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THE WORSHIP OF ATHLETICS.

*Καὶ ἄρα μία καὶ αὕτη τῶν βασάνων οὐχ ἐλαχίστη,
τίς ἕκαστος ἐν τοῖς γυμνασίοις φανέται.*

—Plato.

The worship of the athlete and his art is so human and inherent an impulse, that the modern exaltation of athletics does not confront us with any new cult or doctrine, but with simply the peculiar developments and phases of a primitive sentiment.

For the tried athlete of every age catches the public favor and admiration through his exhibiting the hard qualities of nerve, pluck and endurance, the basis of the Greek *“θυμὸς”* “spirit,” which, in esteeming so highly, we are but following in the steps of Plato, who regarded the “spirited” element as one of the vital essentials in the education of the young men of the “Perfect City.”

Regarding athletics from this common basis of admiration, there has been but little radical change in people's point of view since the games the Greeks celebrated at Patroclus' funeral to the Olympian meeting of 1896. Time, locality, climate and race have necessarily played an important part in determining special rules, theories and etiquette of sport, but behind all this, deep down in man's heart lurks that old animal love of hard fighting, where the spirited qualities have free scope and play. This admiration is the unifying feature of all good, true sport, whether it be for the splendid charge of the half-back through the opposing line, or for the grim, steady nerve of the batsman who has “fought” eleven men for an afternoon and has not “given a chance.”

Tribute paid to prowess such as this puts us side by side with the cheering throng that watched the winner finish in the Olympian stadium, and would make the Greeks, Spartans in particular, most delighted and interested spectators in a modern “Rugby” match.

The Greeks counted the years by the great Olympian games. The enthusiastic sportsman of to-day is still the Greek in thought and expression, for his chronology is largely a list of memorable athletic achievements—“the year that Cross of New College broke the half-mile record,” and, to more firmly settle this date he adds that in the same year, “Oxford had to follow on.”

In a University above all places, where men are young and blood runs fast and hot, we may expect to find deep homage paid to athletics and a strong feeling of hero-worship for the successful athlete.

The question of paramount importance is—how far is this enthusiasm based on sound, healthy and logical principles? How far may these athletics be accepted as the true, clear-cut type, establishing a tone and spirit, so instinct with the honor and dignity of the University, so harmonious and even in their working, that they may

serve as an object lesson and a pattern to an entire community? Now, if athletics are to exercise a real influence in any body of men there must be general participation, or at least a lively sympathy. The Greek games exemplified this. The four great athletic meetings—the Olympian, the Pythian, the Isthmian and the Nemean, were for more than a century the main bond of unity among the scattered states of Greece, controlled by no centralizing, political tendency, but standing each aloof in a strained spirit of jealous rivalry. These great contests, open to all Greeks, brought the townsmen from far and wide, to worship and sacrifice to the same Deity, to witness the same sports, and renew the pleasant associations of former days. The meetings were under the “Truce of God” and, under surroundings so suggestive of peace and paternal feeling, yet so stimulating and bracing in their influence, the Greeks caught a feeling of national pride in their own supremacy over “barbarian” races, thus keeping alive the vital spark of unity that blazed forth in the splendid fire of concerted action at Marathon, Salamis and Thermopylae. What these great games did for the unity of the Greek townsmen athletics should do for the student body. In any large University there is always a risk of disintegration of sympathies and interests, especially when there is no common residential life.

The separation and isolation of the outside existence is further increased by the diversity of purpose and habits incidental to the purely academic side of life. There the division of schools, faculties and courses tend to a distraction of the general and a cementing of the individual interests. In the keen competition for class honors each man naturally works solely for himself, not moved by any corporate or fraternal impulse.

Now it becomes the duty of athletics to draw together all these scattered elements, and to substitute for the complexity of aims and objects, the common interest of recreative enjoyment in the “unhindered exercise of one's natural force.” In such an atmosphere men are divested of such accidents as “course” or “year,” and with one heart and purpose give themselves up to the fresh and wholesome instinct of delight in bodily exercise. “What religion knits people so closely as common sport?” says Robert Louis Stevenson in his “Inland Voyage,” referring to the hearty reception given him by the “Royal Sport Nautique,” a boating club in Belgium. It was a rainy night, but the boat-house was crowded with members, who took the wet and weary traveller to their hearts, with the eager question—“En Angleterre vous employez les sliding-seats n'est ce pas?” When warmed and fed, the guest of the evening returned the hospitality by answering, as best he could, a volley of questions on English boats, makers, styles and designs. “We are employed in commerce during the day,” said an enthusiastic Belgian, “but in the even-