

Life in the Roman Empire: Episode 192

Stadium and Chariot Races

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Fanatic Obsession + The Culture of Competition

One of the most famous quotes from the Roman satirist Juvenal bemoans the state of the Roman people:

“Now that no one buys our votes, the public has long since cast off its cares; the people that once bestowed commands, consulships, legions, and all else, now meddles no more and longs eagerly for just two things—bread and circuses.”

Greco-Roman culture was obsessed with athletic contests. As we’ll see in a moment, chariot racing was the most popular “game.” So popular, in fact, Augustus had to dispatch troops throughout the city on race days to deter thieves from breaking into people’s residences during the races.² Successful chariot racers became wealthy celebrities and had a huge following. Three examples will serve to suffice as evidence of the fanaticism of Greco-Roman people for chariot racing:

- **Suicide:** When one celebrity chariot racer died in a race, a distraught fan threw himself onto the burning pyre at his funeral.³
- **Magical Curses:** It was not uncommon for racers and the general public to resort to magic and curses as a way to gain the advantage for themselves or the racing team they supported. One such curse that has been found reads, “Demon, I demand and ask of you that from this day, hour, and moment forward that you torture the horses of the Green and Whites. Kill also the charioteers Glarus, Felix, Primulus, and Romanus. Cause them to crash and leave no breath in their bodies!”⁴ In essence, ancient Romans acted like present day Philadelphia sports fans.
- **Riots:** It wasn’t uncommon for rowdy fans to end up rioting. One of the worst riots took place in Constantinople. When the riot was over, most of the city had burned down, and 30,000 people had died.⁵ In Thessalonica—a town Paul spent time in—a famous chariot racer made a homosexual advance on a Roman general in the area and was arrested. When fans of the racer heard the news, they rioted, lynched the general, and broke the charioteer out of jail. They proceeded to burn down the center of the city until the emperor sent in troops. 7,000 people died.

I know you may find this challenging, but try for a moment to imagine a culture in which sports fans take devotion to their teams a little too far. Try and imagine a culture obsessed with food and sports.

There were all kinds of games. Here’s a brief snapshot of the proliferation of games in the Greco-Roman world:

- The Olympic Games started in 776 BCE.

1 Juvenal, *Sat.* 10.77-81.

2 Garrett Fagan, *The History of Ancient Rome*, Lecture 42.

3 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chp. 9.

4 Robert K. Sherck, *The Roman Empire*, 217.

5 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chp. 9.

- The Pythian Games started in 595 BCE.
- The Isthmian Games started in 581 BCE.
- The Nemean Games started in 570 BCE.
- The Caesarean Games started in 30 BCE.

“Many cities in both mainland Greece and beyond had their own athletic meets, including several cities with which, again, Paul had some connection, such as Antioch, Tarsus, and Ephesus, the latter being the venue of the famed Panionic games.⁶ It’s likely that Paul’s stay in Corinth coincided with the Isthmian and Caesarean games at least once.⁷ This was a culture of competition. So, the next time you overhear yourself say something like, “Where are you watching the big game?” understand that your life has been deeply shaped by this Greco-Roman obsession.

Foot Racing

Games included many different sports, but two particular competitions stand out in Paul’s writings: footraces and chariot racing.

- During the first thirteen Olympiads the **dromos**, a single lap of the stadium was about 220 yards long.
- In the fourteenth Olympiad, the **diaulos** was added, which meant running the single lap twice.
- In the fifteenth Olympiad, the **dolichos**, or long race, was added. It is estimated to have been seven, twelve, or twenty-four laps of the stadium.⁸

Not far from Ephesus is antiquity’s largest and best-preserved stadium at Aphrodisias. It seated 30,000 people. Its course is 178 meters in length and 40 meters in width.⁹

The apostle Paul frequently made use of racing imagery to describe his life and the lives of those he served as an apostle.¹⁰ How we run the race of our lives matters.

Chariots

In this sport-obsessed culture, the most revered sport was chariot racing. Admission to the Circus Maximus where the chariot racing took place was either free or for a nominal fee, ensuring all Romans were able to participate. Whereas gladiatorial games may only occur a handful of times per year, each of the over one hundred holidays per year included chariot racing.¹¹

- The Circus Maximus was a huge structure:
- It seated at least **250,000** but may have been able to seat as many as **350,000**.¹²

6 David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 267.

7 David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 267.

8 David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 268.

9 Orhan Atvur, *Aphrodisias: Bilkent Kultur Girisimi*, 56.

10 Acts 20:24, Gal. 2:2, Gal. 5:7, Phi. 2:14-16, 2 Timothy 4:7, 1 Cor. 9:24-27, Heb. 12:1-2

11 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chp. 9.

12 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chp. 9.

- There were **three tiers of seating**. The lowest tier was made of marble. The next tier was made of wood. And the highest tier was standing room only.¹³
- It reached its final form in the time of Trajan, measuring **650 by 220 yards**.¹⁴
- The total length of an average race was about 8 kilometers in which chariots raced counter-clockwise. Races probably took less than 15 minutes.¹⁵
- **Carceres**: Refers to the 12 starting gates along the flat side of the oval of the track, indicating the maximum number of racers was twelve.
- **Spinae**: The “spine” was the central portion of the track around which the chariots raced. The spine was embellished with statues of gods, Egyptian obelisks, and, in time, golden eggs and dolphins to indicate how many laps had been run.¹⁶
- **Metae**: The *metae* were three cones at the end of the *spinae* around which the racers turned. It was a one-hundred eighty degree turn and was extremely dangerous, often leading to fatal crashes. Racers bound the reins around their body to secure themselves in the chariot. Of course, this made survival very difficult in the event of a crash. So, racers carried a dagger whose purpose was to cut them free in the event of a crash. Unfortunately, many wrecked racers were dragged around the track to their deaths unable to cut themselves free.
- The surface of the track was sand, but some emperors added other substances to the sand like mica to give a glittering effect as chariots raced; almost like sparks.¹⁷

Kinds of races:

- **Bigae** involved chariots pulled by only two horses.
- **Quadrigae** by far the most popular, involved chariots pulled by four horses.
- **Various Forms**, the Romans would frequently race odd numbers of horses to create new racing challenges.
- **Ped-ibus ab quadrigum**, This race involved both chariot and foot racer. When a chariot crosses the finish line, a foot racer would jump from the chariot in order to race a final lap on foot. This, of course, often turned deadly as there were other chariot still on the course. Basically, it was the ancient equivalent of frogger.

Teams

Originally, there were two racing (red and white) teams called **factions**. Later, two other factions were added, the blues and the greens.¹⁸ In a 12 chariot race, each faction would have three chariot teams, and sometimes teams would work together. Some chariots would sacrifice themselves by crashing, ramming, or obstructing other racers.¹⁹

13 Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, 216.

14 David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors*, 261.

15 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chp. 9.

16 David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors*, 261.

17 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chp. 9.

18 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chp. 9.

19 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, chp. 9.

Philippians 3

“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” [Philippians 3:13-14]

ἐπεκτείνωμαι [epekteinomai] to reach out towards, to strain for.

Like a foot racer stretching out at the finish line, and like a chariot racer unwilling to look behind and inadvertently pull his chariot off course, Paul strains forward with all of his focus, attention, and energy on “knowing Christ.” Again and again, Paul looks to these athletic competitions to drive home the point that how we live our lives, how we run our races, matters. So, run well. Strain forward with eyes fixed, focused, and intent on the goal.

Additional Implications: