

The value of physical education to the ancient gre



eks and RomansThe Value of Physical Education to the Ancient Greeks and Romans

Throughout history, society has placed a different value on physical education and sport. The purpose of physical education has changed over different time periods and as a result of ever-changing socio-cultural events. Some civilizations use the practice of physical education to prepare for war, some for profit, and some for a general all-around development. Three ancient cultures are of particular importance to development of physical education. The Athenian Greeks, the Spartan Greeks, and the Romans each had their own beliefs about the mind, body, and spirit. While these early civilizations valued physical development to varying degrees, they are all worthy of examination within a sport and physical education context.

In ancient Athens, the all-around citizen was valued. To the Athenians, physical education was necessary to achieve all-around mental, moral, and physical excellence. The Greek gods personified this idea, known as *arete*. The 12 main gods of the Olympic Council possessed superior intellectual and physical capabilities, such as strength, endurance, agility, and bravery. They personified the Greek Ideal, which emphasized the unity of the “man of action” with the “man of wisdom” (Lumpkin, 1990, p. 167). “The Greek Ideal became the Athenian Ideal as this city-state sought to provide an educational system that encouraged boys to develop their physical and mental abilities” (Lumpkin, 1990, p. 168). Boys improved their physical prowess in order to prepare for war and also to depict the aesthetic beauty of the body. In Athenian society, the idyllic body was harmoniously

proportioned, alert, and physically fit for both civil and military duties (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 45).

The Athenians main reason for physical competition was in honor of respected soldiers killed in battle and in honor of the gods. A famous Greek epic, the Iliad, “ described the funeral games held in honor of Patroclus, Achilles’ friend who had been killed in the Trojan War” (Lumpkin, 1990, p. 167). The men participated in a chariot race, boxing, wrestling, a footrace, a duel with spears, a discus throw, archery, and a javelin throw.

Women had a very different role in Athenian society. The girls remained at home with their mothers and received little or no education. They were secluded to the home after marriage (Lumpkin, 1990, p. 168).

In contrast, the purpose of education in ancient Sparta was to produce a well-drilled, well-disciplined marching army (Donn & Donn, 2000). Sparta was known for conquering other lands and everything carried out in the Spartan society was done for the purpose of achieving this goal. To become a superior Spartan soldier, boys had to endure unbelievable pain and hardship. The boys were taken away from their parents at age 7, and lived a harsh and brutal life in the soldiers’ barracks. The older children started fights with the younger children to make them tough and strong (Donn & Donn, 2000).

Spartan boys utilized running and jumping as a means of conditioning. They also participated in swimming, hunting, wrestling, boxing, playing ball, riding horses bareback, throwing the discus and the javelin, and competing in the pancratium. A strict code of discipline was placed on its people. As boys prepared themselves for military duty, girls learned of their duty to bear

strong and healthy children. The purpose of physical education for the Spartan girls was to prepare them physically for this duty. The Spartan state required girls to participate in gymnastics as well as wrestling, swimming, and horseback riding. Dancing was important to both boys and girls to improve their physical abilities and to honor the gods (Lumpkin, 1990, 167).

Both the Athenians and the Spartans competed in festivals to honor the gods. The most prestigious and well-known festival in which the Greeks battled was the ancient Olympic games.

The Romans differed greatly from the Athenian Greeks in their emphasis on the all-around citizen. “ With the possible exception of Greek music, most Romans were not comfortable with the all-around development of man that emphasized the aesthetic and educated aspects of Greek culture” (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 37). The purpose of physical training for Roman citizens was solely to make them “ obedient, disciplined, and ready to be a warrior” (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 42). In Rome, the Campus Martinus was served as a place for fathers to teach their sons physical abilities necessary for entering into manhood and then into the military. Running, jumping, swimming, wrestling, horsemanship, boxing, fencing, and archery were taught. Absolute obedience to commands was emphasized at the Campus Martinus (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 43). These activities served two purposes. One purpose was to educate the boys in basic military skills. Secondly, by participating in physical activity, the boys could improve their general health and fitness. They enjoyed exercising and keeping their bodies in shape. “ The Romans were quick to accept the concept of health gymnastics because the maintenance of health was a worthwhile and natural

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goal for them” (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 43). Ancient Romans considered physical training for women simply as entertainment and unnecessary. The women engaged in swimming, dancing, as well as tossing the ball back and forth. Women that participated in weight-training exercises to tone muscles were considered fashionable (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 45).

While physical education in ancient Rome was mainly for military reasons, sport and competition had become entertainment for the masses. Unlike the Greeks, who thrived on competing in the events during their festivals, the Romans became a nation of spectators and not participants. Fights in the Colosseum and the horse and chariot races at the Circus Maximus provided large-scale entertainment and was extremely popular (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 46). They enjoyed watching slaves, Christians, criminals, and other political prisoners engage in brutal competitions ending in death. These are the people known as Roman gladiators. Roman gladiators also consisted of free men who volunteered to participate in the games (“Roman,” 2000). The Romans preferred to watch the free men, although the slaves were well-liked entertainment. By becoming gladiators, these lower class free men gained the admiration and popularity of the wealthy Roman citizens. Criminals that had committed a capital crime had to fight in the gladiatorial arena without weapons. All other criminals had formal training in private gladiator schools. “At these private and imperial schools, gladiators became specialist in combat techniques that disabled and captured their opponents rather than killed them quickly” (“Roman,” 2000). Weapons and the armor of the gladiators choosing were allowed in these schools. If the criminals survived three to five years of combat without dying, they could earn their freedom.

However, few survived the three to five years (“Roman,” 2000). “These festivals provided leisure-time and relief from strenuous training but served no educational purposes” (Lumpkin, 1990, p. 177).

The Athenian Greeks emphasized individual excellence over the group. In Sparta, the state was held in the highest regard. The affairs of the state were always of greater importance than the individual. The singular goal of the Spartans was serving the state. The Romans considered Greek athletics to be too individualistic. Instead, the ancient Romans promoted, if not demanded, “team unity” (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 42).

The concept of dualism was prevalent in the Spartan city-state. Dualism, which means a separation of mind and body, can take two forms. Society may view the mind as more important than the body, or they may view the body as more important than the mind. The Spartans emphasized the body over the mind. The Spartans goals were to win at all costs. Spartan boys learned to be cunning, to lie, to cheat, to steal, and they learned how to get away with it (Donn & Donn, 2000).

The Athenians encompassed a more naturalistic perspective. To the Athenians, the mind was equal to the body and they were both consistently important. Members of the Athenian society were “superbly educated in the arts and sciences and trained to be extremely productive in times of peace or war” (Donn & Donn, 2000). The boys attended day school from age 7-14 and attended four years of higher school. At 18, they attended military school for two additional years (Donn & Donn, 2000).

The Greeks and the Romans valued physical education to varying degrees, yet they all have had a lasting impact on the subject matter. “ Modern programs of physical education in the United States borrowed primarily from the philosophies, activities, and developments of Europeans” (Lumpkin, 1990, p. 165). The Greeks became the foundation for later physical education and sport programs. The Romans developed their own system of physical training and did not borrow from the Greeks in military training strategies (Mechikoff & Estes, 1993, p. 42). By examining the beliefs and practices of each of these historical periods, commonalities can be seen between the ancient civilizations and the current philosophy and curricular practices.

The Greek Ideal of the Athenians is linked to the movement approach, which emphasizes the whole child. Athenian Greeks emphasized personal excellence just like the movement approach emphasizes personal excellence and the individual. This concept is still prevalent in the physical education courses at Bowling Green State University. All of the programs in the School of Human Movement, Sport, and Leisure Studies link the intellectual and the physical. The linkage between the body and mind is present in the requirements of both the foundational courses in human movement as well as the activity, or movement performance, courses.

Like the Spartans, a dualistic society, high school classrooms and sports programs across the nation continually value the body over the mind. Athletes with low grade point averages can still play in games at many schools. At universities, athletes are favored over other students through scholarships and special recognition.

In terms of physicality, which refers to the body, Americans still value and admire the god-like bodies of the Athenians. In the United States, men strive to attain the muscular bodies that the Greeks so proudly honored. The increase in the use of steroids and dietary supplements may indicate that the muscular strength and physical form of the human body popularized in ancient Greece is even increasing in importance among adolescent boys. American women are idealized by their femininity, which was present in the god Athena.

The Romans, whose purpose for sporting events and competitions was strictly for entertainment, may have contributed to current practices of producing sport and competition to make money and amuse society. The World Wrestling Federation, one of the most popular sports leagues in the country, is designed solely for entertainment.

Physical education has its roots linked to the Athenians, the Spartans, and the Romans. While the value and purpose of education changes and evolves throughout history, it has a cyclical nature. Currently, our nation is preparing for a possibly physical war. As time progresses, the emphasis on physical education may increase if men are going to be needed to fight. The value of physical education to the ancient Greeks and Romans continues to play a role in American society and America's schools.

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