

I

The Earliest Days of Greek Athletics



In the two passages from Homer which are presented here a picture emerges of what we may call Homeric athletics. The question is, however, whether that picture is one of his own day or a valid, if somewhat blurred, reflection of the athletic practices of the Mycenaean era. Comparison with archaeological discoveries from that era finds relatively little in common with the Homeric picture, while comparison with the development of the Olympic program (Appendix) suggests that the Homeric picture would have been valid only as of the early 7th century B.C. If so, the informality of the Homeric games might have been the case as well for the early days of the Olympics.

1 Homer, *Iliad* 23.256–24.6

ca. 750 B.C.

Patroklos, the childhood and lifelong friend of Achilles, has fought in Achilles' place and been killed by Hektor outside the walls of Troy. The corpse of Patroklos has been cremated and the crowd at the funeral begins to disperse:

But Achilles held the people there and sat them in a broad assembly, and brought prizes for games out of his ships, cauldrons and tripods and horses

and mules and high-headed powerful cattle and beautifully girdled women and gray iron. First he set forth the glorious prizes for equine feet: a woman faultless in her work to be led away and a tripod with ears holding twenty-two measures for the first prize. Then for the second he set forth a six-year-old unbroken mare carrying an unborn mule foal. Then for the third prize he set forth a beautiful unfired cauldron holding four measures, still new and shiny. For the fourth he set forth two gold talents, and for the fifth a two-handled unfired bowl. Then he stood up and spoke out to the Argives:

"These prizes are placed in competition awaiting the horsemen. If we Achaians were not competing for the sake of some other hero, I myself would take the first prizes away to my tent. You know by how much my horses surpass all others in their *arete*, for they are immortal, a gift of Poseidon to my father Peleus who handed them in turn to me. But I and my solid-hoofed horses stay aside; such is the fame of the charioteer whom they have lost, the gentle one, who so many times rubbed soft oil into their manes after he had washed them with shining water. Therefore they both stand here grieving him with manes trailing on the ground, both hearts grieving as one. But the rest of you take your places in the field, whoever has confidence in his horses and compact chariot."

So spoke the son of Peleus, and the swift riders gathered. By far the first to rise was Eumelos, son of Admetos, who surpassed all in horsemanship. After him rose Diomedes, strong son of Tydeus, and yoked the Trojan horses which he had taken by force from Aeneas. Next rose fair-haired Menelaos, son of Atreus, and yoked his swift horses. Fourth to prepare his flowing-maned horses was Antilochos, glorious son of high-hearted king Nestor. He stood nearby and gave well-intentioned advice to his son:

"Antilochos, Zeus and Poseidon have loved you, though you are young, and have taught you all aspects of good horsemanship. Therefore, I have no need to instruct you, for you know well how to double the *terma*. But I think that your horses are the slowest, and that your work will be harder. The horses of these men are faster, but they do not know better than you how to plan. Remember then, my dear boy, always to have your plan in mind so that the prizes will not elude you. The woodcutter is far better with skill than with brute force; it is with skill that the pilot holds his swift ship on course though buffeted by winds on the wine-colored sea. Thus too by skill one charioteer passes another. But whoever puts his trust in his horses and chariot and recklessly turns wide coming and going, his horses drift out of the course and he cannot hold them. But the man who takes advantage is he who, though driving the slower horses, always watches the *terma* and turns it tightly, nor forgets how much oxhide rein to give and take, but holds

his horses well and studies the man in front. I shall give you a marker, and you cannot miss it. There is a dry stump about six feet high above the ground, either oak or pine, but not rotted by rain water, with two white stones against it on either side, and there the course is smooth around it; it may be the marker of some man long dead and buried, or the *nyssa* set up by earlier men, but now Achilles has made it the *terma*. Having approached this, you must drive your horses and chariot near it, and you in your well-woven chariot box lean toward the left; then call out to your right horse and goad him on, and give him full rein. Your left horse must be driven up close to the *nyssa* so that the hub of the wheel seems to touch, but do not let it graze the stone lest you harm your horses and break your chariot. That would be a thing of joy for the others and a source of shame for you. My dear boy, keep your wits about you and be careful, for if at the *nyssa* you drive hard and slip ahead, there is no one who by sprinting can catch you, let alone pass you."

So spoke Nestor, son of Neleus, and sat back down in his place, having told his son the way to win.

The fifth to prepare his flowing-maned horses was Meriones.

Then they mounted their chariots and tossed in their lots. Achilles shook them, and the first to fall out was that of Antilochos, son of Nestor, and after him strong Eumelos drew the next place, and next was Menelaos, son of Atreus. Meriones drew the next lane to drive, and last of all the best of them all, Diomedes, drew the lane to drive his horses. Standing in line, Achilles showed them the *terma*, far away on the level plain. Next to the goal he set godlike Phoinix, squire of his father, to remember the running and certify it.

Then all held their whips high above their horses, and together flicked with their reins, and bellowed out for speed. Quickly they spread out over the plain and left the ships behind. The swirling dust clung beneath the chests of the horses like clouds of a whirlwind; their manes streamed out in the wind's current; the chariots plunged down to the ground and, again, shot up like meteors. The drivers rocked in their chariots, and the heart of each beat high with the hope of victory; they shouted to their horses, and they flew over the plain in a cloud of dust.

But when the fleet horses turned back toward the shore, then the *arete* of each began to show, and at once the field of horses was stretched out. Quickly the swift-footed horses of Eumelos went in front, and after them the stallions of Diomedes, not far behind and seemingly always about to climb into the chariot of Eumelos with their breath hot on his back and broad shoulders. And Diomedes might have passed, or at least drawn even

had not Apollo been angry with him, and dashed the whip from his hands. The tears of rage started from his eyes which watched the mares of Eumelos running even better while his own horses slackened without the goad. But Apollo's cheating of Diomedes did not escape Athena; quickly she swept to him and returned his whip, and inspired his horses with strength. Then she descended in wrath upon Eumelos and broke the yoke of his horses. They ran off the road, the pole dragging on the ground, and he was catapulted out of the chariot over the wheel, ripping his elbows and mouth and skin, and smashing his forehead so that the tears flowed but his voice would not. Then Diomedes rushed past him, and led the field by far, for Athena had inspired strength in his horses and glory in him.

After him came fair-haired Menelaos, but Antilochos cried out to his father's horses:

"Step it up, you two! Pull as fast as you can! I'm not telling you to catch those horses of Diomedes—Athena has now inspired strength in them and glory in him—but beat the horses of Menelaos! Don't be left behind! Faster! For shame to let his mares beat you stallions! Why are you falling behind, my brave boys? Do you know what's going to happen? You'll get no more care from Nestor; he'll cut you up for dog food, if we carry off the lesser prize because you didn't try. Get going! As fast as you can! I know what I'll do, I'll slip past him where the road gets narrow. He won't get away from me!"

So he spoke, and they were terrified by their master's shouts and ran harder for a little while, and then Antilochos saw the narrow spot in the road. There was a gully where the winter rain had run from the road creating a large pothole, and into this he forced Menelaos who shrank from a collision, but Antilochos turned his horses off the road and drove along for a bit on the shoulder. Menelaos was frightened and called out to Antilochos:

"Antilochos, that is reckless driving! Hold your horses! The road is too narrow here, but it will soon be wide enough for passing. Don't crash up your chariot and wreck the both of us!"

So he spoke, but Antilochos drove all the harder and lashed his horses for greater speed, as if he had not heard him. They ran even for about the length of a boy's diskos throw, but then the mares of Menelaos fell back, for he let up lest the horses crash, the chariots overturn, and they in their struggle for victory end up in the dust. But fair-haired Menelaos called out in anger:

"Antilochos, you are the most wretched of men! Damn you! We Achaians were wrong to say you had good sense! But you won't get the prize without swearing that you played fair!"

So he spoke, and then shouted out to his horses:

"Don't slacken up, don't stop, even though your hearts are heavy! Their feet and knees will tire before yours! Their youth is gone."

So he spoke, and they were terrified by their master's shouts and ran harder and soon caught up with the others.

Meanwhile, the Argives sitting in their assembly were watching for the horses which flew through the dust of the plain. Idomeneus, lord of the Cretans, was first to make out the horses, for he sat apart from the others, and higher up where he had a panoramic view. He heard and recognized the shouting of Diomedes, and made out his conspicuous horse, leading the others, all red except for a white mark like a full moon on his forehead. Idomeneus stood up and called to the Argives:

"Friends, am I the only one who sees the horses, or do you see them too? It seems to me that other horses are leading, another charioteer ahead. The mares of Eumelos must have come to grief on the plain, for I saw them running in front around the *terma*, but now they are nowhere to be seen and I have looked over the whole Trojan plain. Perhaps the reins slipped away from the charioteer and he could not hold them around the *terma*, and did not make the turn. I think that he must have been thrown out there and his chariot wrecked, and his mares bolted away wildly. But do get up and see for yourselves, for I cannot make it out clearly. I think that strong Diomedes is in the lead."

And swift Ajax, son of Oileus, spoke shamefully to him:

"Idomeneus, can't you hold your wind? The horses are still far out on the plain. You are not the youngest of us, and your eyes are no better than ours, but you must always blow on and on. There is no need for your wind since there are others here better than you. Those are the same mares in front as before, and the same Eumelos who holds the reins behind them."

Then the lord of the Cretans angrily answered him to his face:

"Ajax, although you are the best in abuse and stupidity, you are the worst of the Argives with that donkey's brain of yours. Now put your money where your mouth is and bet me a tripod-cauldron. We'll have Agamemnon, son of Atreus, hold the bet so that you will pay up when you find out which horses are in front."

So he spoke, and swift Ajax jumped up again in anger to retort, and the quarrel would have gone on had Achilles not risen and said to them:

"Ajax and Idomeneus, be quiet. This is not becoming, and if others were acting like you, you yourselves would be angry with them. Sit down with the others and watch for the horses. They are into the stretch and will be here soon, and then you can see for yourselves which are first and which are second."

While he spoke, Diomedes had come driving hard upon them lashing his horses. They still ran with feet high and light, and dust still splashed at the charioteer, and the chariot plated in tin and gold still rolled hard behind the flying feet of the horses. So quickly they flew that the wheels scarcely left a trace in the soft dust. Diomedes stopped them in the middle of the crowd with the sweat dripping densely to the ground from their necks and chests. He vaulted from his shining chariot to the ground, leaned his whip against the yoke, and did not delay to take his prize, the woman and the tripod with ears which he gave to his comrades to take away, and unyoked his horses.

Next in was Antilochos who had passed Menelaos by trick rather than by speed. But even so Menelaos held his swift horses near behind and would have won clearly had the course been longer. Then came Meriones, noble squire of Idomeneus, a full spear cast behind Menelaos. His horses were beautiful but slow, and he the least talented at chariot racing. Last and behind all the others came Eumelos, dragging his lovely chariot and driving his horses before him. Seeing him, Achilles took pity and stood up among the Argives and spoke out:

"The best man has come in last, but let's give him a prize as he deserves: the second prize. The first should go to Diomedes."

So he spoke, and all agreed, and he would have given the horse to Eumelos had not Antilochos stood up to argue:

"Achilles, I shall be very angry with you if you do as you suggest. You mean to take my prize away from me, thinking that, even though he is a wretched driver he is a good man. Well, he ought to have prayed to the gods, and then he would not have been last. If he is so dear to you and such a good friend, then there is plenty of gold in your tent, and bronze and sheep, and women and horses. From those give him a prize, even better than mine, and the Achaians will applaud you, but I will not give up the mare, and if anyone wants her he will have to fight me to get her."

So he spoke, but Achilles was delighted with his good friend and smiled and answered him:

"Antilochos, if you would have me bring out something special to give to Eumelos, then I will do so for your sake. I will give him a bronze corselet with a tin overlay. It will be worth something to him."

He spoke and told Automedon, his beloved companion, to bring it out of his tent. This was done, and he placed it in Eumelos' hands, and he accepted it joyfully. But then Menelaos, with heart full of bitterness and anger against Antilochos, stood up, and the herald put the staff in his hands and called for silence among the Argives, and he proceeded to speak:

"Antilochos, you used to play fair, but what have you done now? You

have besmirched my *arete*, you fouled my horses by throwing your own in front of them, even though yours are far inferior. Come now, Argives, leaders and rulers of men, judge between us, with no prejudice, so that no man can say: 'Menelaos used lies and force against Antilochos and went off with the mare Antilochos had won, for Menelaos' horses were inferior, but he has greater power and prestige.' Or rather I will judge myself, and no man will question the decision, for it will be fair. Come here, Zeus-nurtured Antilochos, and do what is right. Stand in front of your horses and chariot, take in your hand the whip with which you drove them before, take hold of your horses and swear by Poseidon the Earthholder and Earthshaker that you did not foul up my chariot with a dirty trick."

Then Antilochos, once more the sportsman, answered him:

"Enough now. I am much younger than you, lord Menelaos, and you are my elder and better. You know how greedy transgressions sprout up in a young man, for his mind races on, but his judgement is lightweight. Please be patient with me. I will give you the mare which I won. If you demand something of my own besides, I would give it to you, Zeus-nurtured, rather than have fallen for all time from your favor and be wrong in the eyes of heaven."

He spoke, and led up the mare and gave her to Menelaos whose anger softened. He said:

"Antilochos, although I was angry I will now give way to you, since you were not flighty or lightheaded before now. Your youth got the better of your brain. You will not play tricks on your betters another time. Another man might not have won me over, but you have suffered much and worked hard for my sake, as have your noble father and your brother. Therefore, I shall be swayed by your supplication, and I will even give you the mare, although she is mine, so that all may see and know that my heart is never arrogant and stubborn."

He spoke, and gave the mare to a comrade of Antilochos to lead away, and took for himself the glittering cauldron. Fourth, in the order he had driven, Meriones took the two talents of gold. But the fifth prize, the two-handled bowl, was left over. Achilles carried it through the assembly, gave it to Nestor, and stood by him and said:

"Let this now be yours, venerable sir, to keep in memory of the burial of Patroklos, since never again will you see him among the Argives. I simply want to give you this prize, since never again will you fight with your fists, nor wrestle, nor compete in the javelin, nor the footraces, for already the difficulties of old age are upon you."

So speaking, he placed it in Nestor's hands. And he received it joyfully and answered:

"You're right, my boy, everything you said is true. My joints aren't what they used to be, nor my feet, and my hands no longer shoot out lightly from my shoulders. If only I were young and strong again as I was back then when the Epeans were burying Amarynkeas in Bouprasion and his sons set up prizes in honor of the king. There wasn't a man like me then, not a one. I beat Klytomedes, son of Enops, in the boxing. In the wrestling, only Ankaïos of Pleuron stood up to me, and I beat him too. Iphiklos was fast, but I beat him in the races, and I beat both Phyleas and Polydoros in the javelin. I only lost in the horse race because the Aktorians—they were Siamese twins, you know—outmaneuvered me in pursuit of the biggest prizes. One of them took the reins and did the driving while the other used the whip and talked to the horses. That's what I was like back then, but now the youngsters have to do such things. I have to bow to old age, but then I bowed to no man. Now you go along and honor your fallen comrade with these games. I accept this gladly; it does my heart good that you remember me as your faithful friend, and that you do not forget the honor which is my due among our people. May the gods grant you proper joy for this."

So he spoke, and Achilles, having listened to all these praises of Nestor, returned to the assembly of the Achaeans. Next he set out the prizes for the painful boxing. He led out and tethered in the field a mule, six years old, hardworking, and unbroken, and for the loser he set out a two-handled goblet. He then stood up and spoke to the Argives:

"I invite two men, the best among you, to box for these prizes. All you Achaeans bear witness that he to whom Apollo gives endurance will take away to his tent this hardworking mule. The one who is beaten will take the two-handled goblet."

He spoke, and immediately a huge and powerful man, Epeios son of Panopeus, well skilled in boxing, rose up, seized the mule, and said:

"Let the one who wants the two-handled goblet come near, for I say that none of you will beat me at boxing and take the mule; I am the greatest. Isn't it enough that I am deficient on the battlefield? A man can't be number one in everything. But I know what's going to happen here to any opponent of mine. I'll tear him limb-from-limb and smash his bones together. Let his friends huddle nearby to carry him out after my fists have beaten him to a pulp."

So he spoke, and they all kept their mouths shut. At last one Euryalos stood up. Diomedes was his second, and encouraged him, and wanted the victory for him. First he pulled the boxing belt around his waist, and then gave him the *himantes* carefully cut from the hide of an ox. The two men, belted up, stepped into the middle of the assembly, squared off, and put up

their hands. Then they fell upon each other with their heavy hands mixing it up. There was a gnashing of teeth, and sweat poured off their limbs. Then Epeios rushed in and hit him on the jaw as he peered through his guard, and his knees buckled. As in the water rippled by the north wind a fish jumps in the seaweed of the shallows and disappears again into the dark water, so Euryalos left the ground from the blow. But great-hearted Epeios held him upright in his hands. Euryalos' friends gathered around him and led him through the assembly with his feet dragging as he spat up thick blood and rolled his head over on one side. They led him completely dazed, and they had to return for the two-handled goblet.

Now Achilles set out the prizes for the third contest, the painful wrestling. For the winner there was a huge tripod to be set over the fire. The Achaians among themselves valued it at twelve oxen. He placed a woman, skilled in the work of her hands, for the loser, and they rated her at four oxen. Then Achilles stood up and spoke out:

"Rise up, two who would try for this prize."

So he spoke, and up rose huge Ajax, son of Telamon, and to oppose him the crafty Odysseus who knew every trick. The two men, belted up, stepped into the middle of the assembly, and grabbed each other with their heavy arms looking like rafters which a renowned architect has fitted in the roof of a high house. Their backs creaked under the force of violent, stubborn, tugging hands. Wet sweat poured down, and raw places all along their ribs and shoulders broke out bright red with blood, and they continued to struggle for victory and the wrought tripod. Odysseus could not bring down Ajax nor throw him, nor could Ajax throw Odysseus who was too strong. Gradually the Achaians began to be restless, and huge Ajax said:

"Son of Laertes, either lift me, or I will lift you. The outcome is known to Zeus."

So speaking he lifted but Odysseus did not forget his tricks. Odysseus caught him with a stroke behind the knee, and threw him over backward, so that he fell on the chest of Ajax as the crowd applauded. Next, Odysseus tried to lift Ajax, but could not raise him clear of the ground, so he hooked his knee again but they fell together and both were soiled with dust. Then they would have wrestled a third time, but Achilles stood up and called to them to stop:

"Wrestle no more now! Don't wear yourselves out and get hurt! You are both winners. Go off and divide the prizes and let the rest of the Achaians compete."

So he spoke, and they listened to him and obeyed, and wiped off the dust and put on their clothes.

Now Achilles set out prizes for the footrace: a silver mixing bowl, a work of art, which held only six measures but surpassed all others in its loveliness. This Achilles made the prize for the fastest runner in memory of his comrade. For second place he set out a large and fattened ox, and for the last place he set out half a talent of gold. Then Achilles stood up and spoke out:

"Rise up, you who would try for this prize."

So he spoke, and there stood up swift Ajax, son of Oileus, and crafty Odysseus, and Antilochos the son of Nestor, the best runner of the young men. They lined up, and Achilles showed them the *terma*. They sprinted from the *nyssa*, and soon Ajax was in front, but Odysseus was running so close behind that his feet were hitting Ajax' tracks before the dust could settle back into them, and his breath was hitting the back of Ajax' neck. All the Achaians were cheering his effort to win, shouting for him to turn it on. But when they were in the stretch, Odysseus said a silent prayer to the gray-eyed Athena:

"Hear me, Goddess, be kind to me and come with extra strength for my feet."

So he prayed, and Pallas Athena heard him, and lightened his limbs, feet and arms, too. As they were making their final sprint for the prize, Ajax slipped and fell (Athena tripped him) where dung was scattered on the ground from bellowing oxen, and he got the stuff in his mouth and up his nose. So Odysseus took away the mixing bowl, because he finished first, and the ox went to Ajax. He stood with his hands on the horns of the ox, spitting out dung, and said to the Argives:

"Oh, shit! That goddess tripped me, that goddess who has always stood by Odysseus and cared for him like a mother."

They all roared in laughter at him, and then came Antilochos to take the prize for last place, and grinned as he spoke to the Argives:

"Friends, you all know well the truth of what I say, that still the gods continue to favor the older men. Look here, Ajax is older than I, if only by a little, but Odysseus is out of another age and truly one of the ancients. But his old age is, as they say, a lusty one. I don't think any Achaian could match his speed, except Achilles."

So he spoke and glorified the swift-footed son of Peleus. And Achilles answered him:

"Antilochos, your kind words for me shall not have been said in vain, for I shall add another half talent of gold to your prize."

So speaking he placed it in his hands, and Antilochos received it joyfully. Then Achilles brought into the assembly and set out the spear and shield

and helmet of Sarpedon which Patroklos had stripped from his body. Then he stood up and spoke out:

"I invite two men, the best among you, to contend for these prizes. Let them put on their armour and take up their bronze spears and stand up to each other in the trial of close combat. The fighter who is the first of the two to get in a stroke at the other's body, to get through armour and draw blood, to that man I will give this magnificent silver-studded sword. Both men will carry off the armour of Sarpedon and have it in common, and I will treat them both to a good dinner in my tent."

So he spoke, and huge Ajax son of Telamon rose up, and the son of Tydeus, strong Diomedes. When they had donned their armour, they came together in the middle, furious for combat, with fierce faces, and all the Achaians were astonished. They closed and made three charges at one another. Then Ajax stabbed at Diomedes' shield, but did not get through to the skin, for the corselet held. Then Diomedes reached over the great shield and tried to hit his neck with the tip of his spear again and again. When the Achaians saw this they feared for Ajax and called for them to stop and divide the prizes evenly. But Achilles gave to Diomedes the sword with its sheath and belt.

Next Achilles set out a lump of pig iron, which Eëtion the mighty used to hurl. But when Achilles killed him, he brought this away in his ships with the rest of the booty. Then Achilles stood up and spoke out:

"Rise up, you who would try for this prize. Whoever wins will have a supply of iron for five years, and neither his shepherd nor his ploughman will have to go to the city for iron, but will have it already at home."

So he spoke, and up stood Polypoites and Leonteus and Ajax son of Telamon, and Epeios. They stood in a line, and Epeios took the weight, and whirling let it fly, but the Achaians all laughed. Second to throw was Leonteus, and third huge Ajax hurled it from his heavy hand, and surpassed the marks of all the others. But when Polypoites took the weight, he overthrew the entire field by as far as an ox-herd can cast his stick, and they applauded him. The comrades of Polypoites took the prize from the king to the hollow ships.

Once again Achilles set out gloomy iron, this time for the archers. He set out ten double-bladed axes, and ten with single blades. Far away in the sands he planted the mast of a ship, and to it tethered a tremulous wild pigeon by a thin string attached to her foot, and challenged the archers to shoot at her:

"He who hits the wild pigeon will take home all the double axes. He who hits the string, having missed the bird, will be the loser and take the single axes."

So he spoke and up stood Teukros and Meriones, squire of Idomeneus. They shook their lots in a bronze helmet, and Teukros' jumped out first. He let fly a strong shot, but did not promise a sacrifice to Apollo, and so missed the bird, for Apollo begrudged him that, but did snap the string with his arrow, and the pigeon soared swiftly up toward the sky, while the string dangled toward the ground. The Achaians thundered approval. Meriones in a fury of haste caught the bow from Teukros' hand, and readied his arrow, and promised Apollo a grand sacrifice of first-born lambs. High up under the clouds he saw the wild pigeon and as she circled he struck her in the body under the wing. The shaft passed clean through and out of her and dropped back to stick in the ground next to his foot, but the bird dropped onto the top of the mast. Her head drooped and the beating wings went slack and the spirit of life fled from her and she dropped down from the mast, and the people were astonished. Then Meriones gathered up all ten double axes, and Teukros carried the single axes back to his ship.

Next Achilles carried into the assembly and set out a long spear and an untarnished cauldron with flowery designs on it, worth an ox. And the spear-throwers stood up. The son of Atreus, king Agamemnon rose, and so did Meriones, squire of Idomeneus. But Achilles said to them:

"King Agamemnon, since we all know that you surpass all others and are the best by far of spear-throwers, take the cauldron, but let us give the spear to Meriones, if you agree."

So he spoke, and Agamemnon, the lord of men, did not disagree.

Now the games broke up, and the people scattered, each to his own ship. The rest of them thought of their dinners and of sweet sleep, but Achilles alone still wept as he remembered his beloved companion. All-conquering sleep would not come to him, and he tossed from side to side in longing for Patroklos.

2 Homer, *Odyssey* 8.97–253

ca. 725 B.C.

Odysseus, in the tenth year of wandering in his attempt to return home to Ithaka after the fall of Troy, has been washed up on the shore of a strange land. He is treated hospitably by the native Phaeacians, who inquire nothing of him, and after a meal the bard, Demodokos, entertains them with songs of the Trojan War which evoke memories and tears from Odysseus. His host, the gracious Alkinoös, notes this, and speaks:

"Leaders and councillors of the Phaeacians, we have had enough now of feasting and of lyre-singing which properly accompanies an abundant table.

Let us instead go out and divert ourselves with various athletic contests so that when our guest goes home he will tell his friends how we surpass others in boxing and wrestling and jumping and foot-racing."

So he spoke and went out, and a crowd of thousands followed him, and many sturdy youths stood up as contestants.

The first contest was in running. They sprinted from the *nyssa*, and flew in a cloud of dust across the plain. Klytoneus won by a long way; he left the others behind by the width of a field which a team of mules can plough in a day. Next they tried the painful wrestling, and Euryalos was the best of all. Amphialos jumped the furthest, and Elatreus won easily with the *diskos*. In the boxing the winner was Laodamas son of Alkinoös. When all had enjoyed the contests, Laodamas said to the young men:

"Hey gang! Let's go ask the stranger if he knows any sport and can show us something. He's well built, and from the look of his thighs and calves, as well as his arms and neck, he must be strong. He's not so old either, although he does look worn-out by hardships. There's nothing like the sea for knocking the stuffing out of the strongest man."

Euryalos answered him and said:

"Okay, Laodamas, you've made your point. Now let's see you do something about it."

Hearing this, Laodamas went into the middle of the crowd and addressed Odysseus:

"Won't you too, sir, try your hand at some contest, that is, if you know any, but you have the look of an athlete to me. There is no greater fame for a man than that which he wins with his footwork or the skill of his hands. Have a try now and put away your cares. Your journey home is near at hand, and we have already prepared for you a ship and crew."

Crafty Odysseus replied to him:

"Laodamas, why do you young chaps mock me with such an invitation? My heart is more set on grief than games, for I have toiled long and suffered much. I am here in your gathering only as a suppliant to get my passage home from your king and your people."

Then Euryalos interrupted and sneered at him:

"As I see it, stranger, you're no good at sports like a real man. You remind me of a master peddling sailors, one who trades from port to port with thoughts for nothing but cargoes and loads and especially profits. You're no athlete."

Crafty Odysseus glared at him and thundered:

"You're no gentleman, sir! You behave like a clod! It is so true that the Gods do not give total grace, a complete endowment of both beauty and wit,

to all men alike. There will be one man who is less than average in build, and yet the Gods will so crown his words with a flower of beauty that all who hear him are moved. When he holds forth in public it is with assurance, yet with so sweet a modesty that it makes him shine out above the general run of men. Another man will be as handsome as the Gods, yet will lack that strand of charm twined into his words. Take yourself, for example: a masterpiece in body which not even a god could improve, but empty in the head. Your sneering made my heart beat faster. I am no ninny at sports, as you would have it. Indeed I think I was among the best in my time, but now I exist in pain and misery, having risked and endured much in the wars of men and the wilds of the sea. Yet despite the ravages of these evil things I will try your tests of strength. Your sneer has galled me and your words have stung me."

He spoke and sprang to his feet still clothed and seized a *diskos* which was bigger and heavier than those the Phaeacians had been hurling among themselves. Whirling, he hurled it from his mighty hand, and the stone whistled through the air. Those Phaeacians of the long oars, those master mariners, hit the dirt beneath the hurtling stone which soared so freely from the hero's hand that it overpassed the marks of every other. And Athena, now disguised as a Phaeacian, set the *terma* and called out:

"Even a blind man, sir, could judge your throw by feeling for it; it is not mixed in with the others, but far out in front. You may take heart from this contest, for no Phaeacian will come close, much less beat you."

So she spoke, and Odysseus was cheered to have found a friend in that crowd, and with lighter heart he said to the Phaeacians:

"Now then, young sports, match this throw, and as soon as you do, I'll throw another even longer. For the rest, let anyone whose spirit or temper prompts him step out and take me on in boxing or wrestling or foot-racing, or whatever. You have worked me up to such a pitch that I shall not flinch from anything, nor refuse a bout to any single Phaeacian, except my host Laodamas. Only a dimwitted fool would compete with his benefactor. To challenge one's host, while being kindly treated in a foreign land, would be to cut off one's nose to spite one's face. But I refuse no other man, nor dodge the polished bow, and I can send my spear further than others can shoot their arrows. I fear only that in the footraces some of the Phaeacians may beat me, for I have been shamefully mauled by constant waves on a bare ship. The joints of my knees are therefore feeble."

So he spoke, and all were hushed in silence. Then Alkinoös answered and said:

"Sir, what you have said to us is not unwelcome, for it is natural that you

should want to show your *arete* since you were angered by that man standing up in the gathering and sneering at you as if at your *arete*, although no man in his right senses would do so. But come now, listen and remember the abilities which Zeus has given us so that you can relate them to some other hero when you dine in your own house with your wife and children. I confess that we are not polished fighters with our fists, nor wrestlers, but we can run swiftly and are experts on shipboard. We love eating and harp-playing and dancing and changes of clothes and hot baths and our beds. But come, let us have the best dancers of the Phaeacians dance before us so that when our guest goes home he will tell his friends how we surpass others in seamanship and running and dancing and singing."