Savage Gladiators vs. Civilized Amateurs: Rome and Athens in American Sports Culture

by ANNA MCCULLOUGH
The last element of the rhetorical parallel between football players and gladiators is the aspect of popularity. They provide entertainment to the masses, and receive adulation and fame as a result. And gladiators were indeed very popular in ancient Rome.

Graffiti from Pompeii and depictions on objects such as common lamps and mosaics demonstrate the broad celebrity of the gladiators and fans’ knowledge of individuals and fighting styles. Romans did have favorite fighters, and some of the biggest stars could even be lured out of retirement to fight for enormous sums of money.

This aspect of a gladiator’s experience is reflected in modern perceptions of them as athletic superstars and entertainers. Commentator Pius Kamau in a March 31, 2004 *Denver Post* article argued that recognition itself is a substitute for monetary compensation for athletic services: that athletes are seduced by “the ultimate modern intoxicant – a gladiator’s adult adulation.”

Even in 1929, Savage complained that college football had become “a spectacle of highly trained actors” for whom *ever-bigger stadiums* were being built; many of which, including OSU’s Horseshoe and USC’s Coliseum, were modeled on Roman amphitheaters and the Colosseum in particular. Beloved “actors” must have the proper stages for their heroic deeds, after all.

But despite their popularity, Roman gladiators also possessed *infamia*, a state of dishonor or disgrace that resulted in legal restrictions and social ostracism. It meant that however famous they were inside the arena, however well they fought or entertained the crowd, outside the arena they were considered among the lowest of the low in the social hierarchy.

This is a striking difference from the modern stereotype of the coddled athlete whose oversized ego and transgressions, some criminal, are overlooked or tolerated.

Robert Lipsyte writes in an April 2, 1995 *New York Times* article that the focus on stardom and spectacle have ruined nearly every level of sport, not just professional or collegiate: “Call it a gladiatorial class. Families, schools, towns wave 12-year-olds through the toll booths of life. Potential sports stars—who might bring fame and money to everyone around them—are excused from taking out the trash, from learning to read, from having to ask, ‘May I touch you there?’” For Lipsyte, it is a class of pampered sports stars trapped in permanent adolescence by the lack of any expectations or duties beyond entertaining the public and playing well.

Most recently, Florida State University quarterback Jameis Winston embodied this stereotype in the eyes of critics when he was investigated for rape in 2012-13 and cited for shoplifting in 2014 – but his former high school retired his jersey number in his honor in summer 2014 nonetheless.

**America, the New Rome**

Adulation and crowd expectations of entertainment turn athletic competition into spectacle, which evokes particular historical associations in American culture with Rome.

In the early 19th century, Republican Rome was held up as a model for early America. Values from that era, austerity and sacrifice for the growth and security of the country, were seen as particularly appropriate for the new nation to imitate.
By the end of the 1800s, however, the model had become imperial Rome after imperialist ideas were boosted by the final subjugation of Native Americans, victories in the Spanish-American War, and the acquisition of the Philippines. The Roman Empire could thus serve, in the words of Margaret Malamud, as “a monitory image of what the States might themselves become.”

This image could be positive or negative, as imperial Rome could evoke tyranny and decadence, à la Nero, or virtuous beneficence, à la Augustus.

This tension was reflected in popular uses of Rome during the era. Roman architectural forms such as the triumphal arch and vaulted ceilings were used, and Roman-style luxury was all the rage in the cities. Public baths, elite banquets, and restaurants such as Murray’s Roman Gardens in New York imitated Rome in their decorations and design, and recreations of Roman spectacles became popular. The Octavian Troupe performed sports and gladiatorial combats. Other groups rendered mythological scenes, chariot races, and acrobatics.

Coney Island also staged a reenactment of the destruction of Pompeii. The moral lesson in this popular spectacle lay in Pompeii’s obliteration as the righteous end to a corrupt, pagan city, a lesson echoed in Imre Kiralfy’s massive stage production *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome*, first performed in 1888. Picked up by Barnum and Bailey as part of their circus, it included arena events like gladiatorial combat. As Malamud notes, even though gladiators and Nero were symbols of the corruption and decadence that brought down the Roman Empire, Americans could still enjoy the spectacle.

Athletes might call themselves gladiators to bolster their own sense of their strength and honor on the field. But the use of the idea of “gladiators” in the amateurism debate is meant to be critical of the concept and evoke Roman spectacle and decadence—Rome’s fall, not its greatness.

It is not just the violence and the image of fans baying for men’s blood, but the overall specter of moral decline that makes it such a potent comparison.

Of course, that decline is presented in different ways.

For NCAA supporters, moral decline will inevitably result from the final abandonment of amateurism as areté and civilization give way to professionalism’s profit, corruption, and brutality. Audiences, owners, and gladiator-athletes are all complicit in this decline by choosing money over the moral high ground.

But for NCAA critics, this perspective ignores the fact that college football has always been deadly; always lucrative; always popular. For these critics, decline has already happened in the form of immoral exploitation and excessive violence that has tainted the game nearly from its beginning. Reforms that address those problems will thus reverse (or at least mitigate) that decline.

**NCAA: Amateurs Have Always Been Profiteers; Long Live Amateurism?**

The current context in which this rhetoric is most often used is the ongoing controversy over NCAA policies regarding amateurism and the big business of college athletics.

Even within the NCAA, there is disagreement over its policies and amateur mission, as internal
emails and memos submitted for evidence in the O'Bannon trial demonstrate.

Also, in August 2014, the NCAA voted to grant autonomy to the five biggest athletic conferences, opening the door to granting stipends to players or other forms of compensation outside mere scholarships.

These cracks in the façade of previous NCAA insistence on no compensation of any type are significant, but amateurism isn’t quite dead.

The NCAA plans to appeal Judge Claudia Wilkens’ decision in favor of O’Bannon and the other plaintiffs. And testimony by Emmert and others during the trial show that belief still exists in amateurism’s unique ability to build character and instill certain moral qualities.

In other words, some continue to value the ideas of amateurism over professionalism, education over profit, and morality and social benefit over corruptive practice.

Some still prefer imagined Athens to imagined Rome.

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**Suggested Reading**


Gardner, Percy. New Chapters in Greek History: Historical Results of Recent Excavations in Greece and Asia Minor. London: Murray, 1892.


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the MVP award in 14 professional seasons. In 1962, he became the first player in NBA history to average a triple-double for a season. In the 1970–71 NBA season, he was