardice and was considered a source of intense personal shame.

This cultural overlap between the *agōnes* of sport and war raised the evaluation that lower-class Athenians had of athletics in 2 distinct ways. The first of these ways was closely tied to the standing of *polemos* ('war') in democratic Athens. **Slide 47** The classical Athenians intensified and transformed the waging of war. They frequently attacked other democracies and killed 10s of thousands of fellow Greeks. By the time Athenian democracy was fully consolidated *polemos* had come to dominate their politics *and* their personal lives. War consumed more money than all other public activities combined, was waged more frequently than ever before and was the main topic of political debate. Lower-class citizens valued war more highly than any other secular activity. They saw themselves as more courageous on the battlefield than the rest of the Greeks, their motives for waging wars as always just, and the history of their state – from the age of the heroes – as a series of almost unbroken military victories.

In democratic Athens war, manifestly, was more prominent as a public activity than athletics. The classical Athenians, it is true, devoted a lot of time and money on athletic *agōnes*. But they devoted considerably more to their armed forces and actual military campaigns. Such campaigns **slide 48** typically involved many 1000s of non-

elite hoplites and sailors. Nevertheless the conception of these 2 activities as comparable meant that athletics was closely associated with a part of Athenian democracy's core business that was held in the highest possible esteem. The *other* conspicuous activities of the wealthy lacked such a close connection with *polemos*. This meant that the cultural overlap between sport and war gave athletics a real advantage over them in the evaluations that the *dēmos* regularly made of the elite's lifestyle.

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### 5. Conclusion: The Democratisation of War

Athens of the fifth century extended military service and traditional representations of it to every stratum of the lower class. Before Athenian democracy war had largely been an elite pursuit. Wars were waged infrequently. They were initiated privately by upper-class faction-leaders. The hoplites of each campaign numbered in the 100s rather than the 1000s. They came predominantly from Athens's upper class. How they represented their soldiering can be seen on archaic black- and red-figure pottery. The military scenes of this ware have been superbly analysed by **slide 50** François Lissarrague. These scenes show how upper-class Athenians drew on the values and the concepts of epic poetry to glorify their own soldiering. This can be clearly seen **Slide 51** in the scenes of a hoplite that has been killed in action or of his corpse being carried back to Athens. Homer's heroes **slide 52** discuss how they will gain deathless renown and deathless memory of their youthfulness by bravely dying in battle. By his 'beautiful death' a hero gains everlasting confirmation of his *aretē*, which is reflected in the beauty of his corpse. Painters sometimes represent this *aretē* of the fallen hoplite by painting in a lion. The lion was one of the animals that Homer used as a symbol of a hero's martial excellence. The Attic painters evoked his attaining of the beautiful death of the heroes by giving him alone long hair, which is, again, a characteristic of heroes in epic poetry.

The creation of a publicly controlled army of hoplites as part of the reforms that Cleisthenes introduced at the end of the sixth century, the massive expansion of the public navy **slide 53** and the introduction of pay for military service opened up war, like politics, to large numbers of non-elite citizens. Because of the real power that this social class wielded in Athenian democracy's legal and political forums as well as at its dramatic contests, public speakers and playwrights found it necessary to represent the experiences of these new hoplites and sailors with the traditional moral explanation of victory on the battle- or sports-field.

This *ideological* democratisation of war can be clearly observed in the public funeral for the Athenian war dead. The ashes of these fallen combatants were placed in 10 cypress-caskets (one for each tribe) and displayed in **slide 54** Athens's civic centre. On the day of the funeral they were carried to the public cemetery where they were placed in 'a beautiful and grandiose tomb'. Such tombs **slide 55** were occasionally adorned with images of soldiers killing each other that evoked the *aretē* of those being buried. They also had epigrams **slide 56** explaining that the dead had put their *aretē* beyond doubt, leaving behind an eternal memory of courage. Finally, **slide 57** each tomb displayed a *complete* list of the year's casualties – *including* Athenian sailors – which was organised by tribes. The funeral oration **slide 58** traditionally delivered after the burial always outlined how the war dead had secured 'the most beautiful death': by falling in battle for the state they had gained deathless renown and deathless remembrance not only of their *aretē* but also of their youth.

This practical and ideological democratisation of war created a second way for the cultural overlap between sport and war positively to impact on sport. It meant that the Athenian *dēmos* not only closely associated athletics with the highly valued and the prominent public activity of war. But they also enjoyed a strong *personal* connection with what athletes actually did. **Slide 59** They could see how sportsmen displayed *aretē* and endured *kindunoi* and *ponoi* just as *they themselves* did when fighting for Athens. Together these two ways fully account for why non-elite Athenians valued athletics and athletes as highly as they did, shielded both from public criticism and showed a strong preference for athletic *agōnes* over other types of competition in their program of festivals. In conclusion the changes that non-elite Athenians made to the waging of war supported and legitimised elite sport.