

Was the Roman Gladiator an Athlete?

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Historians traditionally exclude Roman gladiators from their books on ancient sport.¹ They classify their *munera* as shows or spectacles, and they relegate gladiators to the category of servants or entertainers. The term “athlete” is usually reserved for contestants in Olympic-style *agones*, and the shining ideal of Classical Greek athletics consigns the events of the Roman arena to darkness. After pointing out in *Athletics in the Ancient World* that Hellenic contests exist for the sake of the competitors, who are free citizens, Gardiner sniffs, “The Roman games are *ludi*, amusements, entertainments, and the performers are slaves or hirelings; they exist for the spectators” (10: p. 119). Is this exclusion justified? Few modern athletes have a problem with being “hirelings”; some actually cultivate their status as entertainers. Today, philosophers of sport tend to be more open about what counts as sport and who can be called an athlete. Even those who deny, for example, that so-called professional wrestling is a sport may still be willing to call its participants athletes.

Nevertheless, there is something significant about the distinction between Rome’s gritty gladiators and Greece’s idealized Olympians. It is a distinction based on the Hellenic association of athletics with virtue² and the background assumptions about sport made by those who still buy into that association. It is significant because the ancient Greek use of athletics as character education serves as a foundation and defense of sport in education today. Romans generally rejected athletics as part of education for the upper classes (18: p. 258), so those looking at sport to cultivate virtue today will understandably adopt Greek and reject Roman models of sport. Furthermore, their reasons for doing so will revolve around moral principles such as meritocracy, responsibility, and respect for persons. Is the rejection of gladiators and their *munera* justified according to these criteria?

The ancient Olympics were open only to free men and boys of Greek descent who swore an oath not to sin against the games; victory was viewed as a confirmation of aristocracy.³ Greek gymnasias were usually publicly funded educational centers, and athletic training was thought to cultivate and reveal the physical and moral virtues that made worthy citizens.⁴ Gladiators, in contrast, occupied the class of moral outcasts called *infamia*, and they were apparently forced to kill for entertainment. But do these historical facts about athlete exploitation, forced participation, and the constant threat of death amount to a cogent argument against *munera* being sport? And even if they show that *munera* fail, when compared with Olympic-style sport, to respect the dignity and autonomy of their contestants, does it follow that gladiators should not be considered athletes as capable of virtue as their Greek counterparts?

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Roman Stoicism says no. For the Stoics, the gladiators would be capable of the virtue associated with Greek athletes even while the *munera* fall short of Hellenic standards for sport. Virtue in the Stoic sense does not depend on external circumstances; it requires independence from them. In fact the gladiators' general lack of personal wealth, public honor, and political power actually makes them symbols of the freedom from worldly concerns touted by the Stoics. Fair contests, just compensation, and appropriate honors have no effect on an athlete's virtue, which is the only true good from the Stoic point of view. Second, the Stoic idea of responsibility depends not on external freedoms but on internal liberty—that is, one's voluntary acceptance of fated external constraints. Freedom from compulsion, therefore, is not a necessary condition for voluntary (and therefore virtuous) action. Finally, the violence and risk of death faced by gladiators is not considered disrespectful but rather an occasion to face with dignity a simple mortal reality. In fact, the willingness to accept death before dishonor is a Stoic virtue, as much as the willingness to sacrifice one's life for the people is a Roman virtue.

Using the writings of Seneca, Epictetus, Cicero, and others, I will argue that under Stoicism and in the context of contemporary Roman values, gladiators were capable of transcending their base social status and exercising the virtue associated with Olympic-style athletes. Gladiatorial combat, however, should not be esteemed as a good athletic contest because it purposely undermines competitors' autonomy and dignity. Unlike Greek athletics, which were designed to cultivate virtue, the *munera* demanded Stoic wisdom to navigate their flaws. Even as we admiringly call some modern athletes "gladiators," we should do what we can to prevent modern sports from resembling the brutal *munera*. Gladiators' virtue may shine through their predicament, but it does not justify that predicament.

1. Athletes or Entertainers?

Sport historians' distinction between the Hellenic *agones* and Roman *ludi* does not reflect the ancient meanings of those words, but it does reveal a legitimate concern about the *munera*'s function as entertainment for the masses and their related propensity to disrespect competitors' autonomy. Although both *munera* and the Olympic Games most likely have their origins in funereal sacrifice, the Olympics retained a religious purpose while the *munera* became expensive gifts from ambitious politicians to the Roman masses.⁵ This shift motivated these so-called *editores* to exploit competitors and compromise principles of fair contest in the name of money, entertainment, and political power. Their Olympic counterparts, the *hellenodikae*, were in contrast renowned for their fairness and dedication.⁶ Harris compares the *munera* to modern (European) football, which he berates as "a spectacle for mass entertainment provided by highly paid performers in a scene where money is the sole consideration" (14: p. 73). Craig compares them to the 21st-century phenomenon of professional wrestling: "Like the Colosseum games," he says, "it is hugely popular and sticks to a fairly strict script, and its practitioners are strong and athletic. But it is not a sport. It is entertainment" (6: p. xi).

If *munera* are considered shows and not sport, it follows that gladiators would not be athletes but entertainers—a status so degrading in Rome that it seems to render obsolete the traditional association of victory with virtue.⁷ Although I know

of no evidence that their fights were ever scripted, gladiators did share the debased class of entertainers. Barton describes the conventional Roman idea of a gladiator as “crude, loathsome, doomed, lost . . . utterly debased by fortune, a slave, a man altogether without worth and dignity, almost without humanity” (2: p. 12). Whereas Greek athletes were usually respected citizens, gladiators were generally slaves or criminals condemned *ad ludum* to the life of the arena. Although some free men and women,⁸ including members of the nobility, did elect to become gladiators, they were rare exceptions who merely prove the rule of gladiators’ social marginality.⁹ Even the wealthiest participants swore the gladiator’s oath (*sacramentum gladiatorium*),¹⁰ which amounted to renouncing one’s rights as Roman citizen.¹¹ To become a gladiator was effectively to adopt the social status of a slave.

Its competitors almost completely without rights and its purpose political rather than religious or educational, one could hardly expect the Roman *munus* to adhere to such Olympic-style principles of fair contest as selecting matches by lot. Because top gladiators commanded higher fees and were worth more to their owners, there was a financial disincentive to pit them against one another—especially in fights to the death. The *editores*’ inclination to maximize entertainment and minimize costs is luridly evidenced by the gruesome public executions that so disgusted Seneca.¹² But these uneven contests between weakened convicts and hungry lions were abundantly less popular than gladiator fights. Although the public apparently tolerated the fact that gladiators routinely fought unequally armed,¹³ they generally insisted that they be evenly matched—precisely because this was a precondition for the display of virtue.¹⁴ Says Seneca, “a gladiator reckons it ignominious to be paired with his inferior in skill and considers him to have conquered without glory who has conquered without peril.”¹⁵ Even in notoriously stratified Rome, the *editor*’s motivations to compromise fair contest were often thwarted by the values and expectations of the masses.

The audience’s interest in virtue demonstrated through fair contest—and their unorthodox belief that a slave could achieve it—is further illustrated by the etiquette of the arena.¹⁶ Fights generally ended when one gladiator signaled concession or was brought to the ground by his or her opponent. At this point, the victorious gladiator was to look to the *editor* for the signal to kill or spare the loser. In cases of exceptional valor, the *editor* might also award the winner his or her freedom, a prize symbolized by a wooden sword, or *rudis*.¹⁷ Of course the crowd was more than willing to offer their vociferous advice on these decisions. If a loser had fought valiantly, they would call out “*Mitte!*” (“Let him go!”); if they thought he lacked valor, they would call for his death (30: p. 163). Given the *editor*’s political ambitions, he usually indulged their wishes,¹⁸ but at least one emperor complained about the mob’s willingness to frivolously squander another man’s wealth.¹⁹ Veteran gladiators with vociferous fan clubs, meanwhile, were more likely to survive occasional losses. In any case, it was the *editor* who was said to have killed the defeated gladiator, not the winning fighter who actually performed the act. Junkelmann (16: p. 68) takes this fact to be what distinguishes gladiatorial contests from combat sports such as boxing. Competitors decided the contest, but politicians meted out the grim wages of victory and defeat.

All this demonstrates that even as the *munera* exploited servile gladiators for the political ends of the rich, even as they stripped the skilled fighters of Roman rights and (more seriously) social dignity, even as the *editor* controlled that crucial

decision to live or die, there was one thing that could not be taken from a right-minded gladiator: virtue. To put a Stoic spin on the old phrase about winning: Virtue isn't everything; it's the only thing. At least it is the only thing that matters to a Stoic. "Each man has a character of his own choosing," says Seneca, "It is chance or fate that decides his choice of job" (25: XCIV). Even the Roman audience seems to have recognized and appreciated virtue in these outcasts of the arena. According to Kyle (17: pp. 48–49), the idea that slaves could have virtue entered the Roman psyche as early as 216 BCE after the defeat at Cannae in which oath-bound slaves had fought more effectively than free men. Unlike the individualistic Hellenic ideal of *areté* exemplified by the defiant Achilles, the Roman idea of military *virtus* was grounded in strict obedience to one's general. As Seneca observes, a gladiator's subjection to the will of his commander actually enhanced his status as an example of Roman virtue.²⁰

It is telling that gladiators earned the same symbols of victory — palm branches and crowns of vegetation — that were presented to athletes in the Panhellenic games (16: p. 38). There were also cash prizes, which became the private property of gladiators, even if they were slaves (16: p. 69). Archaeological evidence suggests that some gladiators had elaborate funerals. But the glory, the honors, and even the cash would hold little value for a Stoic gladiator. Rather, the gladiators' relative poverty and detachment would be valued from the Stoic point of view as liberating them from society's corrupting distractions. According to Nussbaum (20: p. 421), Seneca believed that it is our attachment to scarce goods and the resulting fights over them that cause disturbance in our souls. Virtue is all the gladiators had, but virtue is all a person needs for happiness.

Indeed, Stoic therapy is most indicated where external conditions are unreliable as indicators of virtue. Stoic writers — including Cicero, Seneca, and Pliny — came to regard gladiators as evidence that social conventions about human worth and inequality were unsound, a therapeutic idea for struggling Romans.²¹ In a world in which, as Epictetus observes,²² climbing the social ladder meant bending down to kiss someone's feet, the gladiator emerges as a paradoxical figure whose lack of autonomy and social status comes to symbolize freedom, opportunity, and old-fashioned Roman values.²³ Ironically, it was the *editores*' propensity to ignore gladiators' inherent independence and moral worth that put them in the position to affirm their virtue. As Wiedemann sums it up, "The criminal condemned *ad ludos* was a socially 'dead man' who had a chance of coming alive again" (28: p. 105).²⁴ In effect, the *munera* unmasked the pretense of social meritocracy even as they bolstered the *editores*' social standing and political power.

2. Slaves or Volunteers?

The gladiators' display of virtuous behavior in the arena does not imply that these actions were done by choice and, therefore, evidence of actual virtue. Ancient theories of virtue, including the aforementioned Roman *virtus*, would, like modern theories of ethical merit, seem to require free agency.²⁵ Gladiators were compelled to fight, if not by their masters then by their oath, or by the fact that someone was charging at them with a knife. Ancient Olympic athletes, in contrast, volunteered not only for the contest but also for a mandatory month-long training camp just before

the games.²⁶ Even contemporary analytic definitions of sport usually require voluntary participation or at least voluntary acceptance of the rules.²⁷ Can virtuous actions compelled by the constructed threat of death really be evidence of virtue?

The situation varied over time, but few of the fighters in Rome's arenas can be assumed to have been present by choice. Most of the volunteers, or *autocrati*, were probably freed gladiators who could find no other means to support themselves.²⁸ Volunteers from the aristocracy were rare, and emperors who took to the arena seem to have been indulging in fantasy rather than subjecting themselves to its real risks and dangers. Although the emperor Commodus, Marcus Aurelius's son, was known for his visits to the gladiators' school and boasted of having fought over 1,000 times, it is unlikely that these fights were authentic.²⁹ In any event, the fact that some people chose the life of the gladiator does not erase the worry about voluntary participation and its connection to virtue. The consequences of withdrawal from the contest, even when possible, were nothing less than deadly.

For the Stoic idea of virtue, however, free choice to participate is hardly an issue. Stoics believe that external circumstances are determined; therefore, moral worth derives from internal events—especially the adoption of certain attitudes. “Ask not that events happen as you will,” counsels Epictetus, “but let your will be that events should happen as they do, and you shall have peace” (7: #8). One reason that Stoics were willing to consider even enslaved gladiators symbols of virtue is that their enslavement was only a more explicit version of the slavery we all face. Making the point that slaves are human beings who share the same roof as their owners and should be regarded as friends, Seneca reminds his fellow citizens, “Strictly speaking they're our *fellow* slaves, if you once reflect that fortune has as much power over us as over them” (25: XLVII). It is no mistake that the goddess of the arena was Nemesis, who represents the inexplicable effects of mysterious, uncontrollable forces.³⁰

Of course, the Stoic ideas of determinism and slavery were more sophisticated than popular beliefs about fortune. The slavery condemned by Stoicism was self-imposed, caused by desires for things outside a person's control. Says the erstwhile slave Epictetus, “Let him . . . who wishes to be free not wish for anything or avoid anything that depends on others; or else he is bound to be a slave” (7: #14). Not only were enslaved gladiators cut off from the things most people desire (wealth, status, power); self-reliance was necessary for their survival. The gladiator who wished only for what he or she could control was, in the Stoic sense, completely free. Therefore those gladiators who accepted their role and chose to fight achieved liberty, while those who lusted for escape were trapped by their own desires. Gladiators may have had no choice but to fight, but as soon as they *chose* that lone option their participation became voluntary. Perhaps, like Camus's Sisyphus, we should imagine them happy.³¹

The Stoics' is a paradoxical sort of freedom, but if determinism is true, it is the only sort available to any of us. The appropriate attitude is extremely difficult to achieve, and the Stoics believed that it would take extensive philosophical training. But in the end it is a matter of facing up to the truth about fate and striving for virtue within the prescribed limits of self-sufficient activity. In a sense, the Stoics see fate as something we accept just like players accept the rules of a game. And we all have a particular fate, whether it is to be a slave like Epictetus or an emperor like Marcus Aurelius. Says Epictetus,

Remember you are an actor in a play, and the Playwright chooses the manner of it: if he wants it short, it is short; if long, it is long. If he wants you to act a poor man you must act the part with all your powers; [likewise] if your part be a cripple or a magistrate or a plain man. For your business is to act the character that is given you and act it well; the choice of the cast is Another's. (7: #17)

The Stoic athlete's virtue, then, depends not on the choice to play a particular game but, rather, on the choice to play well whatever game she finds herself playing. It is not unlike the situation of a soldier involuntarily drafted into a war. He may fight valiantly and virtuously while regarding his presence on the battlefield as a morally neutral matter of fate. Of course our *common* fate as human beings is death, and that fate is not just something to be accepted but something potentially within our power. Just as the voluntary participant always has the option to quit playing, the Stoic sage always has the option to quit living. Says Seneca, "No one has power over us when death is within our power" (25: XCI). Indeed, suicidal gladiators are Seneca's favorite examples of courageous expressions of virtue and freedom (25: LXX).

3. Heroes or Murderers?

Considered against the idealized backdrop of classical Greece, however, suicide seems rather an extreme option for expressing a person's freedom. The looming risk of death and dismemberment appears to push *munera* outside the realm of sport all by itself. How can killing cultivate virtue? Even the most brutal of ancient Greek sports discouraged fights to the death; in one case a victory crown was awarded posthumously to a boxer who was killed by his opponent.³² Survival is simply too serious a concern to be made into a game.³³ Poliakoff excludes gladiators from his book *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* on the grounds that criteria for sporting success should be "different from those that mark success in everyday life."³⁴ Because war was part of everyday life in antiquity, he decides that "a gladiator fighting to kill or disable his opponent and save himself in any manner possible is not participating in a sport, but in a form of warfare for spectators" (24: p. 7). Whether the brutality of the *munera* was too different from or too much like everyday life in antiquity, did it keep gladiators from being true athletes?

Although losing gladiators were not always killed, few modern athletes, even in the so-called "risk sports," risk death like they did. In the first century of the Common Era, typical gladiators survived fewer than 10 contests, although some survived more than 100 and others were successful enough to earn their freedom (17: p. 86). In succeeding centuries the odds got worse. Contests fought to the death became more popular as the political stakes rose and the public experienced what some contemporary philosophers called a "degeneration of taste."³⁵ Barton has speculated that the Roman demand for brutal and bloody spectacles was ironically a result of posh living conditions and ease of life among Roman gentry.³⁶ What is most troubling about the Roman public's alleged blood thirst is that it seems to reflect disrespect for anything like a concept of human rights.³⁷ In discussing the problem of violence in modern sport, both Simon (26: p. 108) and Parry (21: p. 221) emphasize the importance of respect for persons. Forcing participation denies respect for the autonomy of competitors, but expecting competitors not only to

risk their own lives but also to take the lives of their opponents at the behest of the sponsors seems to deny basic human dignity.

To the Stoic mind, however, death is a common human reality that must be confronted consciously. Says Seneca, "Death is not an evil. What is it then? The one law mankind has that is free of all discrimination" (25: CXXIII). Being forced to kill and facing death yourself are, for the Stoic, prime occasions to demonstrate human dignity. Gladiators exhibited their readiness to die by baring their torsos in the arena (16: p. 47). The *munus*, according to Wiedemann (28: p. 97), was a ritualization of the encounter with death designed to put "death in its place." Gladiators entered the arena through the gate of life and faced the opposite gate of death; the battle took place, symbolically, in the space between life and death.³⁸ The gladiators' status as "socially dead" renders more dramatic the struggle to redeem themselves through valor. According to Auguet, Romans did not regard the confrontation with death as undignified or even an act of "exceptional heroism; it was the normal way of proving oneself a Roman" (1: p. 198). Threatening the lives of opponents was not disrespectful, because it was the risk of death that made their redemption possible.³⁹ "Death summons us all indiscriminately," advises Seneca; "Take courage from this despair."⁴⁰

The gladiators' willingness to risk and even sacrifice their lives in the arena could also be interpreted as a service to Rome that elevated their status to sacred levels. Barton (2: p. 23) observes that Romans expected the same willingness from gladiators that they did from sacrificial animals, who were led to the altar by a slack rope because any show of resistance was considered a bad omen. By seeming actually to take pleasure in mortal struggle, gladiators signaled their adoption of the expected attitude.⁴¹ Furthermore, the gladiators' facing of death recalled the Roman tradition of *devotio*, in which a military commander sacrificed his own life in order to save his troops.⁴² The mortal risks of *munera* reflect the Stoic paradox that an honorable person's suicide validates his or her worthiness to live. It was precisely a gladiator's courage or lack thereof that motivated the decision to end or spare his or her life. Stoic happiness, after all, is a matter of virtue and wisdom, and, explains Cicero, "Wisdom her very self upon occasion bids the Wise to leave her" (5: III.61).

Conclusion

With the image of the gladiator as a sacrificial victim courageously facing danger for the greater good of Rome, we have come full circle to the most ancient origins of sport itself. Our philosophical concerns about the exploitation, lack of autonomy, and mortal risk faced by contestants were serious enough to challenge the notion that *munera* lived up to the Hellenic ideal of virtue-cultivating sport. A closer look at the cultural context, however, especially the contemporary philosophy of Roman Stoicism, repositions these concerns. From this perspective, the gladiator may have not only displayed athletic virtues but also exemplified a Stoic ideal. Says Cicero,

The soul that is altogether courageous and great is marked above all by two characteristics: one of these is indifference to outward circumstances; for such a person cherishes the conviction that nothing but moral goodness and

propriety deserves to be either admired or wished for or striven after, and that he ought not to be subject to any man or any passion or any accident of fortune. The second characteristic is that, when the soul is disciplined in the way above mentioned, one should do deeds not only great and in the highest degree useful, but extremely arduous and laborious and fraught with danger both to life and to many things that make life worth living. (4: I.66)

Stoicism teaches us to find and cultivate virtue even if fortune lands us in such hostile conditions as the Roman arena. Virtue-loving Stoics who have a choice, however, would be unlikely to participate in or promote Roman *munera*. The Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius's distaste for the *munera* was well known, and he made attempts to limit their scale, if not to eliminate them.⁴³

The conclusion that the gladiator was an athlete whose contest fails as sport contains, I think, two important lessons for sport philosophers in the modern world. First, we should be aware of the limitations imposed by our cultural bias and philosophical assumptions. A closer look at sports history in context reveals how Stoic philosophy might enable athletes to cultivate virtue despite hostile circumstances. Second, we should also do what we can to recognize and eliminate similarly hostile circumstances in contemporary sports. To what extent do entertainment concerns dictate professional sport today? In what sense are child and college athletes exploited? How do financial need and poor doping control challenge the ideal of voluntary participation? At what point do the risks of sport outstrip the benefits to athletes and society at large? Stoicism helps individuals transcend unjust circumstances, but it also compels us to labor for justice. Let us meet our challenge with the courage of Roman gladiators.⁴⁴

Notes

1. For example: Gardiner, Harris, Guttmann, Craig, Poliakoff. An interesting exception is Golden (11, p. ix), who defends his inclusion by pointing to the contests' unpredictability, regulations, skills, rewards, and use of athletic language. The issue remains controversial, however, as evidenced by Plecket's challenge to Golden in his review: "One may wonder whether non-free people, who were *forced* to perform in the arena, are to be put on a par with *free*-born athletes who voluntarily participated in games from which slaves were regularly excluded" (23: p. 277). In any case, the majority of books on ancient sport focus exclusively on the Greeks.
2. There is some controversy over translating the Greek *areté* or Latin *virtus* as "virtue," but I think that in this context I can accommodate historical and cultural differences among conceptions of virtue while making general claims about the educational aims of sport.
3. This is not to say that participants were exclusively members of the upper classes, as some early Olympic historians once claimed. Rather, athletic success was so socially prestigious and financially lucrative that it effectively made one a member of the aristocracy. See Young (29: ch. VII).
4. The specific arguments for gymnastics in education made in Plato's *Republic* (Books III and VII) were more or less reflected in ancient Greek practice. See Marrou (18: pp. 38–45).
5. The literal meaning of the Latin term *munera* is duties or obligations, and the historical origin of gladiatorial games, just like that of the Olympic games, lies in a kind of duty or sacrifice made as part of a funeral. According to Wiedemann (28: p. 5), the first Roman *munus* was part of the funeral of Junius Brutus Pera in 264 BCE, where three pairs of gladiators fought to the death on the Forum Boarium. The sacrifice of human blood at a funeral was taken to assuage the gods of

death and to ease the transition to the afterlife (2: p. 13). But the gladiator fights at Pera's funeral turned the occasion from private to public, thereby also serving the political ambitions of his sons. By 105 BCE, Roman consuls were offering official gladiatorial games to the people (8: p. 41). In this way the *munus* strayed from its origin as a duty to the dead and eventually came to be understood as a duty to the public owed by Roman leaders (9: p. 10).

6. The Olympic officials' reputation for fairness can be attributed to their being selected by lot to perform what they regarded as a religious duty. Miller (19: p. 19) makes much of their fairness and objectivity.

7. One must neither underestimate the social stratification of Roman society nor the demeaning attitude toward public performance. It is no mistake that being a gladiator was considered a form of punishment. The Colosseum itself was segregated according to social class, and stage acting was roughly on a professional par with prostitution. Even the charioteers racing on the Circus Maximus were generally slaves or foreigners. The nobles and emperors who entered the arena did not alter the general disdain for gladiators. See Kyle (17: p. 81).

8. Says Friedlander, "Women often fought in the arena: in 64, under Nero, even noble women; as late as 200 AD the practice had to be formally prohibited" (8: p. 43).

9. Says Wiedemann,

The gladiator's place at the furthest margin of the Roman social world implied that, if that world were properly ordered, [free men would not have competed as gladiators]. A person with standing in the community who wished to fight as a gladiator not out of necessity but for pleasure was openly and demonstratively threatening the status-distinctions on which Roman society was based, and claiming that he was beyond the reach of the laws which successive emperors tried to codify these distinctions. Paradoxically, it was those who held the imperial office who were the most tempted to demonstrate that they were above the laws applying to ordinary members of the elite by participating in gladiatorial contests. Very few of them went as far as Nero did, and broke the laws forbidding senators to appear on the stage as actors; but several appeared in the arena. (28: p. 102)

10. Namely, to be "burned by fire, bound in chains, to be beaten, to die by the sword" (17: p. 87).

11. See Wiedemann (28: p. 113). Zoll (30: p. 211) adds the example of a senatorial decree from 19 CE that denies normal burial rights to volunteer gladiators, probably as a way to discourage volunteers.

12. See Seneca (25: VII), but we should not confuse these shows with the true gladiator contests, nor should we confuse Seneca's condemnation of them with a disdain for gladiators (as we shall see, he admired them in many ways). Even as these cheaper and more lurid shows filled midday hours when the stands were relatively empty, the gladiators remained the key attraction.

13. As in pro wrestling, there were specific "types" who fought with different weapons and armor. For example the *retarius*, lightly armed with a trident and net, was a favorite opponent of the *murmillio*, who fought heavily armed with a sword and shield. Because these types represented Roman enemies, but possibly also regions from which members of the audience hailed, the combat between them added greatly to spectator interest. It is unclear the extent to which unequal arms unbalanced the gladiatorial contest; I know of no account that suggests one type was consistently more likely to win than another. The *retarius*' lack of armor, for example, made him quicker than his opponent. It also seems possible that each gladiator may have chosen the type he specialized in, much as modern athletes choose their particular positions. Guttman (13: p. 29) offers this unequal armor as evidence against the *munera* being sport, whereas Junkelmann (16: p. 47) points to an increasing standardization in the armor and pairings of types. Junkelmann also notes that gladiators always fought in pairs except in two-on-one contests in which the single opponent was elevated on a bridge and given missiles to compensate for his disadvantage (16: p. 66).

14. Says Barton, “The concept of ‘the equal opponent’ was fundamental to the Roman warrior’s concept of glory. As in a modern boxing match or a bullfight, in an unequal fight both the contestants were debased regardless of their rank and skills” (2: p. 28).

15. Seneca, *On Providence* 3.4, quoted in reference 2: p. 31.

16. According to Junkelman (16: p. 67) the *munera* did have rules, although we know few of the details. The rules must be conjectured from what we know about common practice from art, literature, and archaeology.

17. Says Barton,

It was not only wounded, exhausted, or demoralized gladiator anxiously petitioning for grace who, frozen in anticipation, expected the sign of the audience’s pleasure; the victorious gladiator was equally obliged to attend respectfully and patiently the *editor*’s signal to kill. The etiquette of the arena demanded that the victor suspend his attack and regard the *editor* eye to eye until he received the sign. (2: p. 19)

18. Says Wiedemann,

Although Rome had effectively ceased to be a city-state before the first [recorded gladiatorial contest] in 264 BCE, the city-state principle that sovereignty ultimately resided with the body of adult male citizens was adhered to even under the emperors. Consequently it was not the *editor* of the games, even if that *editor* was the emperor himself, but the assembled people that decided whether a defeated gladiator had shown enough courage to be granted his life, and whether a successful gladiator deserved to be restored to the privileges of citizenship. (28: p. 165)

19. Zoll (30: p. 165) explains that the wooden sword, or *rudis*, symbolizing freedom was sometimes given to a gladiator. But the *editor* who bestowed it was obligated to reimburse the gladiator’s owner for his worth. Says Junkelmann, “Hadrian was said to have admonished the clamoring crowd, saying it was not for them to tell him to set free another man’s property” (16: p. 69).

20. Seneca, *De providentia* 4.4-16. See also references 2: p. 20 and 9: p. 8; the latter calls the gladiator “an idealized and distilled version of the military ethic of *Romanitas*.”

21. Says Auguet,

For [Cicero, Seneca and Pliny] the moral value of the *munera* lay in the fact that they effected a *transmutation* which no Roman would have thought possible. By their means servile bodies, lacking souls, attained to a standard of behavior that their very nature seemed to rule out. This made the slave the equal not only of the free man but of the hero to whom a particular *type* of outlook was by nature proper. This could literally be said to liberate him from his condition, which was not that of a man but of a chattel or beast. It is quite clearly this paradox, this inversion of categories that struck men of antiquity, insofar as they showed any interest in this question. (1: p. 197)

22. Epictetus, *Enchiridion* (7: #25). As Barton puts it, “One was compelled to elevate oneself by prostration, by kissing feet and other extremities” (2: p. 28).

23. See Kyle: “A victorious gladiator’s prize money was like the *peculium* or private money of a slave; by acquiring enough of it one could buy his freedom. Gladiators could marry, have children, make inheritance arrangements, and even own slaves” (17: p. 84).

24. Barton (2: p. 35) calls the gladiator a “metaphor of empowerment” and the *munus* a “ritual of empowerment”; it created the opportunity for redemption, “a means of gaining honor within a dishonorable situation” (p. 35).

25. See, for example, Loland (12: p. 109).

26. A fact that may account for the relative wealth of the participants, because it would be difficult for members of the lower classes to devote a full month to full-time training. See Miller (19, pp. 113–114).

27. Suits's (27: p. 11) definition of sport includes the athlete's voluntary adoption of the "lusory attitude," namely, the acceptance of the constitutive rules just because they make the activity possible. Huizinga says that play (which includes sport) is "first and foremost . . . voluntary activity" (15: p. 7).

28. See Kyle:

The vast majority of performers in spectacles of death were not present because of "their own free will." Non-citizens and lowly subjects were forced into the arena by sale, crime, or capture, and of those who survived to gain their freedom many probably reenlisted, ironically, to earn a livelihood. (17: p. 81)

29. Says Friedlander of Commodus's fights,

Naturally he always won; according to Dio, he fought publicly with blunt weapons, and, to his own great pride, left-handed, as a *secutor*, against troop masters and gladiators . . . Dio also mentions that the senators (and Dio, as such) publicly had to applaud him and wish him well. (8: p. 50)

Commodus died mysteriously while spending the night in a gladiator school, not during a fight in the Colosseum as the movie *Gladiator* suggests.

30. According to Futrell (9: p. 118), worshippers accepted their own powerlessness but attempted through ritual to persuade the goddess to interfere with destiny on their behalf.

31. Albert Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* (3) retells the story of the mythical character Sisyphus, who was condemned for eternity to roll a boulder up a hill just to have it roll back down. Sisyphus manages to "scorn" this fate by choosing his punishment. Camus concludes that we should imagine Sisyphus happy.

32. See Miller (19: p. 56), who quotes Pausanias 8.40.4–5.

33. Even Suits's (27: p. 15) example of the dedicated race-car driver who breaks the rules of his sport in order to avoid killing a child, who sets the limits of seriousness in sport at concerns about life and death. How can a contest that makes its lusory goal at best personal survival and at worst the killing of one's opponent be considered sport?

34. Poliakoff's definition recalls Huizinga's (15: p. 8) second characterization of play as distinct from ordinary life.

35. According to Friedlander the spectacles of gladiators and *venationes* were condemned by the educated. "A Neo-Pythagorean, a zealot against men, says that the degeneration of taste infected the other senses, and they no longer took pleasure in dances, pictures and statues, but in death and wounds and fights as the most precious spectacle" (8: p. 85).

36. See Barton:

For those who lived in a world in which everything outside the arena was a loathsome and bitter burlesque, the gladiator was a living symbol of redemption and self-vindication, the "moment of truth" in the arena focused and intensified "reality" beyond anything experienced outside. (2: p. 46)

37. Friedlander accounts for the brutality of the games by pointing out that men were divided into those who had rights and those who did not, the fact of habit, and the effect of splendor. "In ancient Rome down to very late times there was no idea of the rights of man, of the sanctity of life, or the thought for its preservation. International law was almost non-existent" (8: p. 78).

38. See Zoll (30: p. 161). Plass confirms the munera's function of causing reflection about death: "Varied as private reactions were bound to be, the social meaning was at bottom public realization of the possibility of death, realization in the a literal sense for those fighting, in a richer social sense for those watching" (22: p. 21).

39. See Barton:

The gladiator's struggle was required to be a desperate one in order to gain him honor. Desperation was the condition of his glory. But in that struggle, provided he fought *gladiatorio animo*, with contempt of life and hope, of status and future, he could gain glory. (2: p. 31)

40. *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.59.4-5, quoted in (2: p. 47).

41. See Barton:

The most esteemed gladiators took pains at the very least to appear to take active pleasure in the struggle right up to the moment of death. The greater the benefit, indeed the pleasure, that the gladiator could find (or appear to his audience to find) in his condition, the more complete was his miraculous transformation into an ideal type of soldier/philosopher. (2: p. 20)

42. See Barton. The *devotio* suicides were viewed as "splendid examples of aristocratic self-sacrifice" (2: p. 43).

43. See Wiedemann (28: pp. 134, 139).

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