

Steven Solomon and Mikkos Minos*: Comparing and contrasting the athletic and Olympic traditions of then and now

By: Ashley Westhem

Stanford, Calif.—Coming off of a thrilling experience in the 2012 London Olympics, Australian track star and Stanford University student, Steven Solomon sat down with me to talk about his Olympic journey. Because he is so willing to impart his knowledge regarding the Olympics in Ancient Greece, Mikkos Minos of Athens (circa 350 BC) was asked to weigh in on his time as an Olympic athlete as well.

Why do you put your body through so much stress in the name of competitive sport?

SS: “The reason an athlete pushes himself through such painful barriers is because of the intrinsic values we get from victory. It’s that unknown factor of not knowing what you can accomplish. And that’s something that is true from the first Olympiad to the last Olympiad. I think success motivates people, once you taste a little bit of success you want to continue to strive for more success. You’re dying while you’re doing it, but whilst you’re dying now, you’re going to convert that into performance on the track, or in the gym.”

MM: It is true that success is everything to us as a way to avoid shame and so we push ourselves to extreme limits. I compete for the honor of my family and also to warrant comparison to the gods. Also, competition is the only thing I’ve ever known and athletics has basically been my life since I was a boy. “To be a great athlete in antiquity was above all else to desire to leave one’s name for posterity, to be a figure whose triumphs would be remembered for generations, to be compared with those of the gods” (*Miller/The Victor’s Crown, pg. 320*).

What is the pay-off/motivation behind you competing?

SS: “I’m very self motivated, I want to see how far I can push myself. I’m very competitive; competition is something that is strong and fierce to me. I don’t like losing so I’m going to push myself to make sure that that doesn’t happen. Family and friends are huge support. I love impressing my family and making my friends proud of me. Then you have the extrinsic value [of winning], like the medal itself. You can’t take away an Olympic medal, or that moment of standing up on the podium.”

MM: For me and other ancient athletes it’s more about the intrinsic rewards that matter brought on by the shame culture and the satisfaction in having bragging rights. What you win isn’t as important as how you win and just the fact that you won. But the prizes were similar; both get olive crowns, and the winner’s city (or country) honors them in some way.

Role of Money

SS: “Now there’s a lot more financial support, with sponsorships, so that can be a motivating factor for some people depending on what situation you’re from. Coming from a background where you don’t have to work, you can just focus on your sport, then you are looking at those intrinsic moments [as pay off], but if you’re coming from a low socioeconomic background where your chances for athletics might make the difference for your family having to work on a farm or being able to send a kid to college then [extrinsic pay off is sought after].”

MM: Same thing. Most of the successful athletes in ancient times came from families with money who could afford better training and didn’t need him to work (*Potter/The Victor’s Crown, pg. 152*).

Role of Spectators

SS: “Thinking back to London, there were 80,000 people in the crowd and they all go ballistic. The spectators can motivate you to extreme heights, but they can also throw you off. The crowd can play a two-way sword, depending on how you deal with it. It inspired great performances from me. I really enjoyed the crowd.”

MM: Spectators have an especially huge role in boosting the morale of the under dog: “the crowd splits off its support to the inferior man and they call out encouragement and bob and weave and punch together with him” (*Polybius, Miller/Arete, source 140*). The crowd could also be a distraction though, so it’s important to maintain professionalism and stay focused: “pleasure will be given to those who have a theoretical knowledge of what ought to be done, and not to the crowd” (*Aelian, Miller/Arete, source 206*).

Training requirements for Olympics?

SS: “That’s probably one of the major differences between ancient times and now. Now you’re really training for four years to get to the Olympics. I had an ancient Greek approach to these Olympics because I was injured so I only had 7 months to train for London. But now coming back from London and knowing where I need to go to win, it’s really a four-year endeavor. The ancient Olympics, it was a lot of natural talent that got you there, whereas now you’ve got the natural talent and you have the really hard work that’s going to put you in a position to do well.”

MM: We had to only train for 10 months and that was thought to be a huge commitment to athletes. It was meant to deter the wannabe athletes from competing with the real talent. We would have to swear an oath to the Hellenodikai that we trained for long enough. (*Potter/The Victor’s Crown, pg. 66*)

Oath during the Games? Respect for Games?

SS: "The spirit of the Olympics is always acknowledged at the opening ceremonies. As a team, you sign your country's code of conduct which says you will uphold the values of the Olympics."

MM: "If you have worked so as to be worthy of going to Olympia, if you have done nothing indolent nor ignoble, then take heart and march on; but those who have not so trained may leave and go wherever they like" (*Philostratos, Miller/Arete, source 67*).

How does age/physical maturity play into competition?

SS: "A peak sprinter will hit their best around mid to late 20's. Being a young athlete, how it helped me was I went in there with an 'I can do anything mentality'. But then you have sports like gymnastics. Their bodies are so strong at such a young age that older athletes can't compete."

MM: Age was not so much a criteria for dividing the men from the boys. Physical musculature was much more important. Also, the success of Milo of Kroton as a young boy and then in adulthood might prove that competing as a youth improves ones chances at success later in one's career.

Camaraderie among nations:

SS: "The Olympics throws out all economic barriers, all disagreements and you all just appreciate the beauty of sport. Walking around the village was one of my most favorite things. Everyone is happy; everyone is flamboyant in their country's colors. I felt very comfortable going up and talking to other countries. After competitions it becomes a real social event."

MM: "Plato the son of Ariston shared a tent at Olympia with some men he did not know, nor did they know him. He so gained their affection with his camaraderie, eating with them simply and passing the days with all of them that the strangers felt fortunate that they had met this man" (*Aelian, Miller/Arete, source 144*). There might have been some misunderstandings between foreigners, but there was the truce to allow athletes and convoys to pass that was typically adhered to.

How do you feel about the concept of competing naked?

SS: "That shows how the world has changed technologically. Through each Olympics, the clothes change. It's like the clothes now are so light that it's like you're not even wearing clothes. Technology has played a huge role in advancing the Olympics and in improving performance."

MM: "The custom of competing in the nude is perhaps the most striking aspect of Greek athletics" (*Miller/Arete*, pg. 16), but "the origins of athletic nudity may, in fact, have little to do with sport and a great deal to do with ideas about status" (*Potter/The Victor's Crown*, pg. 77). Our pride in the fitness and beauty of our bodies separated us from the barbarians who deigned to cover themselves up.

Relationship with Trainer

SS: "I was 16 when I started training with Fira Dvoskina. She's like a grandma to me. She's probably one of the most special people in my life. Not only because of what we have achieved together on the track but also how she's developed me as a person. She definitely feels like family to me and I can't express how much I love her."

MM: Those athletes with supportive parents and who cultivated personal relationships with trainers typically experienced the most success. Sometimes homoerotic relationships developed but that wasn't the case in all situations.

Typical diet?

SS: "So that's probably another area where ancient to modern Olympics has changed. In the ancient Olympics they used to eat a lot of red meat, but science and technology has proven that you don't have to just eat red meat. I always carbo load before my races, so I make sure that my body has enough carbohydrates stores since that's my primary fuel, then recovery food is important. As a runner I have to be really careful about anything I put in my body."

MM: So the diet of modern athletes differs with each sport, but basically every ancient athlete had the same diet: lots of meat and bread. Milo of Kroton is the most extreme example of excessive eating. It's rumored that he "used to eat twenty pounds of meat and twenty pounds of bread and wash it down with eight quarts of wine" (*Athenaeus, Miller/Arete, source 163b*), but this was not the case for every athlete.

Would a win mean anything if you hadn't won it fairly?

SS: "I think the value in winning comes from beating a worthy opponent. The feeling of victory comes from beating someone who is working as hard as you, doing what you're doing, but at the end of the day you beat him. I don't understand how people can feel a sense of achievement when they are taking drugs because it's cheating and they're not beating anyone like them because they're putting extra hormones in their body which normal people don't. Cheating will probably always exist in sport because of people's desire to win...it's become an addiction."

MM: I come from an honor, shame culture. Winning is the ultimate assurance of status for an athlete, however the win would mean nothing if it weren't attained by

sheer athletic virtue and triumph. Money sometimes get involved where a trainer or athlete pays an official to make a call in his favor, however, “the Olympics were to be won by strength and speed rather than money” (*Potter/The Victor’s Crown*, pg. 287). Since winning was everything, many victors won by cheating in order to avoid shame, but it was still frowned upon.

So there you have it. Athletics and the Olympics haven’t really changed all that much since its inauguration in ancient Greece. Money, cheating, fame, honor, fans, and nationalism are all aspects of sport that exists today and existed back then. Technology has changed in that nudity is no longer beneficial to shaving a few milliseconds off of a run, and nutrition has evolved immensely, but the basic concepts of winning to prove one’s worth and represent one’s nation still exist today and will most likely continue to exist into the next hundred Olympiads. Sports are a great constant in the world that connects people from all ages and backgrounds no matter the time period.

*Mikkos Minos is not a real person from ancient Greece. I made up his name for the purpose of this project, but his responses reflect those of athletes from his time as compiled from *Arete* and *The Victor’s Crown*, lecture notes, and my general understanding/knowledge gained from this class. Steven Solomon is a real student at Stanford and his responses are direct quotes from an interview I conducted with him.