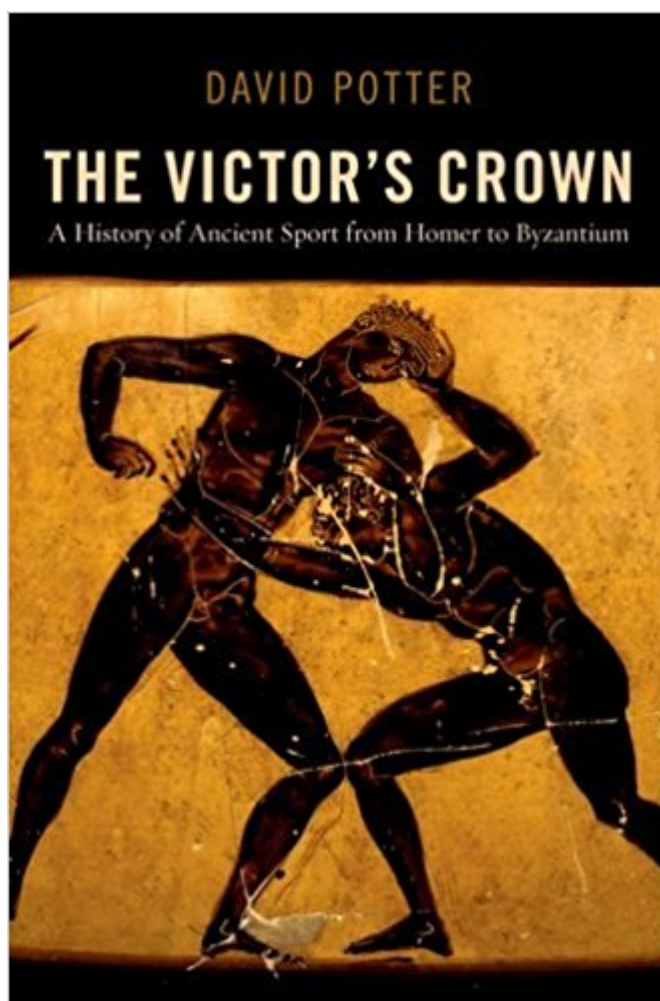


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The Victor's Crown: A History Of Ancient Sport From Homer To Byzantium



Synopsis

The Victor's Crown brings to vivid life the signal role of sport in the classical world. Ranging over a dozen centuries--from Archaic Greece through to the late Roman and early Byzantine empires--David Potter's lively narrative shows how sport, to the ancients, was not just a dim reflection of religion and politics but a potent social force in its own right. The passion for sport among the participants and fans of antiquity has been matched in history only by our own time. Potter first charts the origins of competitive athletics in Greece during the eighth century BC and the emergence of the Olympics as a preeminent cultural event. He focuses especially on the experiences of spectators and athletes, especially in violent sports such as boxing and wrestling, and describes the physiology of conditioning, training techniques, and sport's role in education. Throughout, we meet the great athletes of the past and learn what made them great. The rise of the Roman Empire transformed the sporting world by popularizing new entertainments, particularly gladiatorial combat, a specialized form of chariot racing, and beast hunts. Here, too, Potter examines sport from the perspectives of both athlete and spectator, as he vividly describes competitions held in such famous arenas as the Roman Coliseum and the Circus Maximus. The Roman government promoted and organized sport as a central feature of the Empire, making it a sort of common cultural currency to the diverse inhabitants of its vast territory. While linking ancient sport to events such as religious ceremonies and aristocratic displays, Potter emphasizes above all that it was the thrill of competition--to those who competed and those who watched--that ensured sport's central place in the Greco-Roman world. "Vivid and authoritative. Potter skillfully reveals how the gymnasium lay at the heart of Greek life and culture, but his passion is clearly for the Olympics. When Potter moves on to Roman sport, things get livelier still. He meticulously traces the origins, careers and lifestyles of athletes, gladiators and charioteers alike, and demolished some cherished myths along the way. Most gladiatorial combats apparently ended in surrender, not death, although a crowd might well call out "ingula!" (kill!), running their thousands of thumbs under their throats in the original 'thumbs up' gesture. Fascinating and impressive."--James McConnachie, Sunday Times

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Customer Reviews

"Well written and informative, this book makes complex ideas understandable. Highly recommended."--S.A. Riess, CHOICE "Written in lively style, packed with detail bringing the era to pungent life." --The Independent "Vivid and authoritative....Potter skillfully reveals how the gymnasium lay at the heart of Greek life and culture, but his passion is clearly for the Olympics.... When Potter moves on to Roman sport, things get livelier still....He meticulously traces the origins, careers, and lifestyles of athletes, gladiators and charioteers alike, and demolished some cherished myths along the way. Fascinating and impressive." --James McConnachie, Sunday Times

David Potter is Francis W. Kelsey Collegiate Professor of Greek and Roman History and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Greek and Latin in the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Michigan. He is the author of *Ancient Rome: A New History* and *Emperors of Rome* as well as two forthcoming OUP titles, *Constantine the Emperor* and *Theodora*.

I was inspired to read this book after reading Pindar's victory odes. "The Victor's Crown" is divided into thirty short chapters and follows a loose chronological and thematic order in which the author highlights recurring themes and important shifts in the history of Greco-Roman sport. Part 1 probes the early origins of Greek sport in the Bronze Age and the Homeric Epics. The author follows recent scholarship in interpreting the evidence for Greek Bronze age sport in the context of palace-controlled ceremonials. Athletic contests in the Homeric epics are perceived largely as a transitional stage towards the world of institutionalized, periodic athletic contests of archaic Greece. Part 2 shifts the focus to various aspects of the Olympic games. Quotes from Pindar and lively stories regarding notable athletes of the period are interspersed in two short chapters that examine the games of 480 and 476 BC. Then the discussion moves on to the Olympic program, the various events and the logistics of organizing and carrying out the Olympic festival. The section ends with two chapters on the commemoration and celebration of athletic victory and the

emergence of the pan-Hellenic periodos of athletic festivals. Part 3 examines, in three short chapters, Greek sport beyond local and pan-Hellenic contests. Much of the discussion focuses on the organization and activities in the gymnasium and the extensive Beroia gymnasiarchy law gets its own chapter and the conditions of athletic training, including dieting and competition. With Part 4 we march into the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. A short chapter devoted to the patronage of sport by Hellenistic monarchs and the proliferation of athletic contests in the Hellenistic east is followed by chapters which examine the origins of Roman chariot-racing, gladiators and gladiatorial combat, beast hunts and the exploitation of public spectacles by statesmen and emperors. In the midst of all this, sport as practiced in Etruria receives only a cursory look. This is rather surprising, given the intriguing relationship of Etruscan sport to the athletic practices of the Greco-Roman world. Part 5 deals with an assortment of facets of Roman sport. Chapters 19-22 delve into issues related to spectators' expectations and experiences are perhaps the most original part of the book. It should be noted that there is nothing equivalent in the first part of the volume dealing with Greek sport -- it is certain that a section on spectators in Greek agones would have boosted the author's arguments and enhanced the book's appeal. Part 5 also contains short chapters on sport-related dreams and their interpretation; on visual representations of Roman sport; on participation of women in Greek-style agones and gladiatorial combats in the Roman period, where the author questionably credits Spartan female physical education with the creation of a model for female competitive athletics in the Roman east. Once again notable is the absence, especially in view of the recent surge of scholarly interest on the subject, of a chapter on women's sport in the Greek world, from archaic to Hellenistic times. Following women's sport in the Roman period, the author returns to the subject of gladiators (there is relevant material in Part 4 as well), followed by detailed and lively chapters on Roman charioteers and Greek-style athletes in the Roman world as well as a chapter on the logistics of spectacle administration in the Roman empire. The book ends with a short chapter which outlines the demise of pagan athletic festivals and the conduct of chariot-racing and circus entertainments in the early Byzantine empire. Overall, the sequence of the narrative is at times idiosyncratic. For instance, a short chapter entitled "The Emergence of the Pan-Hellenic Cycle" comes after chapters discussing Pindar as well as Olympia and the Olympics in the early fifth century. The bibliography is extensive, although the author overlooks some widely-read, influential studies. Despite its shortcomings this book has its merits. Potter successfully integrates primary sources in his discussion and the discerning reader will discover numerous original and perceptive observations. His focus on aspects of spectatorship is refreshing. Although it is unlikely that "The Victor's Crown" will displace other firmly established

introductions to Greco-Roman sport, it is a welcomed addition to current debates on the subject.

This book reads like a 'history for college football players' -- players and students don't deserve such condescension. Its title wants to evoke Roman conquest ideology but that's such a cliché that I am surprised the publisher agreed to it. Besides, not all of ancient sport was about winning the match--a notion that surely escapes the victor's notice. Time and again the author states that a certain misunderstanding about ancient history is common among scholars but shows more passion in criticizing obscure opinions than in illustrating his own versions of events. When he does present some kind of narrative of his own, he is in fact summarizing other scholarly opinions (e.g., Poliakoff). The section on Women's Sports is perhaps less tedious than others but the treatment is still fragmented into frequent quotes from poetry, inscriptions, and historiography. The author's method in presenting and analyzing the sources is particularly frustrating because, while a great deal of space is devoted to recalling non-sport events in a confusing fashion, much less attention is given to contextualizing authors like Propertius. Why would a Roman elegiac poet talk about women's sports in Sparta? Potter assumes we must all know that love poetry at Rome is inseparable from sportswomen in the Peloponnese. He keeps repeating 'we are told this and we are told that' and criticizes ancient sources and modern scholars with equally careless disdain. The ill-conceived sentences ring tedious and banal. Professor Potter should perhaps write about modern contemporary sports instead of inflicting tedious lecture notes on intelligent readers (be they scholars, students, and/or football players). If you are interested in ancient sports, opt for Poliakoff - less ambitious but way more sensible.

This book is not devoid of interest, but it is overly ambitious in attempting to infer tenuous relationships between what little is confidently known about Bronze Age to Byzantine sports and what (often little) is known about cultures and societies through much of that span of time. Attempts to draw parallels with modern sports are similarly strained. This occasions introduction of an excess of essentially extraneous text for the sake of nonessential and unrewarding surmise. The author seems inclined to go on rather inappositely about homosexuality among Greeks, and he is disinclined to distinguish sport from simple fitness workouts. Some typographical errors glare (apparently Oxford can't afford competent proofreaders). In places the research, in attempting to cast a wide net, has been less than careful: Potter tells us, for example, that the Beas river (where Alexander camped) is tributary to the Ganges; whereas, it is (or was, before drying up) tributary (via the Sutlej) to the Indus. A shorter book of more-realistic ambition and more-carefully integrated

content would have been a better result.

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