

Chariot racing essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Circus or Hippodrome was an ancient Roman arena used to hold chariot racing.

The Circus Maximus was the main stadium in Rome in which Chariot Races were held. Its shape is of an oblong track, with a central 'rib', which would have been decorated with statues, trophies and had seven movable eggs with seven dolphins, which acted as lap counters for the racers. Every lap, one of the seven dolphins would be turned downwards, signifying the end of that lap. The turning- post or meta was made of solid brick and obviously any collision with the flimsy chariot would result in its almost immediate disintegration.

Charioteers could not see round the meta, and I think this made the act of turning very dangerous – the almost blind corner meant that the charioteer did not know if a crash had occurred just around the bend (see Fig. 1). Figure 1: A Plaque of a charioteer being crushed by the horses of another racer (under the horses)The Circus Maximus could hold up to 275, 000 people, as chariot racing was the most popular spectator sport of the time. The simple track design was still interesting because its length allowed charioteers to 'battle' for the leading position.

There were 12 teams of racers, split into colour groups, so that the audience could clearly make out whom they were supporting from far away. Each charioteer would control teams of 2, 3, 4, 6 or 7 horses (see Fig. 2), although 4 (see Fig. 3) was the most common number, this was because more horses became more difficult to control and turn. 4 horses was a trade-off between speed and manoeuvrability. The horses had to be highly trained.

Figure 2: A statue of the rare 2-horse racing style adopted by the more skilled charioteers of Roman Times. There were 4 different colour teams: Reds, Whites, Blues and Greens. These were what the crowds supported. Pliny the Younger once said: "The Circus Games do not interest me in the slightest. There's nothing new or different about them; if you've seen one race, you've seen them all. I can't understand why so many thousands of people want to see again and again (in a childish fashion) horses racing and men driving chariots. It wouldn't be so bad if they appreciated the horses' speed or the drivers' skill.

But all they see is the colour of the tunic. If you swapped over the colours, I'm quite sure they wouldn't notice the difference. Read also. And it's not just the masses that are obsessed with chariot racing, but some sensible and important men too. I make allowances for the common people, who are more cheap than their tunics.

" Pliny obviously regarded chariot racing as being fit for the uneducated masses. Figure 3: An image of a 4-horse chariot racer, representing the month-long festival of Mars, in which Chariot Racing occurred as a Tribute to the Gods. The race started when the event organiser, the Emperor mostly (Fig. 4), dropped a white cloth. This started the race, and subsequently the racers had to do seven laps of the Circus Maximus, totalling at two and a half miles.

This was not very efficient, as the 6th and 7th laps weren't always needed, as sometimes no racers were still running by then because of injuries.

Emperor Domitian reduced the number of laps to 5 so that more races could

be held in one day. The chariots were released one at a time, which I don't think was very fair, because the first racer would have a long lead on the last racer, even if the last racer was fast. This did not really 'compete' the racers against each other in that case, so the races were biased. To make the game more interesting, people often bet on the horse they favoured the most, but taking into account the bias, I would expect most people to have placed bets on the first racer let out, who displayed the colour that they liked.

There were many dangers that arose from chariot racing, because of the lack of any safety on the chariot. The chariot was built for speed, and consequently, all non-essential parts that would have attributed to safety would have been removed. The back of the chariot did not have a 'back'. In addition, the charioteer wrapped the reins around his forearms and body, to get a better grip, but this meant that if the chariot somehow became detached, he would be dragged around by the horses and be vulnerable to other chariots. This caused more frequent deaths amongst charioteers.

Figure 4: A wall plaque showing a charioteer passing the Emperor (on the balcony, top left) in lead position.

The poet Ovid in the *Amores* vividly describes a race: "The Praetor's starting the first race. Four-horse chariots. Look – they're off! There's your driver. My God, he's taking the corner too wide! What are you doing? The man behind is drawing level.

For pity's sake pull on your left rein! They are rushing down the course in a clash of colours. Now's your chance to take the lead. Go all, out for that gap. Hurrah, he's done it!" Ovid in these statements stresses the excitement felt

by the ordinary Roman viewing these races. He emphasises the need to get very close to the meta so that the turn could be made as tightly as possible.

The charioteer who ‘played safe’ and took a wide turn would be at an obvious disadvantage. Chariot racing and its dangers can be compared to Formula One and motor racing nowadays, although in some places, they do still practice chariot racing. The last major death in F1 racing was when Ayrton Senna died as a result of an F1 car crash. Even though safety levels have risen dramatically since Roman times, freak accidents do occur. I think that if safety levels on chariots had increased, the number of successful charioteers would have been larger, as they would have stayed alive longer. Charioteers obviously had fan clubs and inflated egos as is clear from the epitaph of Scopus:” I am Scopus, the glory of the roaring Circus, the object of Rome’s cheers and her short-lived darling.

“ There were varying views of Chariot Racing amongst the Romans. Some people went there to watch, some went just for money, and for some it was just a meeting place. Ovid once said:” I do not sit here because I am a fan of thoroughbred horses; yet I pray that the one which you (Ovid’s love interest) favour may win. I came so that I may talk with you.” This clearly shows that the actual event of the horses racing was unimportant to Ovid, and saw it as a place to meet the opposite sex (sexes were not segregated at races), although, there were fanatics who came to the Circus Maximus purely for the thrill of the sport. The Emperor Caligula, for example, was so obsessed by horses that he sent out the army into the surrounding streets the night before to ensure silence so that his favourite horse was not scared.

This was a rare case in my opinion, but it is well documented and known. Riots often broke out. For example, after a particularly gripping race, fans in an arena in Constantinople became very rowdy and Constantinople was burnt down, killing thousands of people. A comparison with today's football riots can be made, although there has never been any accident that has led to such a terrible outcome.

Ammienus Marcellinus comments on the crowd's violent attachment to the races: "All over the city you can see the mass of people, unemployed and with too much time on their hands, quarrelling fiercely about the races"

Figure 5: A Mosaic of a charioteer being honoured after a win at the races

Conclusion It is my opinion that chariot racing from the Roman times has not disappeared, simply evolved with the technology into car racing. The views on chariot racing would have dramatically changed. People would try as hard as possible to stop deaths from occurring, and cheating, by weapons or sabotage would not be met with kindly. The primitive Roman view of the thrill of fast racing still exists today, except modern society has developed the restraint to stop riots and large-scale accidents from occurring. Re-enactments of chariot racing, such as 'Ben Hur', most probably don't do justice to the thrill and interest that the sport put forth on audiences, they are merely made interesting for the film audience. Compared with gladiatorial games, bloodlust is not the reason that drew people to these games, purely the racing and in some case the social event that it provided.