

“Plato on a Pommel Horse”

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The ancient Greeks exercised naked. Discus and javelin throws, footraces, and even wrestling matches all took place in the nude. Our word “gymnasium” derives from the Greek word “gymnos,” which means naked. A healthy body was nothing to be ashamed of, for the ancients, and bodily exercise was just as important to them as mental cultivation. Working out came first, in fact. What we now regard as centers of Greek higher learning originated, in many cases, as appendages of exercise facilities. Two of Athens’ most famous scholarly institutions were housed in gymnasiums: the Academia, where Plato taught philosophy among the olive groves; and the Lyceum, which much later furnished the French language with a word for school: *lycée*.

Today, the idea of combining Greek gymnastics with higher learning is almost laughable. Two hundred years ago, though, when modern education was taking shape, ancient models were being actively revived and revamped. Gymnastics in its modern (as opposed to ancient Greek) form traces its origins to Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, a German tutor and schoolteacher who lived through the Napoleonic wars in the early 1800s. Humiliated by the Germans’ defeat by the French Emperor in 1806, Jahn concluded that nothing less than a massive dose of manly vigor would redeem his countrymen. Paramilitary gymnastics would enable them to overcome the physical weakness that had made them such easy prey for Napoleon’s armies.

As the attached picture illustrates, Jahn designed many of the exercises and equipment still common in gymnastics training today, including parallel bars, balance beams, and the pommel horse. In 1811, he began holding outdoor exercises in an open field in Berlin. His recruits came mainly from the ranks of university and high school students. By requiring them to wear a standard uniform, he instilled a spirit of camaraderie among young men of different social and economic backgrounds and gave them a sense of purpose and pride.

The training fields Jahn set up became the model for the thousands of local gymnastics clubs, called *Turnvereine*, that spread throughout Germany in the nineteenth century. Jahn’s teachings reached the United States with the arrival of German immigrants. Jahn himself was offered a position at Harvard in 1827, and though he declined it, his disciples transplanted his teachings to American soil. One of these, Charles Beck, brought German gymnastics to the innovative experimental Round Hill School in Northampton, Massachusetts. Round Hill was founded in part to “encourage activity of body, as the means of promoting firmness of constitution and vigor of mind” and boasted of being “the first [school] in the new continent to connect gymnastics with a purely literary establishment.” Later on, German refugees fleeing persecution for their

parts in the 1848 Revolution brought their own *Turnvereine* to places like Milwaukee and St. Louis, and German gymnasts formed Abraham Lincoln's bodyguard at his inauguration in 1861.

Jahn's project was the direct heir of an eighteenth-century gymnastic tradition. Reformers of the 1700s had seen physical education as inseparable from intellectual and moral instruction. Many of them romanticized the simple virtues of the ancient Greeks and believed them to be as well-toned as well as they were philosophical. A revival of Greek vigor was a perfect cure, in their eyes, for the epidemic of reading addiction allegedly plaguing Europe's young scholars. Excessive reading was thought to stunt one's growth and overtax the nervous system, and concerned educators spoke ominously about the crippling effects of bad candlelight, poor posture, and the compulsive reading of novels and adventure stories, the analogues of today's Game Boys. Napoleon's invasions, Jahn believed, only revealed the long-term effects of German youth's ebbing national strength.

Turnen, Jahn's word for gymnastics, hearkened back to the medieval tournament tradition, and with this term he hoped to evoke the valor and physical prowess of the old Germanic knights. Like many of his generation, Jahn aimed to mobilize a new sense of German identity to defend and construct a modern nation-state. It was at exactly this time, for instance, that the Brothers Grimm began to collect local fairy tales to document what they saw as the native literary genius of the German people. Jahn himself went on to found the first modern university fraternities, designed to channel traditional student drinking and dueling into acts of patriotism. Unlike their counterparts in the United States, where the first fraternities took names like Phi Beta Kappa and Kappa Alpha, Jahn's student societies embraced German, not Greek values. They sang songs about the fatherland and paraded around with red, gold, and black pennants—the models for Germany's national flag today.

By embracing native German traditions, Jahn's generation made a subconscious break with Greek models revived in the late 1700s. As late as the 1770s and 1780s, German educators used the word *Gymnastik* to describe physical training and included events like the ancient pentathlon in their curricula. But by the 1810s, when Germany's educational system was overhauled, the word *Gymnasium* had acquired an almost exclusively scholarly meaning. The German *Gymnasium*, a kind of elite preparatory school, did not offer physical education instruction but instead imparted ancient Greek language and culture. A thorough immersion in the great civilizations of antiquity was thought to promote the revival of the German nation for the modern epoch. With six hours of Greek plus six of Latin every week, the *Gymnasia* left little time for serious sporting activity. Successful university admission meant hitting the books, not the gym room.

The athletes had simply gone one way and the scholars another. Each retained a kernel of the Greek ideal while abandoning its central emphasis on an integrated mind and body. The situation in our own day is much the same. Few people now see athletics as central to a well-rounded education, even though athletics have come occupy an

enormous space in American high schools and universities. This has become increasingly problematic over the last few decades, at the college level especially. Athletic department budgets have ballooned and universities now compete with each other in fierce “arms races” for the hottest recruits, the biggest stadiums, and the richest donors and supporters. Meanwhile, those who work in the academic departments of the university often feel threatened by the values big-time college sports seem to represent: commercialism, profitability, excess competition, and distraction from intellectual pursuits.

One can hardly call for a wholesale return to Greek ways to remedy this situation. But understanding how the values we attach to sports have changed since ancient times at least helps explain why academics and athletics have grown so far apart. Greek gymnastics always favored individual competition, like the modern-day track and field events they inspired. Today, however, the most popular sports, like football and basketball, all revolve around teamwork. Only in academic life does the stress on individual achievement reign supreme. In the classroom, students compete for grades based on their own work, and “teamwork” counts as plagiarism. On game day, group effort and school spirit carry the day.

Greek gymnastics also emphasized a strong bond between students and teachers, young and old. Plato learned from Socrates, and his own students carried on the Academia. Yet while contemporary “academia” is only a metaphor for the Platonic tradition, the athletic world has kept a more faithful link to the ancient spirit. Coaches, who provide not just physical instruction but moral guidance, are unique to athletics. Not only do they provide models of leadership, but they often keep close tabs on their athletes’ personal and emotional lives. Professors, by contrast, remain relatively aloof. Even when they take an intense interest in their students, their livelihoods depend little on the success of their charges, and their responsibilities center on their own research as much as on teaching others.

The question of gender is inescapable when discussing the Greeks and their legacy. Greeks could only exercise nude because women, whose presence would obviously have been disruptive, were excluded from public life. German gymnastics (and the German *Gymnasium*) followed this all-male precedent. So too, the most popular sports in modern America are male-dominated. Despite federal mandates that women’s and men’s sports be given comparable support, sports still bear the imprint of stereotypically male values like aggression, competition, and strength. One can hope that women’s basketball and women’s soccer will continue to rise in popularity and offset this imbalance. In the meantime, though, academia has done a lot better at integrating women, especially in the humanities. Women now well outnumber men in America’s colleges, and many fields, like history and literature, currently produce more female than male Ph.D.s.

Perhaps the most telling difference between us and the ancients is that athletes used to share a common culture with scholars. There was no real divide between geeks and jocks. Today, scholars with elbow patches are liable to look disdainfully on athletes with shoulder guards, and vice versa. Most of the frictions between these groups have as much

to do with cultural stereotypes as any real grievances between them. But they play a significant role in poisoning collective debate about the proper role of sports in the educational life.

On the positive side, today's universities, in both their academic and athletic functions, still promote national cultural unity. In modern America, sports revolve around rituals of physical competition, and, with no real violence, can promote bonds of friendly competition among the fifty states. In a subtler but equally profound way, America's universities provide access to a common high culture. Professors, much more so than doctors and lawyers, circulate around the nation looking for open teaching positions; unlike other professionals, they have little or no control over where they live. For students, the biggest rite of passage into adulthood is moving off to college. For both groups, being uprooted from their places of origin makes studying Plato and all the rest of the humanities a unifying experience, and this is how universities knit the nation together.

Here is where the Greek legacy is perhaps strongest. The ancient Olympics were a time when people from all of Greece's warring city states put down their weapons and came together to compete. This is precisely the spirit the Germans, likewise fragmented politically but united culturally, were hoping to resurrect in the 1800s. Modern America has the luxury of having already attained national unity, and the wherewithal to celebrate it in academic and athletic spheres alike. If more of us recognized this common ground, perhaps the gaps between geeks and jocks would look a lot smaller.

Sources: *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford, 1937); Teresa Sanislo, "Models of Manliness and Femininity: The Physical Culture of the Enlightenment and Early National Movement in Germany, 1770-1819 (Ph.D. Diss., University of Michigan, 2001); John Betts, "Mind and Body in Early American Thought," *Journal of American History* 54, no. 4 (Mar. 1968): 787-805.

