THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF GYMNASIUM IN PREPARATION OF THE YOUNG FOR COMPETITIONS IN THE ANCIENT GREECE OLYMPIC GAMES

Abstract
According to the content and problems of the research, this paper belongs to history of sport. It represents not only an aspiration to enrich history of sport through scientific-technical analysis of the role of a phenomenon of gymnasium for sports competition, but also the arousing of the research potential through new knowledge about sense of life of a young athlete in that space, reflection and studying of the significance of an ancient gymnasium for performance in the festivity games at Olympia. Ancient Greece gymnasiums had educational and cultural character. The existence of training space led to creation of conditions for appearance of the first founders of the sports science, who by their mediations, realizations and observations, were inspiring for all those who wanted to expand knowledge and transfer it to the others. Although, historians accurately described lives of ancient Greeks and their progressive cultural life, there are still things not enough described from the area related to actuality of the phenomenon of gymnasium in preparation of the young for competition in the Ancient Olympic Games.

Key words: GYMNASIUM / ANCIENT GREECE / OLYMPIC GAMES

INTRODUCTION

Symposion – conference, discussion accompanied by food consumption (Gianaki, 2000), was part of the youth’s culture. The same culture found its other sense through gymnasion – practising areas. Greek society was the first to realize importance of sport for general culture. The schedule of international festivals in which top athletes competed (the Olympic Games being only the most famous among them) was established in the VI century B.C. (Christopoulos & Bastias, 1976). The athletes were famous personalities in their home towns, showered with gifts and victor’s hymns written by personalities such as Pindar (1996), but oddly enough team sports did not exist notwithstanding the significance of a group...
in these and in many other activities. The boys spent great part of a day in gymnasia where they practiced, spent time in discussions or other working activities (Muratidis, 1992). It is not accidentally that two well-known gymnasia, Academia and Lyceum, gave name to two famous schools of philosophy, Plato’s and Aristotle’s, because those philosophers developed their activities intentionally close to the practising areas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gymnasion – upbringing and educational institution

Education in Athens for children aged 7 to 14 was traditionally done in three fields: literature, physical education, and music. There were:

- Grammar schools – giving instruction in reading, writing and calculation.
- Gymnastic schools (palaistra) – where various physical exercises were performed, competitions supervised by the paidagogi, different types of fighting were taught, as well as swimming and others.
- Music schools – in which singing and playing the various instruments as well as dancing were taught (Ilic & Mijatovic, 2004).

In his work Politics Aristotle (1984) explained the element of the educational and instruction system in ancient Greece: „There are mostly four subjects which are usually taught: grammar, gymnastics, music and sometimes drawing. Grammar and drawing are taught because they are useful for life and have manifold applications, and gymnastics because it makes people courageous... Music is not beneficial to health and physical strength as gymnastics is, because music does not produce neither health nor physical strength.“ Aristotle not only offers explanation why gymnastics is indispensable for the youth, but clarifies it through examples. He says: “So, we agreed, that gymnastics need to be applied and how it should be used. Until puberty lighter exercises should be used, avoiding the compulsory nutrition regime and compulsory efforts to prevent the development. There are reliable proofs that it can happen: among the Olympic winners, one can find only two or three who won both as boys and as adult people, because strenuous exercises practiced while they were children, exhausted their strength. But, if three years from the beginning of the puberty are dedicated to other sciences, then in the years to come they can be subjected to efforts and strict nutrition regime. One should not put effort on body and mind at the same time, because the aims of these two efforts are contrary i.e. physical effort impedes thoughts, and mind effort impedes the body.”
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Physical education was carried out at practising areas, which were initially simple and consisted of a running track (dromos). Later, beside the running track there were children exercise grounds – palaistra. When both facilities merged into one whole, it was named gymnasion (Ilic & Mijatovic, 2004). The main building of Greek gymnasia was palaistra.

At the age of 14 to 16 the boys from Athens attended gymnasium (Ilic & Mijatovic, 2004). The main person in the gymnasium was gymnasiarchoi (Skiasdas, 1997). The best ones had chances to participate in Panathenia and Panhellenic games, and the top ones were lucky to appear in the stadium at Olympia. When they reached the age of 18 the boys would move into the ephebeis, which lasted until the age of 20. After that they became soldiers.

Picture 1. Ancient Greece gymnasium – reconstruction according to Iliakis (Christopoulos & Bastias, 1976)

Chronis (2004) gave an accurate description of the ancient Greece gymnasium: "Gymnasium was big and square shaped. Three sides had broad corridors with eaves, while the fourth side was twice broad again with eaves (probably to protect from rain and better protection from the sun). It was 192 meters long and it was called dromos or ystos and was used by runners at bad weather. In front of, i.e. outside the gymnasium there was another running track – paradromis, also long 192 meters (used for running at nice weather). Outside, little farther there was a palaistra, and next to it various rooms with different functions):

- **Apoditron** – dressing room.
- **Elaiothesion** – room for anointing of the athletes.
- **Konistion** – room in which the athletes covered themselves with powder or sand to an oiled body
- **Sferistion** – room for with ball games.
- **Korikion** – room for boxing and pancration exercises with the korikos hanging in the middle
- **Efivion** – rooms where various lectures were held.
- **Loutron** – room for bath taking after the training (washroom). Before entering the bath they would remove oil with sand with the strigil.
- **Piriatron** – room (similar to the Turkish hammam) with hot and cold water. During Hellenic and Roman period most gymnasia had this room.”

The functions of the aforesaid rooms indicate the existence of essential factors for successful implementation of the training process. When compared to today’s sports of fitness centres a certain similarity can be spotted.

**Activities in the gymnasium**

The ancient Greece gymnasium had a curriculum of implementation of various activities. Through the analysis of significant examples one can gain an
insight of the existence of certain activities and interpretation of their significance. The picture 2 displays „the manager of the palaistra with tool for leveling the ground, three spears and a discus hanging on the wall from the period around 480 BC.“ (Ciric, 1996). It is assumed that the manager instructed the youth in the stated activities through his personal example, as the army leaders were in the first lines of combat. Such an attitude probably influenced that all the boys carried out working and training activities with greater zeal. The explanation of the scene leads to a conclusion – everybody in the palaistra took part in working tasks of preparation for training.

**Picture 2.** The manager of the palaistra with equipment used in the training process

In the found archeological value – cratire (Picture 4) Chronis (2004) by describing the events from ancient Greece, tried to interpret the author’s deed with the following words: “the scene from gymnasium in Athens was shown on a cratire of red figurative style, originating from 350 BC. Three naked young men, carrying a wreath on their heads, are getting ready for training. The middle man is pouring oil from a special bottle (arybbalos) into the hands of the second athlete. On the right side there is another young man who is holding a strigil. Fat and unfit body shows that they are very young. There

**Picture 3.** Young wrestler prepares wrestling field

sports competitions, had daily physical activities of working character. It could be said that young men in palaistras and gymnasiums, through a whole day planned physical activity (working and training tasks), were qualified for later very efficient realizations on the field of manifestation of physical abilities in war and at sports competition.
are two bottles hanging from the wall and one strigil in the middle.” The explained scene, presented in a very nice and preserved cratire, suggests a true picture of real everyday life in ancient gymnasium. It is presumed that the author did not want to present the bodies of the young in ideal proportions, but as they really were. Consequently, it can be concluded that the presentation of the young’s preparation for training was displayed in possible everyday activity which existed immediately before the training.

**Picture 4.** Preparation of young athletes for training

In 1880 Falke, according to various memoirs, depicted also various sports and training activities of the young people in gymnasia. (Michalopulos, 2003). The choice of use of various sports and training activities points out that, with a certain restriction, they represented fundamentally important exercises in the process of preparation for sports competitions and war skills. It can be noticed that they used training facilities from the space of specific and comprehensive preparation.

**Picture 5.** The young man in gymnasium from the ancient Greece practices before the trainer

Everyday athletes’ preparation for competition was observed, besides trainers by, philosophers, politicians and musicians. So Plato was a good philosopher but also a sports practitioner (”plato” means broad back and that nickname he gained from his own paidotribe who was his wrestling coach – and competed in the Isthmian games). He considered that good body had more capabilities and that while running and wrestling one should use the principle of training of the entire body for speed and strength, which was explained through a dialog of the citizen of Athens and Kleinia in his book *Laws*:

“Athenianian: in the war the most appreciated is physical agility of both legs and hands. Agility and speed of legs can serve for both running away and for pursuing; in battle at close range agility of hands is useful, and in a conflict between individuals, besides that power and strength are necessary.

Kleinia: Sure!
Athenianian: But, if we do not use arms, neither one or the second speed can offer us great benefit.
Kleinia: Sure!“ (Platon, 1971).

The principle of training the whole body for speed and strength, conceived by Plato, is used even today in sports practice, where comprehensive preparation represents base for development of speed and strength. It is known from modern technology of sports training that without basic preparations an athlete cannot have great achievements in competitions (Platonov, 1997; Stefanovic & Jakovljevic, 2004).

Flaceliere (1979) states that each palaistra (integral part of gymnasion) had at least one permanent aulos player: “His task was not only to improve with his music warm up exercises, today called Swedish gymnastics” but also discus and javelin throwing as well as other sports”. One of the roles of the aulos player was, by means of music which had rhythm, to help young men to master more easily regular performance of exercised used for warming up. These are today’s warm up exercises, stretching of muscles and other movements. Thus, the ancient Greeks knew that to introduce young men by warming up into greater training efforts. On the other hand they took care that the exercises be done in perfect movements where aulos player had additional role, while the coach had main role.

There was a special room for bath taking within the gymnasium (wash room) after the training, called loutron. After the removal of sweat, oil and dust by strigil, ephebei used sponges and special bath tubes filled with water to clean better their body– such a bath tube is presented on the Picture 6. the scene presents young men having a bath after training. Ancient Greeks knew that hygiene is important in order to have good condition and health (Giof, 2000).

Picture 6. Ephebei takes a bath after the training

Panhellenic sanctuaries were great gathering places where a man could show oneself before the audience from the entire Greece. After Delphi, Olympia was the second significant sanctuary, situated in the area of Elis on the Pelopones, dedicated to god Zeus, where the oldest and for ever most watched sports games were held – Festivity games at Olympia.

The Picture 7 presents a „scene of an athlete standing under the stoa in palaistra (it can be seen it is made of ceramics) with leather belts for boxing in one hand, and holding a palm branch in another as a winner. On the left hand side, you can see a pillar, on whose top there is a head of the god Hermes, protecting a young man in combat skills “ (Giof, 2000). Based on the presented details it can be assumed that the author of this piece, wanted to show through symbols that the winners in combat events originated from palaistra and that they believed in God Hermes who was their protector. It means, that not only the competition at Olympia had religious character, but the palaistra space itself, where the ephebei used to train for sports competitions had a character of a cult. It points to knowledge that there was syncretism of two spaces – for exercising and for competition, which had a link of human (sports) being with something they consider sacred, spiritual and divine. It could hardly be imagined that the athletes behaved religiously only in competitions, because it is generally known that sport and religion were two significant social factors, which formed social environment in life of all people of ancient Greece.

Aristotle (1984) was the first to say that gymnastics belongs to a special science branch and that it has a system of exercise using: “In all skills and
sciences which do not encompass only certain parts, but one complete field (still it has one part) whose task is to examine what is suitable for each individual subject (of that skill, i.e. science). For example, gymnastics should examine **what kind of exercising is suitable to which body, which exercise is the best**, because the body which was naturally gifted and made the most beautiful must have as appropriate the best type of exercises and finally, **which exercises are good for everybody**. That is namely the task of gymnastics. And if someone wants to have well shaped body and regular posture and if he does not want to know gymnastics’ rules, that does not diminish the duty of the trainer and of athlete to be able to develop that ability (feature). We see the same happening even in medicine …” From the above stated text it can be noticed that ancient Greeks knew about the system of preparation of the young in sports competitions. In compliance with that they conceived **competitions for three age categories** (Pausania, 1994). Today it would correspond to the categories of pioneers, juniors and seniors (Stefanovic, Ioanidis and Karioty (2008).

De Boton (2002) states the following on Socrates’ method of logical thinking, regarding the knowledge: “In order to follow Sokrates’ example, when faced with the criticism we should behave as athletes training for the Olympic Games... SOKRATES: One should work and exercise, as well as eat and drink, according to the instructions of one’s instructor, who possesses expert’s knowledge, and not according to the opinion of the remaining world.” Sokrates supported an opinion that coaches were experts, because they possessed “understanding and knowledge”. Under that he probably presumed that they were good paidagogoi who basically possessed knowledge on execution of training process.

By studying ancient literature Muratidis (1992) wrote: “Plato often mentions coaches named gymnastes together with doctors, while Aristotle thought that he possessed special knowledge to prepare athletes. Philostratos used to say that gymnastes knew theory and practise when it comes to athletes training and paidotribes knew only practice.” Muratidis (1992) states for coaches: „Gymnastes was as we would say today, trainer of professional athletes or to those who would try to win in great sports competitions and to become popular in the entire ancient Greece.“

Since 4th century B.C. coaches specialists had appeared for various sports, who had to know other sports as well. The training commences with stretching (programming), where more factors were taken into consideration: facility (outside or inside), place, climate conditions, part of the day, training quality, physical and psychical state of an athlete (Komitudis, 2004). A new training system appeared – tétras, a cycle of 4 days with different training (Philostratos, 1992). It was in fact the beginning of the first micro cycle.

The coaching science had its point of departure in ancient Greece, where there were recommendations for training under health aspect and preparations for cult competitions, all in function of well prepared soldiers for war. Philostratos (1992) ancient Greece writer was the first to present all knowledge so far and experience of the coaches of ancient Greece. He says that training science invented and developed competition program in the Olympic Games and parallel with that improved methods and training means of training in athletes which was implemented in gymasia.
By studying references from the ancient Greek and comparing it with modern knowledge form the field of sports training Stefanovic, Ionnidis and Kariotu (2008) reached the following standpoint - in Ancient Greece as well as today, sports training involves coaches specialists, people from sports medicine, scientists and others. The structure of the training in ancient period remained almost the same until today. They knew the training principles. Once training used to be sketched, and today we use computer technology of planning and programming. Music was used on training and competition as a stimulating factor of achievement of success/results in the selected sports activity. Similar things occur today in the process of sports training and in competition. Significant is the space of recovery to which great attention is and was devoted in both periods. In ancient Greece it was spoken about training science at that level of knowledge, as it is spoken today – corresponds to new technology of sports training. Using of terminology, selection of athletes, categories of competitors, comprehensive preparation, using of optimal load in training, knowledge of periodisation (micro cycles), nutrition and other links knowledge of that time and today’s knowledge on sports training – and finally two sports cultures from various time periods.

Gymnasium was not only the place where a person would occasionally drop in to warm up, but educational upbringing institution which cherished the culture of body and mind. The facility itself most often was located in the city centre, and as for example in Alexandria ranked among the most beautiful buildings. What is more important, all full members of the city community were expected to belong to the gymnasium. The conditions for accession were strictly fixed. For continental Greece there are evidences that membership excluded (among others) slaves, liberated slaves, their sons and those involved in dirty business. Probably these rules in newly established cities practically excluded almost all those who were considered non Greeks. It means that one of the key institutions on which Greek city culture was based was gymnasion – gymnasium.

CONCLUSION

In ancient Greece each polis wanted to have its own competition but also the winner in another towns (the success of politics through sport – as it happens even today). The appearance of popular sports games (at Nemea, Delphi, Isthmia, Athens and other cities - states), which essentially represented competition system, influenced the creation of the system of physical exercising called gymnastics – training only for sports competition, which was implemented in gymasia. The research results resulted in some new knowledge from the field of gymnasium phenomenon in preparation of the young for sports competitions, whose culmination were the Festivity games at Olympia. That is the way to approach to those who are eager for knowledge and enlarge it with everything. The conclusions reflect in the following:

- Spatial conditions for training in gymasia were functional and well conceived.
- Trainer’s knowledge in gymnasium was on a high level.
- The scientific system of practicing existed in gymnasium.
- There was an ontologic approach of body development in gymnasium which reflected in the harmony of body and mind.
- Everyone in the gymnasium participated in working activities – tasks.
- Besides the instruction educational character, gymnasium had also cultural character.
- Gymnasium was one of the key institutions on which the Greek culture was founded.

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