

Michael B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Appendix, bibliog., illus., index, pp. 202. \$US22.50.

Michael Poliakoff is an associate professor of classical studies at Hillsdale College, and this work is another excellent contribution by a classicist on sport in the ancient world. In recent years, classicists such as Poliakoff, Stephen Miller, David Young, Thomas Scanlon and Donald Kyle have launched a major assault on studies of sport in the ancient world, destroying many a myth by their meticulous research. The virtual reverence attached to the work of such as E.N. Gardiner

has been annulled in the process, but this is progress, as the 'new classicist provides a different insight and offers views which are not restricted by the turn of the century romantic notions of the past. The literature in the field of physical education needs to be hurriedly rewritten as these scholars wade through the data - some new, but mostly old data being subjected to intense scrutiny - paying scant heed to sanctimonious opinions that have been passed down from one generation to the next.

Michael Poliakoff is of the new school, and his particular research interest lies in combat sports, such as boxing, wrestling, stick-fighting and pankration. In this book the author concentrates on the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome and the Near East, covering the time span from 3000 BC to the twelfth century AD.

Poliakoff's research findings rely on inscriptions, documents on papyrus and clay tablets, poetry and prose, coinage and of course works of art. The book is well illustrated, many of the reproductions being rather rare, for example those on pages 11, 14, 29, 30, 35, 39, 41, 47, 49, 56 and 59. Poliakoff has used his own photographs to a fair degree, but, unfortunately the reproductions are poor in some cases, an example being the wrestling scene from the Tomb of Beni Hasan (p.5). As good quality representations are abundant of this scene, the presentation could definitely have been improved with such utilisation.

The book is divided into eight main chapters: General Aspects of the Ancient Combat Sports; Wrestling; Pankration; Stick Fighting; Boxing; The Nature and Purpose of Combat Sports; The Participation in Greek Combat Sport, and Metaphor, Myth and Reality. In addition there is an Appendix, entitled 'Combat Sport, Funeral Cult and Human Sacrifice', which is a fascinating finale. By placing the Notes at the end, he has succeeded in allowing the text to flow, and not be encumbered with terminology, Greek and other obscure names and words, which are of interest principally to the specialist.

Poliakoff's fundamental thesis is that as games and play tell 'a lot about the character, values and priorities of a society ... [they] ... combat sports in particular, with their elements of violence and savagery, offer an unusually revealing perspective of different societies' (p.1). Combative sports have been found to exist in virtually every society - whether primitive, or so called civilised - although in some societies, and at certain time periods, such activities have played a more dominant role than in others. Of interest, to the academic, as well as non-specialist, is not only how the fighting sports were pursued, but why. What urge was satisfied? What satisfaction and rewards were offered the combatants? Why was popular support and acclaim accorded to 'fighters'? Due to the preponderance of literature and artifacts, the Greeks are analysed in the greatest depth. The author argues convincingly that the Greek orientation toward contest and competition differed from the other civilisations under study. Of particular value is the material on the social background of participants, which disputes the myth of superior sporting ethics of ancient civilisations.

Combat Sport in the Ancient World is an outstanding piece of work, carefully documented, and except for a few minor flaws as mentioned, well illustrated. The work is a must for every school and college/university library and for the shelves of the sport historian. It is scholarly, and yet highly readable, making it of value for those concerned with the development and practice of modern combat sports. With the intensification and spread of violence in sport in our society an understanding of what combat sports did for, and to, ancient societies will be of immense value.

Maxwell L. Howell
The University of Queensland

Reet A. Howell
Queensland University of Technology