

Chapter 2

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No Life without Athletics. Plutarch and Greek Sport

“Tension between alternative viewpoints thus lies
 at the heart of athletic representation.”

(König 2005: 346)

At the beginning of Plutarch’s *Life of Philopoemen* we find an interesting story on the question of whether or not athletic training was of good use for Greek soldiers. The passage reads as follows:

ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ παλαίειν εὐφυῶς ἐδόκει καὶ παρεκάλουν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὴν ἄθλησιν ἔνιοι τῶν φίλων καὶ τῶν ἐπιτρόπων, ἠρώτησεν αὐτοὺς μή τι πρὸς τὴν στρατιωτικὴν ἄσκησιν ὑπὸ τῆς ἀθλήσεως βλαβήσοιτο. τῶν δὲ φαιμένων, ὅπερ ἦν, ἀθλητικὸν στρατιωτικοῦ σώμα καὶ βίον διαφέρειν τοῖς πᾶσι, μάλιστα δὲ δίαιταν ἐτέραν καὶ ἄσκησιν εἶναι, τῶν μὲν ὕπνω τε πολλῶ καὶ πλησμοναῖς ἐνδελεχέσι καὶ κινήσεσιν τεταγμέναις καὶ ἡσυχίαις αὐξόντων τε καὶ διαφυλαττόντων τὴν ἔξιν ὑπὸ πάσης ῥοπῆς καὶ παρεκβάσεως τοῦ συνήθους ἀκροσφαλῆ πρὸς μεταβολὴν οὔσαν, τὰ δὲ πάσης μὲν πλάνης ἔμπειρα καὶ πάσης ἀνωμαλίας προσῆκον εἶναι, μάλιστα δὲ φέρειν ῥαδίως μὲν ἔνδειαν εἰθισμένα, ῥαδίως δὲ ἀγρυπνίαν, ἀκούσας ὁ Φιλοποίμην οὐ μόνον αὐτὸς ἔφυγε τὸ πρᾶγμα καὶ κατεγέλασεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ στρατηγῶν ὕστερον ἀτιμίαις καὶ προπηλακισμοῖς, ὅσον ἦν ἐπ’ αὐτῶ, πᾶσαν ἄθλησιν ἐξέβαλεν ὡς τὰ χρησιμώτατα τῶν σωματίων εἰς τοὺς ἀναγκαίους ἀγῶνας ἄχρηστα ποιοῦσαν

He (sc. Philopoemen) also seemed to have had a talent for wrestling, and when some of his friends and guardians suggested that he should take up athletics, he asked them whether it might have a negative effect on his military training. They told him the truth – that the physique and lifestyle required for athletics were completely incompatible with military life, especially in respect of the regimen and training involved. Athletes, they told him, both develop and maintain their condition by sleeping a great deal and regularly eating their fill, and by fixed periods of activity and inactivity; and so their condition is liable to be worsened by the slightest imbalance and departure from routine. A soldier, however, should be inured to every kind of inconstancy and irregularity, and above all should be able to cope easily with lack of food or sleep. This not only made Philopoemen shun and scorn athletics himself, but in his later life he wielded punitive measures and expressions of contempt in a determined effort to banish athletics completely from the armies under his command, on the grounds that it took a perfectly serviceable body and made it useless and incapable of fighting when necessary (*Phil.* 3.2–4; trans. R. Waterfield).

The message of the episode is very clear: Plutarch characterizes athletics as “completely incompatible with military life”. In doing so, he decides the old question of the possible use of athletic training for future (or current) soldiers to the detriment of athletics which is regarded rather as an obstacle for developing the necessary skills of a successful warrior. This view is presented as a universal truth (“They told him the truth [ὅπερ ἦν]”) which also implies that it is to be understood as identical to Plutarch’s own position.

This is peculiar for two reasons: first, the argument itself is not very persuasive with regard to the form in which it is put forward, since no differentiation between ‘heavy weights’ and those athletes competing in track-and-field events is made. With regard to a long distance runner, the argument that he needs a lot of food is simply not very convincing; second, although the argument is in line, for instance, with the way Alexander’s attitudes towards athletics are depicted by Plutarch,¹ there is an obvious contradiction to other passages in his

¹ In the words of Kyle ²⁰¹⁵: 237: “Plutarch (...) has the later Achaean general Philopoemen (...) echo Alexander: although he had a good body and talent as a wrestler, Philopoemen would not compete because it would undermine his future as a soldier, (...)”. The *locus classicus* for Alexander’s attitudes towards athletics is Plut. *Alex.* 4.5 (cf. *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 179d) including young Alexander’s famous skeptical answer to the idea that he should compete in the footrace at Olympia: “if kings were my contestants”.

work like in the second book of his *Table Talks*, where he even argues that the Thebans defeated the Spartans at Leuctra because they were good wrestlers (and not, as one might have thought, due to the oblique order, the Sacred Band or the military genius of Epaminondas).² This entails the question of how this tension, if it is one, is to be understood and why Plutarch expresses such opposing views on the relation between athletics and warfare. Might it be possible to reveal Plutarch's general attitude towards athletics?

It is striking to note that these questions have not puzzled previous research very much. There are only a few pages dedicated to the topic in some of the major companions and introductions to ancient athletics or the Second Sophistic.³ Plutarch's view on athletics is sometimes touched by studies on ancient critics of Greek sport.⁴ Mostly, however, his work is rather used as a quarry for references to all things athletic.⁵ In any case, a systematic study on Plutarch's perception of athletics is a desideratum.⁶

It lies beyond the scope of this article to comprehensively fill this gap. What this contribution can offer is a focus on two specific aspects of Plutarch's perception of athletics: the relation of war and athletics and the role athletics played in the composition of his *Lives*. In order to analyze both aspects, I will focus on the *Lives*, but will also have a look at the *Moralia* when necessary. I will start by putting *Philopoemen 3* into context, then turn to examples of negative attitudes towards athletics in Plutarch's work before finally discussing cases of positive perception of athletics by the same author.

Putting Philopoemen 3 in Context: Plutarch and His Hero

The *Lives* of Philopoemen and Flamininus form the only pair of lives in Plutarch's collection in which the protagonists were contemporaries and interacted with each other. Throughout

² Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 639a-640a. The specific question raised by Plutarch here is why Homer always has the disciplines of boxing, wrestling, and running in that order. The answer is all about the notion that athletics were once introduced for military reasons, an argument which is also to be found in Plutarch's Spartan Lives.

³ Golden 1998; Kyle ²2015: 236-238; König 2017: 162-164.

⁴ Müller 1995; Papakonstantinou 2014: 327.

⁵ This includes some of my own studies on Hellenistic athletics (see esp. Scharff forthcoming). An illuminating example is represented by Golden 2008 who, according to the book's index, cited more passages from Plutarch (43) than from Pausanias (26) and Pindar (15) combined.

⁶ The only study exclusively devoted to the topic is the article by Hamilton 2007. There even is a surprising absence of Plutarch in König's magisterial *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire* (2005), only partly filled by his short but instructive comments in König 2017: 162-164.

his *Life*, Philopoemen is described as a successful military leader, “the last of the Greeks”⁷. In order to emphasize Philopoemen’s military strengths, Plutarch makes good use of a long established notion of (intellectual) criticism of athletics. He may have held some intellectual reservation against athletics from a philosophical point of view.⁸ Yet, Plutarch’s negative approach with regard to the usefulness of athletic training in his *Life of Philopoemen* is clearly motivated by another reason.

Athletics, although also practiced by some Romans, were still conceived as a rather Greek activity in Plutarch’s times.⁹ Plutarch’s aim in his parallel *Lives of Flaminius and Philopoemen* was to show, if not even the latter’s overall superiority, then at least his equality to the victor of Cynoscephalae who was one of the most prominent Romans of all times among the Greeks.¹⁰ In order to achieve this goal, his Philopoemen had to excel not so much in a Greek-style activity like athletics, but in a field of Roman dominance. This is why he is presented as “the more experienced general”¹¹, as Plutarch concludes in his syncretism.¹² In order to emphasize this aspect, Philopoemen is equaled with two very prominent figures of the Greek past which embodied military skills and excellence for Plutarch more than anyone else: Alexander III of Macedon, undoubtedly the ‘first of the Greeks’ in terms of military achievements, and Epaminondas, the victor of Leuctra and Plutarch’s local hero.¹³ According to *Philopoemen* 3.1, the Achaean general “took Epaminondas as his primary role model”¹⁴ and it is in this context that Philopoemen’s Homeric branding belongs: When his childhood is compared to that of Achilles and when he is characterized as very interested especially in the more martial parts of the *Iliad*,¹⁵ this echoes Plutarch’s Alexander, as did Philopoemen’s approach to athletics. All in all “Philopoemen comes across as a heroic figure”¹⁶ who engages

7 Plut. *Phil.* 1.4 (also in *Arat.* 24.2).

8 van Hoof 2010: 211-254; cf. König 2017: 162-164, both focusing on Plutarch’s *Advice about Keeping Well* in the *Moralia*, see also Corvisier 2003.

9 On the perception of Greek athletics in Rome, see Mann 2014: 173: “The exclusion of Greek athletics from Roman culture in discourse went hand in hand, (...) with inclusion in practice”.

10 For a somewhat different view of this pair of *Lives*, see Beneker, in this volume. On both *Lives*, see Swain 1988; Walsh 1992; Pelling & Melandri 1997; Schrott 2014; Erskine 2016. On Flaminius as a historical figure, see Baldson 1967; Badian 1971, 1973; Beck 2005: 368-394; Pfeilschifter 2005. On Philopoemen, see Errington 1969.

11 Plut. *Comp. Phil.-Flam.* 2.1: ἡ Φιλοποίμενος ἐμπειρία βεβαιότερα.

12 Note the very last sentence of the syncretism: τῷ μὲν Ἕλληνι τὸν ἐμπειρίας πολεμικῆς καὶ στρατηγίας στέφανον, τῷ δὲ Ῥωμαίῳ τὸν δικαιοσύνης καὶ χρηστότητος ἀποδιδόντες (...) – “I award the Greek the prize for military experience and generalship, and the Roman the prize for integrity and honesty” (trans. R. Waterfield).

13 See Giroux, in this volume, for more on Epaminondas and his connection to Plutarch’s regional world.

14 Plut. *Phil.* 3.1: καίπερ Ἐπαμεινώνδου βουλόμενος εἶναι μάλιστα ζηλωτής, (...).

15 Erskine 2016: 352 who sees “echoes of the Homeric age” in Plut. *Phil.* 1, 3-4, 9, 21.

16 Erskine 2016: 352.

in battle himself, as it was expected from a victorious king of the Hellenistic period.¹⁷ So it comes as no surprise that a “story about Philopoemen at the Nemean festival”¹⁸ is all about his military glory.

To put it in a nutshell, an analysis of the narrative context of the episode cited above shows that the most eminent example of Plutarch’s negative attitude towards athletics in his *Lives* is rather motivated by the need for portraying his leading character as a successful soldier than by his supposed contempt for athletics. In this episode, Plutarch’s approach is a rather playful one aimed at emphasizing his leitmotif.

A Negative Perception of Athletics: Plutarch Demonstrating His paideia

Apart from *Philopoemen* 3, there are surprisingly few passages in the *Lives* that show a clearly dismissive tone towards athletics. *Agesilaus* 20.1 reveals that Cynisca’s brother convinced her to participate in chariot races in order to demonstrate that an Olympic victory was no big deal, but simply a question of wealth.¹⁹ The historicity of the episode which originally stems from Xenophon²⁰ is rather questionable,²¹ since Cynisca invested a lot of money and was obviously very proud of her success as her famous epigram from Olympia clearly demonstrates.²² The passage appears rather abruptly in Plutarch’s account of *Agesilaus’ Life* and it is possible that he simply retells Xenophon here who is directly referred to in the

17 Esp. telling in this regard is Plut. *Phil.* 10 where it is told how Philopoemen defeated the Spartan tyrant Machanidas in a duel. On the victorious king, see Gehrke 2013.

18 Plut. *Phil.* 11.1.

19 Plut. *Ages.* 20.1: οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ ὀρώων ἐνίους τῶν πολιτῶν ἀπὸ ἵπποτροφίας δοκοῦντας εἶναι τινὰς καὶ μέγα φρονούντας, ἔπεισε τὴν ἀδελφὴν Κυνίσκαν ἄρμα καθέισαν Ὀλυμπίασιν ἀγωνίσασθαι, βουλόμενος ἐνδείξασθαι τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ὡς οὐδεμιᾶς ἐστὶν ἀρετῆς, ἀλλὰ πλοῦτου καὶ δαπάνης ἡ νίκη – “However, on seeing that some of the citizens esteemed themselves highly and were greatly lifted up because they bred racing horses, he persuaded his sister Cynisca to enter a chariot in the contests at Olympia, wishing to show the Greeks that the victory there was not a mark of any great excellence, but simply of wealth and lavish outlay” (trans. B. Perrin).

20 Xen. *Ages.* 9.6; cf. Xen. *Hiero* 11.5.

21 Mann 2001: 161-162: “Daß der König die Wagenrennen gering geachtet, seine Schwester aber dazu angestiftet habe riesige Summen Geldes dafür aufzuwenden, hält sachkritischen Überlegungen nicht stand”.

22 Ebert 1972, no. 33 (= *IvO* 160 + *Anth. Pal.* 13.16). The epigram of the first female Olympic victor of all times successful in 396 and 392 BC (Moretti 1957, no. 373 and 381) is also mentioned by Paus. 6.1.6. For Cynisca’s reasons to compete, see also Cartledge 1987: 150; Hodkinson 1989: 99; Hodkinson 2000: 327-328; Pomeroy 2002: 19-24; Kyle 2003; Hodkinson 2004: 111-112; Kyle 2007: 141-145; Millender 2009: 18-26; Nobili 2013 (2016): 74-81; Fornis 2014: 316; Paradiso 2015. One can see why Christesen (2019: 189 n246) calls scholarship on Cynisca “something of an industry unto itself”.

previous chapter.²³ If the episode should express Plutarch’s own reservation towards the value of equestrian victories, he does not stress it.

Another passage is *Alexander* 4.5–6 which is echoed by *Philopoemen* 3, as we have already seen. Yet, although Alexander is clearly presented as someone who is skeptical to compete himself and who “seems to have been opposed to athletics” in general,²⁴ what Plutarch really emphasizes here is that his Alexander simply had a different approach to athletics than his father Philip and used it to distance himself from his parent.²⁵ In the words of Plutarch:

οὔτε γὰρ ἀπὸ παντὸς οὔτε πᾶσαν ἡγάπα δόξαν, ὡς Φίλιππος λόγου τε δεινότητι σοφιστικῶς καλλωπιζόμενος καὶ τὰς ἐν Ὀλυμπίᾳ, νίκας τῶν ἀρμάτων ἐγχαράττων τοῖς νομίσμασιν, (...)

For he (sc. Alexander) did not feel attracted towards recognition *tout court*, whatever its source, as Philip did, with his tendency to preen himself on his rhetorical skill like a sophist and to engrave his successes at Olympia in the chariot-race on his coins (*Alex.* 4.5; trans. R. Waterfield).

Thus the focus of the passage is not on the value of athletic success, but on a son setting himself apart from his father.

In addition to cases like these, it may also be of interest what Plutarch does *not* tell us in his *Lives*. Although, methodologically, this means entering rather unsafe territory, the question

²³ Plut. *Ages.* 19.5 and 19.6.

²⁴ Plut. *Alex.* 4.6. the whole sentence goes as follows: φαίνεται δὲ καὶ καθόλου πρὸς τὸ τῶν ἀθλητῶν γένος ἀλλοτρίως ἔχων πλείστους γέ τοι θεῖς ἀγῶνας οὐ μόνον τραγωδῶν καὶ αὐλητῶν καὶ κιθαρῳδῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ῥαψῳδῶν, θήρας τε παντοδαπῆς καὶ ῥαβδομαχίας, οὔτε πυγμῆς οὔτε παγκρατίου μετὰ τινος σπουδῆς ἔθηκεν ἄθλον – “By and large, he seems to have been opposed to athletics; at any rate, although he instituted a great many tragic and musical competitions (for both the pipes and lyre), and also rhapsodic contests, games involving all kinds of hunting, and quarterstaff matches, he showed no interest in offering prizes for boxing or pankration” (trans. R. Waterfield).

²⁵ Much has been written about Alexander’s approach to athletics. The most recent and convincing contribution is Mann 2020a. I do not agree with Kyle (2015: 227–232) that Alexander’s deviation from a Macedonian tradition of participating in Greek contests was an expression of his orientalized concept of kingship according to which a king must not partake in a competition against his subjects. In my opinion, the reason is rather to be found in the changed political circumstances after Chaironeia: for Alexander, the self-attribution to the Greek world simply was less important than for his Argead predecessors because Greece was now under Macedonian control. For Alexander’s approach to athletics, cf. also Weiler 1975; Brown 1977; Slowikowski 1989; Romano 1990; Lunt 2014.

of intended omission remains an exciting one.²⁶ Take the famous episode of the duel of Dioxippus versus Coragus which is told by two authors of the so-called *vulgata* tradition, Diodorus and Curtius Rufus, both probably strongly relying on Cleitarchus who was also used by Plutarch.²⁷ In this passage, an Athenian Olympic wrestling champion defeats a better equipped Macedonian soldier.²⁸ Both accounts slightly diverge but agree in the overall message which is a triumph of athletics over warfare: whereas the Macedonian nobleman fights with the typical armor of a Macedonian soldier including sarissa, shield, sword and rig, the Greek ‘heavy weight’ competes like a true athlete: naked, fully anointed, even with a crown. Using a club as his weapon, he presents himself as a second Herakles, patron deity not only of the gymnasium, but also of wrestlers in particular. The story is also about the level of ethnic and political identity: an ‘old’ polis-Greek vanquishing a Macedonian exponent of the new ruling class of the Hellenistic period.²⁹ In any case, the allusions are more subtle in Diodorus and Curtius Rufus apparently did not get all of them right. With regard to Plutarch, it is not surprising that he does not mention this episode in his *Alexander*. It is clear that a walk-over of athletics over warfare would have contradicted his own words in *Philopoemen* 3. Thus we may conclude that an emphasis of the superiority of military skills over athletic virtues constituted part of what Plutarch actually wanted to express.³⁰

However, things do not turn out as unambiguous as they might appear in the first place, for there are other omissions with regard to athletics in the *Life of Alexander*. This brings us to an episode, or rather: a saying (*apophthegma*) that Plutarch renders in his *Moralia*. It reads:

ἐν δὲ τῇ Μιλήτῳ πολλοὺς ἀνδριάντας ἀθλητῶν θεασάμενος Ὀλύμπια καὶ Πύθια νενικηκότων, ‘καὶ ποῦ τὰ τηλικαῦτα,’ ἔφη, ‘ἦν σώματα, ὅτε οἱ βάρβαροι ὑμῶν τὴν πόλιν ἐπολιόρκουν;’

When he saw in Miletus many statues of athletes who had won victories in the Olympic and the Pythian Games, he said, ‘Where were the men with bodies like

26 See, for example, the upcoming edited volume *Plutarch's Unexpected Silences* (Beneker, Cooper, Humble, & Titchener [eds.]).

27 For the historiography of Alexander the Great, see most illuminating Wiemer 2015: 16–38.

28 Diod. 17.100.2–101.6; Curt. Ruf. 9.29.

29 If there is any kernel of historical truth to the episode, it may consist in probable tensions between the Macedonian and the Greek parts of Alexander’s army. On Alexander’s army, Sheppard 2008: 77–98; for Dioxippus (Moretti 1957, no. 458), Decker 2014: 96–98.

30 This idea of the superiority of warfare over athletics is, for instance, clearly expressed in Plut. *Ages.* 21.3 and *Them.* 17.2.

these when the barbarians were besieging your city?’ (*Reg. et imp. apophth.* 180a; trans. F.C. Babbitt).

For Donald Kyle, the passage fits well into his overall picture of Plutarch’s negative attitude towards athletics.³¹ Yet it is important to note that the sentence is not cited in the *Life of Alexander* and that we do miss any context here – the passage is found in the *Sayings of Kings and Commanders*. Whether or not it was intentionally omitted in Alexander’s *Life* is hard to decide. What we can state is that the saying was known to Plutarch and that it is not necessarily in line with his Alexander who does not want to compete at Olympia but regularly organizes athletic and musical festivals on his campaigns.³² Again, it has to be emphasized that Plutarch’s Alexander does not show a negative attitude towards athletics in general but simply refrains from using agonistic victories for his self-presentation in order to set himself apart from his father, Philip.³³ For this purpose, the public denigration of Olympic victors simply is not necessary.

All in all, there seems to have been more examples of a negative approach to athletics in the *Moralia*. Especially telling is a series of scathing comments on athletic coaches brought forward by Plutarch’s character Zeuxippus in his *Advice about Keeping Well*.³⁴ The critique focuses on the supposedly “anti-intellectual qualities of professional training”³⁵, as Jason König puts it. According to Zeuxippus, athletic trainers “claim at every opportunity that scholarly discussion at dinner spoils the food and makes the head heavy”³⁶. These coaches “do not allow us to investigate or philosophize about anything else at dinner, or to read any of those things which have pleurably alluring and sweet qualities (...)”³⁷. He reasons: “we shall order them not annoy us, but to go off to the gymnasium colonnades and the *palaestras*

31 Kyle 2015: 237.

32 For Alexander as organizer of contests, see esp. Mann 2020a who recently established “campaign *agones*” (Mann 2020b: 99) as a new category of athletic contests for which Alexander had a marked preference. On these competitions, cf. also Bloedow 1998; Adams 2007; Günther 2013.

33 This is why we find Alexander deeply respecting and honoring an athletic victor after Gaugamela in Plut. *Alex.* 34.2 (cf. Papakonstantinou 2014: 327). A similar story is narrated by Arr. *Anab.* 2.1.15.

34 Plut. *De tuenda san.* 133b-d; cf. van Hoof 2010: 238-239; König 2017: 162-164.

35 König 2017: 162.

36 Plut. *De tuenda san.* 133b-c: ἀλειπτῶν δὲ φωνᾶς καὶ παιδοτριβῶν λόγους ἐκάστοτε λεγόντων ὡς τὸ παρὰ δεῖπνον φιλολογεῖν τὴν τροφήν διαφθείρει καὶ βαρύνει τὴν κεφαλὴν, (...) (trans. F.C. Babbitt).

37 Plut. *De tuenda san.* 133c: ἡμᾶς μὴ ἄλλο τι ζητεῖν ἢ φιλοσοφεῖν ἢ ἀναγιγνώσκειν παρὰ δεῖπνον ἕως ἰσίων ἐν τῷ καλῷ καὶ ὠφελίμῳ τὸ ἐπαγωγὸν ὑφ’ ἡδονῆς καὶ γλυκῦ μόριον ἐχόντων, (...) (trans. F.C. Babbitt).

and talk about these things with their athletes, whom they have made as shiny and stone-like as the pillars of the gymnasium by tearing them from their books, (...).”³⁸

Athletes are compared to “the pillars of the gymnasium” which probably means that they have an imposing physical appearance but are rather shallow figures with regard to their intellectual capacity. There can be no doubt that this passage includes a strong “denigration of athletes”³⁹; and yet it is also true that we should be very careful not to equate Zeuxippus’ words a priori to Plutarch’s own position. This is a dialogue including other voices different from that of Zeuxippus.⁴⁰ What is more, even Zeuxippus’ comments are in essence rather “playful and teasing”⁴¹ compared to what later authors like Galen wrote on the same topic.⁴² But above all, the dialogue is about an author demonstrating his *paideia* by arguing for the guidance of philosophy in all matters concerning health. Having a figure like Zeuxippus make a case to the detriment of athletes and their trainers primarily served Plutarch’s own self-presentation as a philosopher and intellectual author.

This motivation, however, is not necessarily to be found in all his works in the same manner. We can expect the leitmotifs of such a productive and versatile author to differ in his writings, especially between the *Moralia* and the *Lives*, but also within his philosophical writings. The presence of the athletic trainer (*paidotribes*) Meniskos as fellow symposiast to Plutarch in his *Table Talk* is a good case in point here.⁴³ It indicates that we should not assume Plutarch to have had an entirely negative conception of athletics. Rather, he adapted it to whatever message he wanted to deliver in a particular passage of his writings, as we will see in the following section.

38 Plut. *De tuenda san.* 133d: κελεύσομεν αὐτοὺς μὴ ἐνοχλεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἀπιόντας ἐν τῷ ξυστῶ ταῦτα καὶ ταῖς παλαιστραῖς διαλέγεσθαι τοῖς ἀθληταῖς, οὓς τῶν βιβλίων ἐξελόντες, (...) τοῖς ἐν γυμνασίῳ κίοισιν ὁμοίως λιπαροὺς πεποιήκασιν καὶ λιθίνους (trans. F.C. Babbitt).

39 König 2017: 162.

40 For instance, the doctor Glaukos, although it can still be argued that Zeuxippus appears as Plutarch’s “mouthpiece” (König 2017: 163).

41 König 2017: 163.

42 Though it must be admitted that athletic trainers are criticized elsewhere in the *Moralia*. See, for instance, a passage in the *Apophthegmata Laconica* (233c) where it is stated that the Spartans deliberately refrained from appointing wrestling coaches “so that their *philotimia* would not be directed to *techne*, but to *arete*” (τοῖς παλαιοῖσι παιδοτρίβας οὐκ ἐφίστανον, ἵνα μὴ τέχνης ἀλλ’ ἀρετῆς ἡ φιλοτιμία γένηται). See also Plut. *Apophth. Lac.* 236e; cf. Finley & Pleket 1976: 70-71; Mann 2001: 130-132.

43 Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 747a-b.

A Positive Perception of Athletics: Education and Metaphors

In the *Lives*, there are two main areas in which a positive approach to athletics can be found: the first concerns the content of the *Lives* themselves and consists of the simple fact that athletic activities appear in almost all of the Greek *Lives*, oftentimes in an early phase of the career of the respective statesman and general.

The *Lives of Pericles, Alexander, Eumenes, Aratus, and Philopoemen* show that for Plutarch, athletics regularly formed part of the life and education of a free-born Greek. All of them, with the exception of Pericles, naturally practiced athletics in their youth.⁴⁴ Others splendidly participated in equestrian competitions,⁴⁵ organized contests,⁴⁶ introduced new events to athletic festivals,⁴⁷ set rewards for athletic victors,⁴⁸ accepted the cost of a *choregia*,⁴⁹ built a theatre on campaign,⁵⁰ or even brought athletics to Rome⁵¹. It is interesting to note that even in the Roman *Lives* athletics sometimes formed part of the narrative: according to a passage in the *Life of Cato the Elder*, the Roman aristocrat served as an athletic trainer (*gymnastes*) for his son and taught him “not merely to hurl the javelin and fight in armour and ride the horse, but also to box, to endure heat and cold, and to swim”⁵².

The Greek (and sometimes the Roman) worlds of the past as depicted by Plutarch are full of sports and competition. If we had no other surviving evidence and had to judge solely by Plutarch’s *Lives*, there would still be no doubt that agonistic competition formed an integral part of the Greek world from Solon’s times until “the last of the Greeks”.

It is important to emphasize that we even find social advancement through athletics in the *Lives*, as in the case of Eumenes, who, according to Plutarch, citing Duris of Samos, stemmed from an impoverished family and was able to attract the attention of Philip II by his

44 Plut. *Per.* 8.4 (wrestling), *Alex.* 4.5 (running), *Eum.* 1.1 (wrestling and pankration), *Arat.* 3.1 (pentathlon), *Phil.* 3 (wrestling).

45 *Alex.* 3.5 and 4.5 (Philip’s victories), Plut. *Alc.* 11.1–12.3 (cf. Plut. *Dem.* 1.1). According to Plut. *Alc.* 11.1, Alcibiades’ famous Olympic victory “transcends in the splendor of its renown all that ambition can aspire to in this field” (ὑπερβάλλει λαμπρότητι καὶ δόξῃ πᾶσαν τὴν ἐν τούτοις φιλοτιμίαν; trans. B. Perrin). In a competition across time and space in which Plutarch becomes the umpire, Alcibiades even outscored the equestrian successes of kings like Philip II.

46 Plut. *Nic.* 3.2.

47 Plut. *Per.* 13.6 (musical contest at the Panathenaia).

48 Plut. *Sol.* 23.3. On Athenian rewards for athletes, Papakonstantinou 2019: 69–71.

49 Plut. *Arist.* 1.3.

50 Plut. *Cleom.* 12.2; see Scharff forthcoming.

51 Plut. *Pomp.* 52.4.

52 Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 20.4.

impressive performance as a wrestler and pankratiast in the local gymnasium.⁵³ In Eumenes' case, it clearly was a good thing that his education had included not only literature but also athletics.⁵⁴

In Plutarch's view, athletics rather belonged to the early phase of the life of a successful Greek politician. For him athletics primarily had an educational function and served to prepare for a thriving career as politician and general. This is probably most clearly expressed in the words Plutarch uses to describe how the Athenian statesman and general Phocion educated his offspring:

Φώκῳ δὲ τῷ υἱῷ βουλομένῳ ἀγωνίσασθαι Παναθηναίοις ἀποβάτην ἐφῆκεν, οὐχὶ τῆς νίκης ὀρεγόμενος, ἀλλ' ὅπως ἐπιμεληθεὶς καὶ ἀσκήσας τὸ σῶμα βελτίων ἔσοιτο (...)

When Phocus his son wished to compete at the Panathenaic festival as a vaulting rider of horses (*apobates*), Phocion permitted it, not because he was ambitious for the victory, but in order that care and training of the body might make his son a better man; (...) (*Phoc.* 20.1; trans. B. Perrin).

It also becomes very evident in the Spartan *Lives* in which the typical Lacedaemonian way of education, “the greatest and noblest task of the law-giver”⁵⁵, plays a key role. According to Plutarch, in Sparta even “the maidens exercise their bodies in running, wrestling, casting the discus, and hurling the javelin”⁵⁶, and there can be no doubt that athletics formed an integral part of the education of the free-born Spartan boys, the famous *agoge*, as well. Plutarch makes it very clear what the aim and purpose of these measures was: they supported in Sparta more than anywhere else the idea that athletic training was meant as a preparation

53 Plut. *Eum.* 1.1. Eumenes' father is said to have been “driven by poverty to work as a carter” (πατὴρ δὲ μὲν ἀμαξεύοντος [...] διὰ πενίαν γενέσθαι) (trans. R. Waterfield).

54 In Plutarch's words (*ibid.*), “the boy received the kind of education in school and in the gymnasium that one would expect of a free-born child” (τραφεῖν δὲ ἐλευθερίως ἐν γράμμασι καὶ περὶ παλαίστραν) (trans. R. Waterfield).

55 Plut. *Lyc.* 14.1: μέγιστον (...) τοῦ νομοθέτου καὶ κάλλιστον ἔργον (trans. B. Perrin).

56 Plut. *Lyc.* 14.2: τὰ μὲν γὰρ σώματα τῶν παρθένων δρόμοις καὶ πάλαις καὶ βολαῖς δίσκων καὶ ἀκοντίων διεπόνθησαν, (...) (trans. B. Perrin).

for warfare or – as in the case of the Spartan maidens – a preparation for giving birth to particularly strong soldiers.⁵⁷

According to Plutarch's general view, an athletic education clearly seems to have been desirable for a politician in the making. It could serve as preparation for war, induration, and even social advancement. However, this does not mean that our author would argue this standpoint everywhere in his *Lives*, when it does not serve his superior line of reasoning (as in *Philopoemen* 3). What is more, his commonly positive perception of athletics in the *Lives* is occasionally rivalled by the intellectual author not only of the *Moralia* who advocates the predominance of rhetoric and philosophy in terms of educational meaning. This rivalry also seems to lie behind Plutarch's criticism of athletic trainers.

The second area in which athletics more often than not made a positive appearance in Plutarch's work is the field of metaphors and analogies. Plutarch clearly loved his athletic metaphors, as other authors like Polybius did as well.⁵⁸ It remains to ask whether there was a Plutarchan way of using athletic metaphors.

All in all, the two most important groups of athletic metaphors in the *Lives* are those for warfare and rhetoric. Most popular with Plutarch were athletic metaphors referring to the military sphere. The most commonly used agonistic metaphor suggests itself: wrestling is frequently applied to battles stretching over a long time or with changing fortunes. It is said about a battle which Demetrius Poliorcetes lost against Ptolemy I that “an untried youngster (*neos*) was up against a man who had graduated from Alexander's wrestling-school (*palaistra*) and had honed his skills in many great conflicts (*agones*) of his own”⁵⁹. Yet Plutarch also used other athletic disciplines in order to refer to the course of a battle: again in the *Life of Demetrius*, the *diaulos*, an especially exhausting long sprint of about 400 meters, becomes a metaphor for the many difficulties which awaited the one-eyed Antigonos and his son Demetrius the Besieger.⁶⁰ Plutarch knew and made good use of the technical terminology of the agonistic field. In addition to athletic events like the two-stade race (*diaulos*), he also referred to *termini technici* of the self-presentation of victorious athletes: in the *Comparison of*

57 This was clearly not an idea restricted to Plutarch alone. Hodkinson 1999 has shown that the Lacedaemonians had an idiosyncratic “agonistic culture”; on the world of Greek athletics as a world formed by many similar but different agonistic cultures, Scharff forthcoming.

58 For Polybius' fondness on athletic metaphors, see Wunderer 1909: 55–59 and Gibson 2012: 273–277.

59 Plut. *Demetr.* 5.2: οἷα δὲ νέος καὶ ἄπειρος ἀνδρὶ συμπεσῶν ἐκ τῆς Ἀλεξάνδρου παλαίστρας ἠθληκῶτι πολλοῦς καὶ μεγάλους καθ' αὐτὸν ἀγῶνας, (...) (trans. R. Waterfield).

60 Plut. *Demetr.* 19.1.

Lucullus and Cimon, the latter is metaphorically awarded the title of a *paradoxonikes*, an athlete who achieved victories in the ‘heavy events’ of wrestling and pankration on a single day because he won two military victories on land and sea on a single day.⁶¹ That this title did not exist in Cimon’s times, however, does not bother Plutarch.

Other agonistic metaphors referred to the field of rhetoric. In the *Life of Demosthenes*, the beginning of the statesman’s training as an orator is compared to the way the long-distance runner Laomedon of Orchomenos came to be an athlete: by the advice of his physicians.⁶² Thus yet another discipline appears among the spectrum of Plutarch’s positive athletic metaphors. However, when Pericles is called a “political athlete” in his youth and his teacher in music Damon, “a consummate sophist”⁶³, is described as his “rubber and trainer” (ἀλείπτης καὶ διδάσκαλος) this is not meant kindly.⁶⁴ Again, Plutarch’s criticism is based upon his presupposition of the negative role of some athletic trainers. Yet in most of the cases, the athletic metaphors are used in a positive sense. In *Solon 27.7*, athletic competition even becomes an analogy for life itself.

Conclusion

To sum up, Plutarch’s perception of athletics is not as easy to grasp as it might appear in the first place. It is certainly true that there are a lot of passages in Plutarch with a dismissive undertone with regard to athletics. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that Plutarch had

61 Plut. *Comp. Cim.-Luc.* 2.1: ἐν δὲ τοῖς πολεμικοῖς ὅτι μὲν ἀμφότεροι καὶ κατὰ γῆν καὶ κατὰ θάλασσαν ἀγαθοὶ γεγόνασιν ἀγωνισταὶ δῆλον ὥσπερ δὲ τῶν ἀθλητῶν τοὺς ἡμέρα μῆ πάλη καὶ παγκρατίῳ στεφανομένους ἔθει τινὶ παραδοξοῖκας καλοῦσιν, οὕτω Κίμων ἐν ἡμέρα μῆ πεζομαχίας καὶ ναυμαχίας ἅμα τροπαίῳ στεφανώσας τὴν Ἑλλάδα δίκαιός ἐστιν ἔχειν τινὰ προεδρίαν ἐν τοῖς στρατηγοῖς – “In war, it is plain that both were good fighters, both on land and sea. But just as those athletes who win crowns in wrestling and the pankratiion on a single day are called, by custom, ‘Victors-extraordinary,’ so Cimon, who in a single day crowned Greece with the trophies of a land and sea victory, may justly have a certain pre-eminence among generals” (trans. B. Perrin).

62 Plut. *Dem.* 6.2: καὶ καθάπερ Λαομέδοντα τὸν Ὀρχομένιον λέγουσι καχεξίαν τινὰ σπληνὸς ἀμυνόμενον δρόμοις μακροῖς χρῆσθαι τῶν ἰατρῶν κελευσάντων, εἶθ’ οὕτως διαπονήσαντα τὴν ἕξι ἐπιθέσθαι τοῖς στεφανίταις ἀγῶσι καὶ τῶν ἄκρων γενέσθαι δολιχοδρόμων, οὕτως τῷ Δημοσθένει συνέβη τὸ πρῶτον ἐπανορθώσεως ἕνεκα τῶν ἰδίων ἀποδύντι πρὸς τὸ λέγειν, ἐκ τούτου κτησαμένῳ δεινότητι καὶ δύναμιν ἐν τοῖς πολιτικοῖς ἤδη καθάπερ στεφανίταις ἀγῶσι πρωτεύειν τῶν ἀπὸ τοῦ βήματος ἀγωνιζομένων πολιτῶν – “And just as Laomedon the Orchomenian—so we are told—practised long-distance running by the advice of his physicians, to ward off some disease of the spleen, and then, after restoring his health in this way, entered the great games and became one of the best runners of the long course, so Demosthenes, after applying himself to oratory in the first place for the sake of recovering his private property, by this means acquired ability and power in speaking, and at last in public business, as it were in the great games, won the first place among the citizens who strove with one another on the bema” (trans. B. Perrin).

63 Plut. *Per.* 4.1.

64 Ibid.

a negative attitude toward athletics in principle. Though oftentimes criticizing athletes and their coaches, his approach to athletics is far from being persistently negative throughout his work. Rather, he adopts a playful perspective and adapts his judgement to the necessities of the particular context in which he uses athletics to talk about something else: be it Philopoemen's superiority or his own *paideia*.

What is more, Plutarch did not intend to give a coherent picture of athletics in his works. For him, athletics rather served as a tool box that provided him with an almost endless stream of metaphors which appealed to his readers and were simultaneously not too platitudinous. On the other hand, his critique especially referred to the field of education and the role of athletic trainers who were sometimes regarded as a competition to the philosopher as an educator. In these cases, Plutarch emphasized the pre-eminence of rhetorical and philosophical education.

Nevertheless, it must be stated that there is no *Life* without athletics at least for the Greek *Lives*. This is why Plutarch became such an invaluable source of information for anyone interested in the cultural history of Greek sport.

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