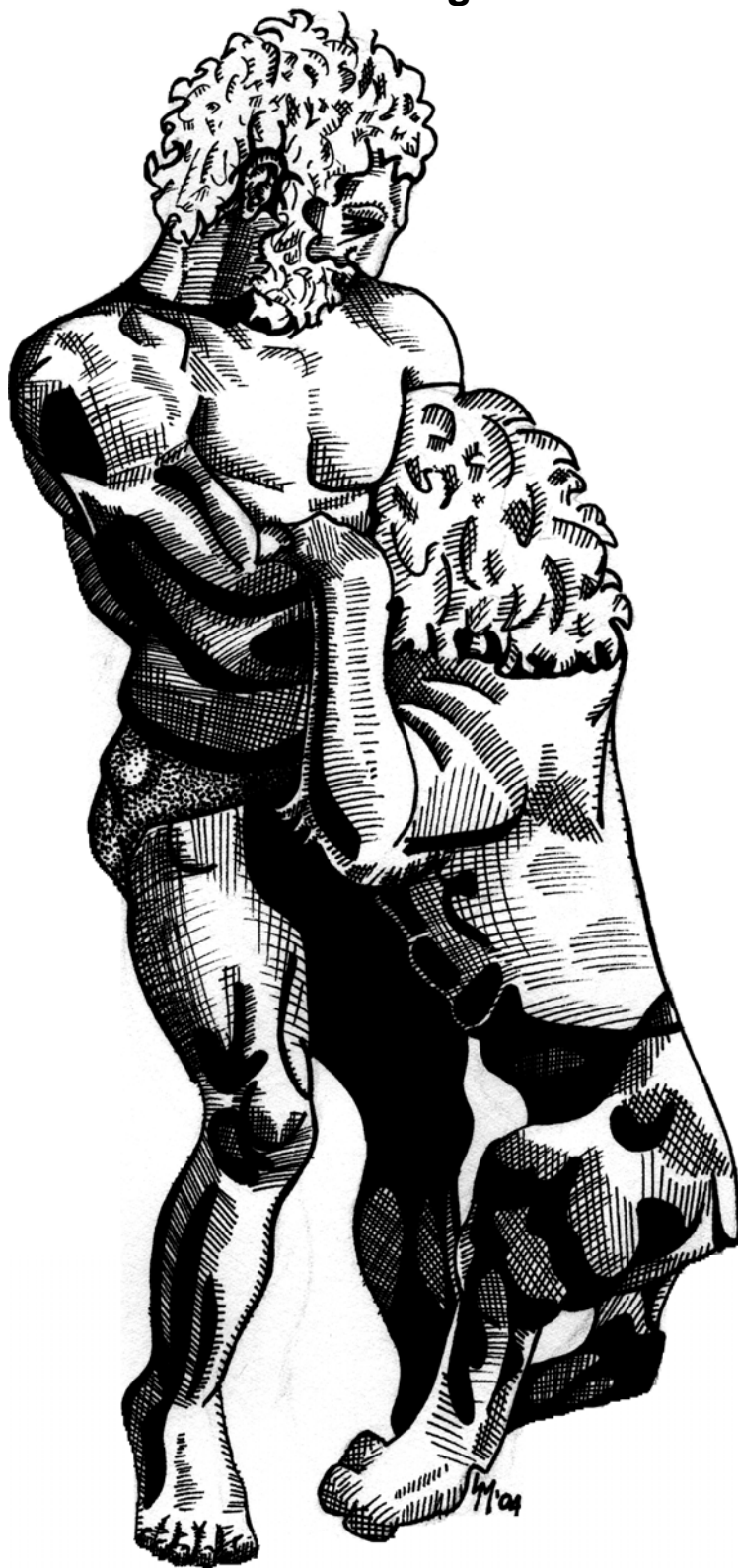


Submission Fighting and the Rules of Ancient Greek Wrestling



By Christopher Miller

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The Ancient Greek sports are remarkable in human history and instructive to those interested in promoting athletics due to their recorded longevity of more than a millennium, their high levels of participation amongst the people of the time, and the great degree of enthusiasm clearly demonstrated for these sports through period artwork and through remunerations for victorious athletes. The Ancient Greek sports also produced the rare example of the professional sports-player. Interestingly enough there are examples of female participation in the sports primarily in wrestling and the foot and hippic races, showing thereby the universal appeal of these games. Athenaeus writes, **ἐν Χίῳ|δεῦθ|ἡ|ῆ|ς|ω|καὶ|β|α|δ|ι|ζ|ε|ῖ|ν|ἡ|δ|ι|σ|τ|ὸ|ν|ἐ|σ|τ|ῖ|ν|ἐ|π|ὶ|τ|ὰ|γ|υ|μ|ν|α|σ|ία|καὶ|τ|οῦ|ν|δ|ρ|ο|μ|οῦ|καὶ|ὄ|ζ|α|ν|π|ρ|ο|σ|π|α|λ|αῖ|ν|τ|α|ν|τ|οῦ|ν|νεβ|υ|ν|τ|αῖ|ν|κο|ραῖ|ν|.** (Athenaeus. The Deipnosophists. XIII. 566e.) ‘On the island Chios the most pleasant thing is to walk over to the gymnasiums and running-tracks and to watch the young men wrestling with the girls.’ It is therefore of great use to us to discover the precise nature of these sports and thereby learn the world’s most enduring and popular models of athletics.

Greek Athletic Culture

The most highly respected Ancient Greek sports were individual, not team, events. This is not to say that there were not team games played, usually involving balls of various kinds, but these team games were not given the honour of the individual events. This prejudice in favour of individual achievement likely lies in a deeply ingrained element of Greek culture involving the highly self-conscious sense of personal identity reflected and immortalized in the poems of Homer. Thus the acquisition of personal honour and the risks one takes when setting one’s honour on the line in competitions with others produced a great deal of excitement in the minds of the Ancient Hellenes. Success in sports not only, by the very nature of the skills involved, reflected military prowess thereby granting the victor prestige in a society in need and in fear of fearsome warriors but also epitomized the struggle to assert one’s self over another and thereby to demonstrate the superiority of one’s own sense of identity over another’s.

It is difficult for us to know from a participatory standpoint which sports were the most popular. Certainly from a spectatorial point of view the most popular sports were the percussive combat events of boxing and the pankration and the noisy, fast paced competitions of the hippodrome. Given the outlines of Vitruvius for a Greek palaestra, one might suspect that running and the combat sports were the most popular for participants. That the throwing and jumping events were thought less of can be seen in their being lumped together into one competition: the Pentathlon. But the fact that they were a recognized part of the Olympic programme also goes to show their relative importance in a world replete with all varieties of possible contests. The precise method of the jumping contest in the Pentathlon aside, we are relatively well informed of what went on during training and while competing in the Greek sports. We can piece together how contestants ran their races, how charioteers won their crowns, how boxers dealt their blows and how pankratiasts pummeled their opponents. The rules of these events were

relatively simple and are immediately available to our intuitive understanding. Victory in the various races went to the swiftest, in the boxing to the one forcing the other to submit or pass out from his blows of the closed and wrapped fist, in the pankration to the one making the opponent give up as in boxing but using any part of the body to strike the blows and allowing any method of gripping to inflict pain or to threaten unconsciousness. The winner in the javelin and discus hurling contests was the one who threw furthest. It is the wrestling which gives us the most trouble and this is particularly frustrating since it may very likely be that due to its non-disfiguring and much less painful nature it was the most popular of the combat sports in which to participate even if its brutal cousins were more popular for watching.

Towards a Full Understanding of Greek Wrestling

Unlike the other events, the wrestling competitions seem to have been won by points. Three 'falls' seem to have been needed for a win, a 'fall' being the touching of one's opponent's back to the ground. There is no submission to one's opponent in this. Indeed for this very reason it is said that the Spartans allowed their citizens to take part in the wrestling but not the other combat events in the Olympic games since the wrestling did not involve acknowledging defeat. However, it is our contention, and the purpose of this study to prove, that the acknowledgement of defeat was in fact a part of Ancient Greek wrestling in two instances: the successful complete application of an arm or joint-lock or other body crushing maneuver and the use of a stranglehold. This contention rests on three main pillars: the first being literary sources supporting it, the second being lack of any evidence at all to the contrary, and the third being common sense based on practical considerations. We will also show how the rejection of Nonnos, who describes submission holds in detail, as a reliable witness to Ancient sport is mistaken. It will become apparent that the stranglehold was not only within the range of accepted techniques but was in actual fact frequently used and for a very important reason we will come to later. It will also be learnt why little mention is made in the sources of submission by arm-lock while such a path to victory might seem an obvious choice if it were allowed as we postulate here. By so doing it is hoped that we can acquire a full understanding of the nature of the Ancient Greek wrestling and thereby enable us to resurrect it to enjoy again if we so choose.

One problem with using sources which are up to a millennium apart in their composition is as to whether we are dealing with the same sport or whether we are dealing with evolved, variant or different grappling sports all called 'wrestling'. If it were not for the fact that the Olympic rules were codified and well-known throughout the Ancient Mediterranean through officially 'Isolympic' festivals and through other festivals which aped the Olympic Games of Elis and their rules, we could not assume any continuity in wrestling rules. That the Olympic rules changed precious little over time is not doubted. Where there were alterations in the rules or where new events were added, we hear of these through our ancient sources. The early addition of the rule prohibiting the breaking of fingers in wrestling is a case in point.

It is very much worthy of note that the Modern Turkish Oilwrestling, flourishing as it does in Western Turkey where Greek settlements thrived until this past Century, has rules remarkably similar to what we suggest were the rules for its Ancient Greek parent.

The Turkish form, called *Kirkpinar*, in fact Turkey's national sport, considers touching the back to the ground as signaling defeat, and it does allow any kind of submission technique besides hitting, although hitting or kicking does at times happen and does not always trigger a response from the referees, to coerce the opponent to concede the win through tapping-out or saying so verbally. A hand signal too can signal defeat, which it did in the Ancient Greek combat sports, as we see depicted frequently on pottery. The main differences between the *Kirkpinar* and Ancient Greek wrestling lie in the number of falls, which are three in the ancient but only one in the modern sport, and the fact that Turkish Wrestling requires special wrestling trunks be worn. It is more than likely that the use of wrestling trousers slows down the action a great deal, allowing the competitors to hold each other away by gripping the pants tightly, and this would help to explain the necessity of the one-fall wins rule. However, the age of this oiled and trousered wrestling style is unknown, and it very well may be that it was the local Ionian, West-Anatolian Greek variant on the pan-Hellenic sport even in Ancient times. Contacts with non-Greek Asiatic cultures, which were disgusted by public nudity, may have had a decisive influence here on the athletes' covering their lower bodies. Homer, thought by many to have been an Anatolian Greek, has his competitors 'gird their loins' before competing in the various sports, including wrestling. However, even if this be the case, it was wrestling as practiced at the Olympic games which became the standard in Antiquity.

Other Forms of Wrestling

This is not to say that other forms of wrestling did not exist in spite of this Olympic pre-eminence. It is more than likely that other local varieties of wrestling were enjoyed by the people of those areas. For instance, it is well-known that nudity was normally frowned upon by most Mediterranean peoples besides the Greeks. This cultural predisposition was one of the things the Fifth Century B.C. Greeks emphasized when marking themselves out from the 'barbaroi': the non-Greeks. 'True' Greek wrestling was something done naked and oiled. The addition of trousers, belts or any other items of clothing into the game changes it quite a lot. Indeed, where any clothing is involved in grappling sports it tends to be used as a focus for gripping as it is a much more sure hold than a sweaty limb gripped in a sweaty hand. Developments of belted wrestling include a broad number of Eurasian forms, among them Korean *Ssirum*, Japanese *Sumo*, Icelandic *Glima*, Swiss wrestling, the form of Mesopotamian wrestling practiced by *Gilgamesh* in that famous epic, and no doubt many others. Turkish wrestling is similar to these in its use of trousers which can be gripped. In traditional Scottish wrestling, which is somewhat different from these, a fixed grip is taken of the opponent before beginning the match. However, in all these forms of the sport, the Turkish oil wrestling excepted, victory can be had merely by forcing the opponent to touch the ground with any part of the body besides the foot. This kind of wrestling may have been one of the earliest to evolve in Eurasia. The widespread appeal of this kind of wrestling throughout a broad range of ethnicities across the Eurasian landscape tends to support this theory. It can be practiced in one's clothing and at any time of the year. A specially procured soft-landing area is not really necessary since forcing the opponent into any kind of stumble onto a body-part other than the foot is a victory and thus high twisting throws are not as frequently required as they will be in Greek wrestling. Neither will there be so much

bending of the body placing it into awkward precarious positions requiring the support of a hand, knee or elbow to retain balance. This is not to say that in the more highly evolved versions of some of these sports there are no sand pits used, since there are in Sumo and Ssirum, but rather that the sand pits are not a basic requirement for avoiding injury in the training for these sports. Indeed many tournaments for these kinds of games are held in fields. It is the wrestler's responsibility to be tough enough to endure the occasional high throw. These forms of wrestling are also convenient since they do not require much contact with the ground and the dirtiness and discomfort that would arise from this. As for the Turkish style, where the competitors can take fixed grips of each other's pants, under the body's center of balance, but the upper body is oiled and slippery, bouts can go on for quite some time before there is any kind of fall and in fact matches are sometimes won by one of the competitors deciding he has not stamina enough to continue and there is no contact made with the ground at all. The familial relationship between Ancient Greek wrestling and Modern Turkish Oil wrestling, the Kirkpınar, is obvious, but the inclusion of wrestling pants changes the sport a great deal since it puts the priority of attack on the lower body which can be grabbed over the upper body which, covered in oil, effectively cannot be.

Pre-Classical Greek Wrestling

It may come as no surprise then that these early and widespread Eurasian types of wrestling are of the kind attested to in Homer's Iliad – the first work of Greek literature that we have any trace of. Homer clearly states that the contestants put on belts/loincloths before their match. This is entirely different than the later-Greek version of the sport where the clothes are removed before competing. “**zwsamehw d' aja tw/ ge bathn e) meßson aßwna**”¹ “Having put on their belts/loin-cloths the two went into the middle of the crowd.” The match then begins and there is much pulling to no avail as in the forms of wrestling described above and the bout becomes boring for the spectators. If in this Homeric form of wrestling the knees or other body parts were allowed to make contact with the ground we would expect to hear of some attempts making use of this. Instead we hear that the two tug at each other's shoulder-area and sides until there are red marks imprinted on them. It may even be that there was a fixed hold, perhaps with one arm going over the opponent's shoulder and the other under his other one, such as that seen in the Scottish wrestling. The Scholiast on Homer writes of an archaic form of wrestling where there was a fixed grip². This could account for the red weals appearing on their shoulders and sides. However, there is no convincing reason to believe that the grip was fixed. The two trips made by Odysseus are both achieved by applying pressure behind one of the opponent's kneecaps: the first time using the foot and from the outside of Ajax' legs, the second time using the back of his own knee and from the inside of Ajax' legs. These kinds of knee reaping throws are very common in the forms of wrestling prohibiting touching the ground with body parts beside the feet since they do not put the attacker in danger of collapsing on the knees if the throw is misapplied or thwarted by the opponent. High throws such as shoulder or hip throws of various kinds

¹ Iliad 23.710

² Scholiast to Homer Iliad 23.711. See Poliakoff, M. Combat Sports in the Ancient World (Yale:1987) pp.34-40 for more discussion of this.

require the attacker to squat to get underneath the opponent's center of balance and thus place the attacker in the dangerous position of being closer to the ground than the opponent. The two throws of Odysseus are also the third and fourth most frequently scoring throws in modern Judo where it is possible to lift the opponent by tugging on his/her³ clothing⁴. Homer's description of wrestling like his depiction of battle was so out-dated by the time of the establishment of the gymnasium as central in Greek life in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C. that Homer will not be needed any further in our investigation.

It goes without saying that the modern 'Greco-Roman' style, where the legs are not permitted to be brought into play, does not match up at all with our ancient sources. However, this form of wrestling seems to have grown out of La Lutte à Mains Platte of the Provençal region of France, and tends to produce spectacular high throws. Such a form of wrestling, descending from a local folk style, may very well have a long history, perhaps reaching back into antiquity, but it bears no resemblance at all to the Ancient Olympian-rules wrestling described in our sources and portrayed in art. In fact the modern Olympic style of wrestling most closely resembling that of Ancient Greece is Judo, a sport invented by a Japanese professor of English in 1882. Kano from the start intended to create an international sport, albeit one free from nationalism, and the influence of Greek athletics on him can be seen in his own writings⁵. He and Pierre de Coubertin were friends, and Kano was the Japanese delegate to the International Olympic Committee. He was not the only Asian sport-founder to be influenced by the Greeks. Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of modern Karate, believed that his martial-art originated ultimately from the Greek Pankration.

The Benefits of Wrestling

What is it about wrestling in all its kaleidoscope of variants that makes it so universally appealing? There is not a culture in the world without wrestling of some kind. Wrestling tests two things: strength and balance. In the day to day fight for survival it is these two qualities which are paramount. One needs muscle to move and work and one needs balance to stay on one's feet which as upright two-legged creatures in a world where the at least four-legged model is by far the most prevalent is not as easy as we may like to pride ourselves in naively thinking that it is. Whether hunting, working, lifting, playing, riding a horse, fighting, running or doing any other physical activity, staying on one's feet without falling is always a key concern. Not only does falling get in the way of what one is trying to accomplish and prevents locomotion, but for humans can be very

³ The 'his/her' will be warranted throughout this study since we have evidence for female participation in athletics at various periods in ancient history at least at the recreational level if not so often at the competitive and we have the medical writer Rufus who actually recommends running and 'rolling around in the dust' (i.e. wrestling activities) as exercise for adolescent girls. See Rufus *ap. Oribasius lib. inc.* 18 (2) 11 R. In Roman times the baths were open to women as well as to men, in certain times and places to both at once and at other times and places to men at certain times of the day and women at others, and we cannot assume that women never exercised before their baths since we know for a fact that the men frequently did.

⁴ Seventh Degree Black Belt holder and British National Judo Coach Syd Hoare has included these statistics in his highly informative book *Teach Yourself Judo* (New York:1980) pp.21-2.

⁵ Kano, Jigoro. *Kodokan Judo*. (Kodansha:1986) p. 239.

dangerous. Bones can easily be broken or joints dislocated from a mere fall and in fact death or permanent disability can result from the impact of head on earth or from a twisted or jarred spine. The chances of injury are very high where one loses one's balance unexpectedly and cannot regain it. Of course, in a wrestling match the situation is reversed since it is expected that one's balance is being challenged so if one does fall, one is prepared to fall safely, and this fact of the general safety of wrestling is borne out by the experience of wrestlers for millennia. Indeed it is said that wrestlers tend to walk with their legs slightly wider apart than non-wrestlers, this being due to their heightened sense of balance. However, the continuous shifting of position to attempt to unbalance the opponent and defend against the opponent's attempts to do the same is one of the most important elements detracting from its visual appeal. For any observer who is not well versed in the art it is difficult to make out that anything is happening at all. Indeed throughout history wherever there has been the option of watching wrestling or watching contests of speed or of hitting it is these latter that draw the most crowds. The swift motions of the arms in boxing and those of the legs in running excite the spectator much more than the seemingly roof-rafter like statue-quick actions of wrestlers. However, wrestling can be much more appealing to take part in than in racing or in percussive contests. While training for racing, one must train alone pushing oneself to run faster and faster, and this loneliness can be a stumbling block since people are by their nature rather social. On the other hand running needs no equipment at all and no practice-partners and so is perhaps the most accessible sport, and recreational jogging can of course be done with friends where they can be induced to come along. Percussive sports like boxing lead to daily injuries and to pains, which continue after one has finished training for the day. The use of soft gloves only allows more momentum to be applied to the head without fear of breaking the fingers or wrists. The violent excitement of hitting an opponent at full speed and force is of course a draw for some, but percussive sports such as this predominately develop in popularity much more for spectators than for participants.

There is another particular quality about wrestling that adds to its appeal. By its very nature, wrestling is not merely a *test* of strength but is also a way of *building* strength: a form of bodybuilding. All of one's strength is being exerted to move the combined weight and strength of a whole other human. When we are dealing with, for example, two trainees weighing about 80 kilograms each who are able to push with at least their own body weight's force, we can expect that up to 160 kilograms of pressure is being felt in the arms and throughout the body. This of course is in addition to bearing one's own body-weight. To add to this further we must note that in wrestling not only certain specific target areas of muscles are used but instead the vast majority of all the muscles of the body are vigorously and continuously exercised against resistance. Thus, even where there is no 'fall' there is a great deal to be gained merely from the strength training acquired by the exercise of the muscles. In racing the arms are clearly given very little resistance training and in the percussive sports this is only slightly ameliorated by the flailing of arms about but then the legs are given precious little exercise. If one were to take someone who trained only in boxing and someone of the same weight who trained only in wrestling, the difference in strength alone would be so great that if they were to fight there would be little doubt as to the result of the contest. Added to this is the percussive fighter's need to constantly go off balance in order to put weight behind his/her blows. This continuous off-balancing plays right into the wrestler's hands.

However, without wading yet into issues of the pankration where striking and grappling were both permitted, let us simply establish that wrestling not only greatly improves balance but also vastly increases strength and so is of great use to humans interested in having success in any form of physical endeavour.

Wrestling and Soldiering

Now, why has strong wrestling prowess always been associated with skilful battlecraft? The reason seemed obvious to people who in former times depended on many physical abilities and arts to get through their day to day lives, but is more obscure to us now who have machines to do many things for us. The fact is that when fighting, in order to initiate any action, whether offensive or defensive, you have to be balanced first. If you are unbalanced, even slightly, you cannot control yourself enough to start a strike, block, evasive tactic, or anything. When fighting with sword and shield, where there is bashing of shield on shield and thrusting of sword, the one who can regain balance and keep it more frequently will be able to deliver more blows than the opponent can. Also, when the opponent is off balance, he or she cannot even defend effectively, let alone strike back. So, the result will end up being death for the one with worse balance. Thus, balance is so critical for fighting that it is the one with better balance who will likely come out alive: a terrifically strong reason to want to develop it as much as possible if you are a soldier. When fighting even with missile weapons such as throwing spears or arrows, balance is still critically important, as the more balanced you are, the better control you have of your cast or shot, and therefore the better aim you will have. Balance remains an important skill for modern gunfighting soldiers, as they need to establish and maintain their balance in order to aim their weapons effectively. It even, to return briefly to athletics, is of great necessity for boxers, so that they can fight proficiently. We read of much cross-training among the combat sports in ancient times, with Wrestling always being the basic starting point for all combat athletes.

The Fall

The most important part of any sport by far is the method of winning. If people of the distant future were to merely know about 21st Century soccer that the object of the game is to place the ball in the opponent's net only by using parts of the body other than the arms, they would quickly, upon running an experimental game, come to the realization that the feet are most admirably suited to this purpose and could then reconstruct the skills of the game in great detail. Of course, one aspect of the game they would not be able to know for a certainty is what is done when the ball leaves the field. Nor would they know the size of the field or of its nets nor the precise constitution of the ball. Nor would they know exactly how infractions of the rules such as the one prohibiting the use of the arms are to be dealt with. They might postulate the removal of the offending player from the game for a time for such an infraction. That there are sanctions in place the people of the future would not doubt since the use of the arms is all too tempting and would have to have been discouraged through threat of punishment but the exact nature of these sanctions they would not know. They likely would not suspect that penalty kicks were used since this seems too extreme a sanction. So, the skills of a

game can be very accurately rediscovered with a minimal description of its nature, but every detail of the rules or of penalties cannot be if they are of any complexity.

With wrestling however, we are lucky since by far the most important physical element in the game is the human body, and this has not changed since the time of the ancients. Humans do not have any more legs or arms than they did back then. However, there are still many other issues to solve and we must now turn to our sources to do so.

What evidence do we have for the touching of the back to the ground being considered a 'fall'? The following is a short excerpt from the play 'The Knights' of the Fifth Century B.C. comedian Aristophanes (lines 571-3).

ει)de/pou pe)soien e) toh w)non e) makh|tini/
tou# a)pe)hsant' a)h, ei# h)nou#to mh)pept w)kehai,
a)l a)diepal aion au)hij .

“But if he fell on his shoulder in a fight,
he wiped it, then denied that he had fallen,
and went on wrestling.”

The problematic word here is the word **w)non**. A rough translation of it is 'shoulder', however 'upper arm' is also legitimate. The word as used here is singular: it does not say 'the shoulders', it says 'the shoulder'. The word that one does not see here that one might like to see is the word **nw)ton** which means 'the back'. The context of this passage though is important. The playwright is using a wrestling metaphor for describing an enthusiastic spirit of doing battle with the enemy. If thrown on the shoulder, the athlete would wipe it off and keep going. What this passage must mean is that the fall is just questionable enough or unnoticed enough for the athlete to be able to deny that he has been properly thrown and therefore he is able to wipe it off and keep going. His spirit is aggressive and not one to give up. If Aristophanes had written that 'our brave ancestors, when thrown flat on their backs, would wipe them off and continue the match' he would be painting them as comic imbeciles since the fall had been so obvious and their skill so limited as to be thrown so decisively. While Aristophanes' play is indeed a comedy, in this speech the focus of the hilarity is not on the 'noble ancestors'. We may take this passage as evidence that the shoulders were on the edge of the scoring zone. Since the shoulders are on the edge of the back, it is the back we must expect was the scoring zone. And naturally enough the back is mentioned as such by many writers⁶.

We should point out now too that this passage implies that the match would have been stopped had a fall been scored. The third line emphasizes that the wrestler *goes on* wrestling anyways after having wiped the dust off. The word **au)hij** is added to emphasize that he goes back to the struggle and does not stop. If it were the case that wrestlers were expected to continue wrestling after a fall without a break in the action then this emphasis on the wrestler continuing his match unabated would have been out of place here and its inclusion would not have occurred to the writer.

⁶ Michael Poliakoff has very thoroughly listed the sources proving that the mere touch of the back to the earth counted as a fall. See his Studies in the Terminology of the Greek Combat Sports (Hain:1982) p. 8 and notes.

For another help in understanding the scoring zone we can turn to the poet Alcaeus of Messenia who writes (AP 9.588):

**Τὸ τριτὸν οὐκ ἐπόησεν ἐπ'ωμῖδάσ, ἀλλὰ παλαιάσ
ἀπ'τῶν τοῦν τρισσοῦν ἰσμοῦθεν εἰς πόδου.**

Here the athlete “did not get his ‘upper shoulders’ dusty, but having wrestled without being thrown took away the threefold fruits of his labour from Isthmia.” The ‘threefold fruits’ ‘**τοῦν τρισσοῦν πόδου**’ of course are the individual matches he won, each containing three falls scored on an opponent. The term ‘upper shoulders’ **ἐπ'ωμῖδάσ** as a plural must here represent a legitimate scoring area since landing on both of them at once would clearly place other parts of the back on the ground as well. It is important to note that the term is ‘upper shoulders’ **ἐπ'ωμῖδάσ** and not simply ‘shoulder’ **ὤμων**. This choice of diction should tell us that there is no reason to believe that one shoulder’s contact with the ground alone constituted a fall. There is no place in ancient Greek literature where a single shoulder’s touching the ground is portrayed as a fall. In all likelihood since falling ‘backward/onto the back’ **ὀπίθιον** and other terms describing the same backward falling motion are the most common term used for a fall in the literature⁷ and we are not told of falling ‘sideways’, we are best to regard the back of the shoulder as a legitimate target but not the front. A fall onto the front part of the shoulder could naturally be a source of dispute if there were a slight smattering of dust on the back. Realistically, we should expect that if the athlete was turned over onto his back, he clearly lost. If, while bracing his body on all fours against the opponent’s attempts to overturn him the athlete somehow touched some of his outer shoulder to the ground but still kept himself from being turned over, we must expect that this would not be counted as a fall, since he did not really fall ‘on his back’. As for a lower terminus to the target area we must suppose that it ended before the buttocks began since we never hear of winning by making the opponent ‘sit down’. Nor do we hear of wiping the dust off one’s buttocks or thighs.

For those who doubt that wrestling on the ground was part of the sport we have these lines of Aristophanes:

**ἐπειτ' ἀγῶνας/γ' εὐθύς ἐστήσται ποιεῖν
ταύτην ἐκ' οὐσίν αὐτίον καὶ ὅν παῦ,
ἐπιγῆ- παλαιῖν, τετραπόδῳ ἐστάῃ,
πλαγίαν κatabal lein, ἐ) γοῦατα κῦδ' ἐστάῃ,** (Aristophanes. Peace. 894-7)

‘Thereupon it will be possible to have contests immediately
to hold this beautiful woman tomorrow in every way,
to wrestle on the ground, to make her get down on all fours,
to throw her on her side, to bring her head to your knees’

This ground wrestling is clearly distinguished from the Pankration, which comes next:

**καὶ παγκράτιον γ' ὑπάλειψαμεθ' ἡμῶν
παίειν ὀρυττεῖν πῦρ ὀρού-καὶ τῶν περὶ:** (Aristophanes. Peace. 898-9)

‘and having oiled yourselves for the pankration, to hit vigorously
to dig alike with clenched fist and with the penis.’

Aristotle clearly shows us that wrestling did not allow hitting:

⁷ Ibid.

καί τῆσαι βούληται, ὡς περ οἱ ἀτροξεῖριζόμενοι, παταβεῖν αὐτόν. (Aristotle. Nicomachian Ethics. 1111.a15)

‘...and he, wishing to touch just like those wrestling at arm’s length, might hit.’

The section this comes from gives many common examples of mistakes people can make involuntarily. It is very clear that hitting is not allowed in wrestling.

Why “The Fall” Wins the Match

Why should touching the back to the ground count as victory? Why not some other part of the body, or submissions only? The answer must be that, if we take balance being the principle skill tested in this warrior sport, a skill so important the fate of individual lives and the future of the nation depend on it in war, then the most extreme display of loss-of-balance ought to represent utter defeat. And, this is of course what we have in “The Fall”. Touching the back to the ground demonstrates a total loss of balance, so much so that no limbs or even parts of limbs, such as knees, elbows or any things at all are supporting the body any more. Also, lying belly-up on the battlefield makes the soldier terribly vulnerable to weapons thrusts and trampling, and at least momentarily immobile since no limbs are in a readied position to raise the soldier up. In the fight on a battlefield between Bouzes and a Persian soldier recounted below, Bouzes was able to get up from the ground first after they knocked each other off their horses, due to his wrestling training, and slaughter his enemy like an animal.

“Up” and “Down” Wrestling

In Wrestling, the fight often goes from standing and moving around on two feet to struggling on the ground on all fours. The ancients distinguished between these two phases of the fight as the “up” and “down” stages of Wrestling. An opponent is even more balanced when on all fours than when upright, so turning him or her over can be extremely tricky, and one can be trapped and rolled onto one’s own back by the underneath wrestler if one is not careful. However, the fighter on top has more options on his or her side, and also has the advantage of gravity and initiative due to the top position, so this above position is favoured by wrestlers. The upright phase of the fight would ideally result in a grand throw achieving a “Fall”, but would more often result in one wrestler ending up above the other in a groundfighting match with the one on top doing the attacking and the one on the bottom defending, evading and counterattacking as best as possible. Tricks and tactics are employed to get to this top position on the ground from standing, since it is often very difficult to throw an opponent directly to his or her back. The battle on the ground can be quite intense and last a long time, as both fighters are very well balanced due to their both being on all fours. The combat application of this stage of the fight is that of keeping on top of a downed opponent in order to finish him or her off with a knife or similar weapon, albeit this groundfighting stage of Wrestling was criticized by some ancient military writers as being impractical for warfare, since even the wrestler on top is vulnerable to wounding on the battlefield from weapons coming from above.

Duration of the Match

That scoring three falls on an opponent is needed to win the match is also very well attested to in the ancient sources⁸. This is one aspect of the sport that we can be fully certain of, at least in its official internationally recognized Olympian or Isolympian form. It seems to have been so throughout Greek history. Here is a line from the early Fifth Century B.C. playwright Aeschylus:

εἰς μὲν τὸ δὴ τῶν τριῶν παλαισμάτων. (Aeschylus. Eumenides. 585)

‘this is only one of the three wrestling falls’

After a fall is scored the contestants would have to both get back on their feet before continuing. If there were no break after a fall is scored, there would be nothing to prevent the scorer from pressing his opponent’s back down to the earth two more times in rapid succession. If this were allowed, it would have changed the nature of the sport from a three-fall game to essentially a slightly lengthened one-fall-takes-all competition. It is three falls we hear of in the sources so we must imagine an official break in the contest after a fall, where the competitors have to stand up and separate. Whether or not the referee made a ‘Stop! ... Begin!’ call we cannot know. It may simply have been that to not get up nor let the opponent also get up before continuing the fight was a foul and punished with whipping like other infractions such as striking or biting the opponent or gouging the opponent’s eyes. We never hear from our sources of referees stopping and starting matches. Indeed there is a line from Appian which seems to suggest at least that there was no official forcing of the athletes to come to grips. He writes of soldiers behaving much like athletes holding off from each other a short time to regain their breath before continuing the battle. Wrestling is the sport he is describing here and one could easily imagine wrestlers taking a short breather after a fall is scored and then rushing back to the contest. This kind of pause is just as common in the informal bouts of the combat sports clubs of today as it is in actual judged competitions. The use of ‘**suneplekonto**’ ‘they entwined themselves’ makes this passage a clear reference to wrestling, and indeed he describes the battle only a little before as a wrestling match.

ὅτε δὲ καὶ κάμοιεν, ὡς περ ἐν τοῖς γυμνασίοις ἐ) ἀπανοήσονται ἰσον ἀ)λήθως διίστατο καὶ αὐτοὶ σuneplekonto. (Appian. The Civil Wars. III.9.68.)

‘and when they were exhausted, just like in athletics they stood apart from each other for a short recovery of breath and then entwined themselves together again.’

Although our sources remain silent too about referees calling out falls, we must feel that the probability lies with them having done so. The fall would not always have been obvious to both contestants, and they could not be trusted to decide for themselves if a fall had been scored since they are by definition biased in their own favour. This may be why we have the wrestler in Aristophanes’ play above wiping off his shoulder and then denying that a fall had taken place. He clearly had someone to deny it to. Neither can we know whether or not there were specific starting places for the contestants. Perhaps these details varied from place to place or from time to time. It would, though, seem more plausible that these details were observed with a great deal of continuity through time, particularly at a festival as conservative as the Olympics was. Even if we cannot know these elements of formality, we can still re-create the ancient sport since it is the way the sport is played by the competitors themselves that makes the sport what it is.

⁸ Poliakoff, M. Combat Sports in the Ancient World (Yale:1987) p.23 and notes

Indeed, while training or wrestling recreationally with friends there is no referee needed, and this was the way wrestling was done the vast majority of the time, so even if we are only able to reconstitute Greek wrestling under these circumstances we have been able to bring the ancient sport back to life. In fact, informal competitiveness, where recreational athletes challenge others in a friendly environment to see how well their strength and skills match up without official supervision, and where the winner can have the satisfaction of victory but the loser no embarrassment, must have been as much a part of the draw of ancient wrestling as it is for the tens of millions of non-tournament oriented combat sports athletes of today who make up the bulk following of these sports. As for the average length of a bout, it probably lasted no more than a few minutes per fall. The sources are silent about long matches such as those seen in boxing where a famous athlete was known to dance around all day without letting his guard down, or where a match went on so long that the contestants agreed to allow each other one unguarded blow to decide it. Indeed Philostratus feels the need to explain why wrestling is seen as an ‘α)εγεinhh’ ‘painful’ contest, and it is primarily because the training for wrestling is so hard since training is mostly done by just wrestling⁹. He implies that the other combat sports’ matches are harder but says that their training is easier since they do not train by continually fighting the way wrestlers do. This should at least let us know that wrestling was not outstanding for its duration amongst the combat sports. We can also surmise that the time between falls was not very long since three falls were needed for a victory. If it took a great deal of time to achieve even a single fall, it would be hard to see the sport requiring up to five individual bouts to determine the winner – why not just make the first win final: the way it is in boxing and the pankration? Why drag out a match to incredible lengths of time when one athlete has already established his/her superiority? The only reasonable answer must be that falls were frequent and that it was felt that scoring more than fall against one’s opponent was needed to demonstrate superiority. In fact, to win a victory without being scored against oneself was so rare that it deserved sometimes imperial mention as in the case of the statue dedicated by the Emperors Valentinianus, Theodosius and Arcadius, who reigned 384 to 392 A.D., honouring the ‘unthrown’ wrestler from Smyrna: Joannes¹⁰. Our estimate of the duration of bouts also rests on our re-creation of the sport using trained Judo athletes as will be outlined below.

Greek Athletics in a Christian Empire

That imperial adoption of Christianity in the Fourth Century A.D. did not interfere with the continued enjoyment of athletics and athletic festivals is already well established¹¹, although we might assume that the pagan religious elements in them dwindled with time or were purposely removed. It was not until the Fifth Century that gladiatorial combat to the death between humans, something so clearly at odds with Christian values, was finally suppressed after the death of the monk Telemachus who tried to stop such an event in Rome. Greek athletics were never banned except as a temporary punishment for a disorderly city and indeed whenever the races were held in

⁹ Philostratos. *Gymnastika*. 11

¹⁰ *CIL* VI 10153 = Dessau, in Rachel Robinson’s *Sources for the History of Greek Athletics* (Cincinnati: 1955) p.206.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-8.

the hippodrome of Byzantium, they were given an official and ceremonious blessing by the Patriarch. The likelihood is, if we follow this pattern, that such ecclesiastical blessings were given at games held in cities outside the capital city too. The Emperor Justinian's Code of laws compiled in 528 A.D. was expressly made with the intention of excising or bringing up to date outmoded laws. In this up-to-date Code, he has included a law excusing athletes crowned three times at sacred festivals from civil obligations. At least one of the crowns must have been won in Rome or in the territory of Ancient Greece. This means that there were still 'sacred' athletic festivals being held and that there were still victorious athletes qualifying for this exemption from civil obligations. If chariot racing was by far the most popular spectator sport, this should come as no surprise since it had always enjoyed that status being the most expensive, fast paced and colourful of the games. This enthusiasm for charioteers does not however mean that the other sports were neglected. Procopius the Sixth Century A.D. historian of Justinian's reign tells us at length of a wrestling trainer's victories over two Persian warriors in single combat, he being the only one of the Romans to have the courage to do so¹². This wrestler's name is Andreas, and he was not a soldier, but a 'professional wrestling trainer for youths' **'paidotribhv'** in charge of a certain 'wrestling school' **'palaistra|tini'** in Byzantium, who had come on the campaign because he was a member of the general Bouzes' personal entourage and the one training/taking care of **'epimeloumenov'** Bouzes' body at the bath. **"Andreas de hē tiv ēn toiv Bouzou oi keibiv, ou)stratiw)thv me) ou)de)ti a)khsav tw) kata)ton polemon pw)rote, paidotribhv de) kai) palaistra|tini) Buzantiw) e)festhkw)w. dio)dh) kai) tw) stratw) ei)peto, a)te tou Bouzou sw)matov e) balanei)w) e) epimeloumenov"** (Procopius I. xiii. 30-1). This tells us that in the Sixth Century A.D. there were wrestling schools where youths went to train under professional instructors such as Andreas. The passage does not say Andreas was in charge of *the* wrestling school of Byzantium, but *a certain* wrestling school **'palaistra|tini'**. It would be just as legitimate to translate this as 'one of the wrestling schools in Byzantium'. What Procopius writes clearly implies that there were a number of such schools in the city besides that of Andreas. His being called a 'wrestling trainer for youths' **'paidotribhv'** demonstrates to us that athletics as a part of the education of the young was as current for the Greeks of the Sixth Century A.D. as it was for their ancestors in the Second, at least for those in Byzantium and likely in other cities as well. Antioch's Olympic Games we know were still thriving in the Sixth Century¹³, and we can be sure that not only competing, but training too, went on in this city at least until its sacking by the Persians. Returning to Andreas, we find him defeating his second opponent by using his wrestling skill after the two were both cast to the ground when their horses collided:

Andreas de) proterhsav, touto) gak) au)tw)h) (kata)thn) palaistran) mel) eth) e)pidou, tw)te) gohati) e)anistamenon) au)ton) e) tuye) kai) au)riv) ei)w) to) lafov) peso)nta) e)kteise. (Procopius I. xiii. 37)

Andreas was first (to get up), for the training of the wrestling school gave him this, and he hit him while the man was rising up on his knee and after the man fell back down to the ground, he killed him.

¹² Procopius I. xiii. 29-39.

¹³ Rachel Robinson, Sources for the History of Greek Athletics (Cincinnati:1955) p. 274

This is in fact exactly what Lucian says the use of wrestling in war is: when grappling with the enemy to trip him up and throw him down faster, and when falling down oneself to get up most easily¹⁴. Since in wrestling one is always trying to cast the opponent down while fighting to keep oneself up and on one's feet, this observation by Lucian makes perfect sense. In Procopius, again we hear the mention of the 'wrestling school' **'palaistran'** and we also hear of 'training' **'meleth'**. This passage just adds further to the incontrovertible truth that Ancient Greek wrestling was still very much alive and indeed in vogue in the Sixth Century Byzantine Empire.

But this is not all. We have, only a little further on in the text, proof that chariot racing was not the only Greek sport watched in the Hippodrome of Constantinople. We learn that a certain Hypatius comes to the Hippodrome and sits on the imperial throne there: **οθεν αριβασιλευειν τε ιππικον και γυμνικον θεασθαι αθωνα** 'from where the king was always accustomed to watch the equestrian and gymnastic competitions'. Gymnastic contests here are clearly distinguished from the equestrian. Note that they are called 'contests' **'αθωνα'** and not 'displays'. Thus we can establish that competitive athletics were still a part of Greek civic life into the Sixth Century. In fact, Michael Psellus writing in the Eleventh Century gives proof that they survived well into his own day. He tells us of the Emperor Constantine IX being a champion in the Pentathlon and of the Emperor Michael VII taking well to athletic training¹⁵. He elsewhere alludes to running and wrestling and it may be that the boxing and pankration had declined in popularity although a full reading through of all Byzantine literature would be necessary before pronouncing on this. At the least we can be absolutely certain that both the institution of the palaestra and the sport of Classical Greek wrestling was alive and well at least as late as the reign of Justinian in the Sixth Century A.D.

Evidence from the Ancient Writers for Submission Wrestling

Since this is the case, there is no reason to doubt that when the Fifth Century poet Nonnos goes into great detail describing athletic contests of various kinds, that he is writing as someone who had every opportunity to witness the real thing. His intricate descriptions of wrestling moves and counter-moves applied one after the other in sequence seem to be coming from someone with a good deal of firsthand experience of the sport with a strong ability to visualize the complex maneuvers¹⁶. Nonnos wrote a great deal and two poems of his survive. His epic *The Dionysiaca* is the Ancient World's longest by far. Evidencing the compatibility of Ancient Greek culture with Christianity, his other epic is a verse paraphrase of the Gospel of John. He has a great deal to say about athletics as about everything else, but it is his descriptions of choke-holds in wrestling that will interest us here.

Here Aiacos and Aristaios are competing in wrestling. Aiacos has just reversed Aristaios' attempt to throw him and has scored upon Aristaios a fall. The two go at it again and this time:

Kai pel asav o(on a)dra peristrwqenta konih|

¹⁴ Lucian. *Anacharsis*. 24.

¹⁵ Psellus, *Chronographia*. VI. 125-6, VII. 14-5.

¹⁶ Nonnos' wrestling passages can be found in *Dionysiaca* X 339-77, XXXVII 546-609, and XLVIII 90-176.

Αἰᾶκὸν ἀντιπάλῳ οἷο μέσῳ ἐπέβησάτο νώτων
 καὶ πόδα πεπταμένῃ διαγαστέρον ἐκτάδα πεμπῶν,
 κάμπυλον ἀκροτάτῳ περιγούησάτι δεσμά σναπτῶν,
 τάρσῳ τάρσῳ ἐρεῖδε παρασφύρον ἀκρον ἐλίαν:
 καὶ τάξυν ἀντιβίβῳ τετανυμένῳ ὑψόφῳ νώτων,
 χεῖρας ἐλίε στεφανήδῳ ἐπὶ ἄλλῃ ἡσίν ἐλίαν,
 ἀυχένη δεσμῶν ἐπάλῃε βραχίονι, δακτύλα κάμυαν:
 μύδα ἐν δὲ ἰδρωτί xυθῆν ἐφραίνε κόνιν,
 ἀυχμηρῆ ἡ γαμάτῳ δερῆν ῥέγμα ἰγγά κακὰ ἰών,
 μή τι ἰσχυρῆ περιπλοκῶν ἀκμάτι χεῖρων
 ῥεμῆν τριβόμεθιο κατὰ χυχέων ἰμάδα πεμπῶν.

Του δὲ πιεζόμεθιο σνεππεον ὄφει παλμῶν
 κερήμεθιο κήρυκεν, ὀπιπευθῆεν ἀγῶνον,
 μή μιν ἀποκτείνεεν ὀροζυγί φηκεὸν ὀκῶν
 οὐ γὰρ ἐν τότε ῥεσμῶν ὀμοίον, ὀκ παρὸν αὐτοῖ
 οὐ γίγονοι φράσσάτο, τί ταινομένῳ ὀξε δεσμῶν
 ἀυχηνίῳν πνικθῆνι πότῳ βεβαρήμεθῳ ἀπῆκ
 νικῆν ἀντιπάλῳ μνηστεύεται ἐν φρονί σιγή
 ἀπὲρ νικῆσάτα καθῆλ χεῖρι πατάαν. (Nonnos, Dionysiaca. XXXVII

594-609)

And having thrown the man completely spread out in the dust
 Aiakos got on the middle of his opponent's back
 And sending his outstretched feet along under the spread out stomach,
 Binding together a bent bond around just above the knees,
 He pressed sole on sole and encircled the ankles to their outermost tips;
 And having quickly stretched himself over his opponent's back,
 And winding his hands over each other like a wreath,
 He cast a bond on the neck with his arm, having bent his fingers;
 He drenched the heaped up sand with soaking wet sweat,
 Cleaning off the running drops with dry sand,
 So that the entwined man might not slip through the knot of his hands
 While sending hot moisture down from his squeezed neck.
 And while he was being squeezed by the sharp palm
 The heralds chosen as overseers of the games wandered over,
 So that the forearm with the yoked-together lifting-strap would not kill him.
 For there was not at that time such a rule, which their
 descendants made later on, that when a man is overwhelmed
 by the strangled pain of necks being stretched by bonds
 he gives over the victory to his wrestling opponent with sensible silence,
 having tapped the winning man with a shameful hand.

First off we must iterate that this contest is called 'wrestling' and that Nonnos, writing at a time when wrestling was still very much alive in its traditional form, would not have confused it with the pankration. The possibility of a change in rules in the later Empire is ruled out by earlier sources we will come to that contain exactly this same choking technique. In fact, it is the only kind of strangle mentioned in the ancient sources. But first we must explain clearly what this technique is:

When your opponent is on all fours or sprawled out on his stomach, you can get on his back with your legs on either side of his trunk as if you are riding a horse. Then you thrust them around and underneath his belly, squeezing tightly as if riding a horse without stirrups. Push your legs further down his belly into his groin area. This is now a very secure hold. He should now collapse onto his belly if he has not done so already. If you have long legs or want an even more secure hold you can try to push your heels out behind his thighs and rotate your feet outwards so they each act as a kind of hook, locking into the back of your opponent's legs tightly. Then you can fight with the opponent's arms and head: trying to lift his head and move his arms out of the way so that you can thrust one of your forearms tight across his neck, under his chin. Now you can bring up your other hand and fold the two together, making a tight grip. Press into his neck the part of your wrist at the base of your thumb. Now all that is left to do is to press your forehead downwards onto the back of his and squeeze his neck with the noose you have made with your arms, focusing particularly on pulling back.

This technique is known as '裸絞': 'Hadaka Jime' or 'Naked Strangle' in Judo. It is called 'naked' since it is the one strangulation in Judo which does not require a grip on the uniform. In theory the choke can be applied with using only the hands but in practice the legs must be wrapped in tightly first before a resisting opponent can be subdued. In Judo, since touching the back on the ground while in the ground-fighting stage of the match does not on its own count as a fall, this choke can be applied on a victim lying on top of the attacker as well. The so-called 'sleeper hold' where the two hands are not connected but instead the hand of the choking forearm grasps the bicep of the other arm and the hand of this other arm is used to put pressure either at the top of the victim's head or to the back of his neck is considered a variation on this Naked Strangle. The other important variation on this technique is when it is applied from the front with the opponent's head clamped under the armpit of the choking arm: the back of the head being squeezed into the armpit and the front of the throat being squeezed by the sharp edge of the forearm. The informal current term for this technique is 'the guillotine'. No doubt all of these variations came into play in Greek wrestling since all of them can be done without putting oneself too greatly in danger of being turned over onto one's back by the stranglee. In fact, the variation of the 'naked strangle' called 'the guillotine' came up very frequently in our re-creation of the ancient sport and if classical Greek depictions of Herakles strangling the Nemean lion in that famous mythological wrestling match are any indication, this variation of the 'naked choke' was one of the favourites of the ancient world; for obvious reasons. Wrestlers normally fight face to face since turning one's back to the opponent gives him a big advantage. Therefore it is from the front, while facing each other, that the strangle is most easily applied. This strangle can be applied just as easily from a standing position as from a kneeling position. Herakles and other wrestlers are frequently shown executing it and often from a standing posture on artwork of various media, from coins to monumental statuary, all the way from the Seventh Century B.C. to the Seventh Century A.D, and not only on lions¹⁷. We should, however,

¹⁷ See, for example, the Silver repoussé mirror from the Cyrene Treasure showing the Emperor Herakles represented as his mythical namesake strangling the Nemean lion (early Seventh Century A.D.) using the standing version of the 'naked choke' from the front. Also see the beautiful statue of Herakles strangling the Nemean Lion in this same way (a copy of a Greek original), 4th century B.C., marble at The Hermitage

never forget that one of the best uses of the strangling techniques in wrestling is to force the opponent's head to go where one wants it to and thereby land the opponent on his back. In the ancient sources which have survived until now, and that is precious few of the many works involving wrestling which must have existed in Ancient times, the 'naked choke' applied from the rear is the spectacular version of this technique seen fit to be included with the greatest description in works of literature. Indeed, applying this technique involves stretching the opponent out on his belly and face and strangling him until he taps out. It is surely the most complete and humiliating defeat possible in the sport: the whole body is completely tied up by the opponent and he is forced against his will to submit. This is utter domination of the type that the emotion-stirring poets loved.

Another remarkable similarity between this passage from Nonnos and modern Judo and other combat sports involving submission holds is in the mention made of tapping the opponent to signal submission. This is one of the very first things learned in any submission grappling club today and it is astounding to find the same thing being done thousands of years ago by the Ancient Greeks. However, if one thinks about it, tapping is the only possible way to signal for the opponent to stop while one is being strangled. One cannot shout and the opponent is not likely to notice a special finger symbol in the heat of the action. Tapping several times with the hand is immediately noticeable. In modern Judo, tapping the mat with the feet or hands is also legitimate, but we have no evidence for this in the ancient sources, nor we would not expect to find any, since the sand of their training grounds does not give off sound the way a modern mat does while being struck.

To return to the choke, we must ask why it is that this 'naked choke' is the only choke mentioned explicitly in the Ancient sources. This question can be answered. Judo allows any form of choke except the ineffective and dangerous-to-the-fingers 'horror-movie choke' where the thumbs are pressed into the front of the throat while the fingers squeeze. However, the only choke recognized to be effective on an opponent without clothing around his/her neck is the 'naked' choke. This is, remember, in a sport that allows virtually any kind of strangulation imaginable. In Greek wrestling, where a mere touch of the back to the ground constitutes a fall, the choke could never be applied from any angle without some fear of an imminent fall caused by the choked contestant rotating the shoulders or pushing with the whole body, so successfully applying it to a resisting opponent took some skill. It may surprise the uninitiated that there is a great deal of finesse and precision required in throttling someone. In fact, wrestling is a much more mentally demanding activity than a complex board game like Chess, since its intricate maneuvers must be analyzed and planned without having the leisure-time to sit and slowly think them through. Galen rails against the 'idiots of the wrestlers' who keep choking their opponents even after being turned onto their backs.

Α) Ἰ) (an tiv a)aisxunth|periplekwn te kai\mhpw katapeptwkehai sugxwpwn, o)ioiov estai toiv idiwtaiv twn palaistwn, oi(katabl hqentev upo\ twn palaistikwn kai\kata\ thv ghv upo)ioi keimenoι toouton debusi to\ptwma gnwrizein, w)ste kai\kratousi twn auxehwn autou\ tou\ katabal|ontav ouk evnatev apal|attesqai ka) toutw|nika\ upo)l ambahousi.
(Galen. On the Natural Faculties. II. ii. 80.)

at St. Petersburg. For this choke without a lion see for example Herakles wrestling with Antaios. Attic amphora, c. 520 B.C., of the Leogros Group, found at Vulci. British Museum B 222. *ABV* 370; *LIMC* I.2.

‘But whenever someone is impudently folding himself around (the opponent) and not yet conceding that he has fallen down, he is the same as the idiots of the wrestlers who, having been made to fall down by the wrestling experts and are lying with their backs on the ground, are so far from noticing the fall that they keep control of the necks of the ones having thrown them, not allowing them to escape, and because of this they assume that they win.’

The key word in this passage is **‘kratousi’**. The most literal rendering of it would be simply ‘they control’. At times this word can mean ‘take control of’ or alternatively ‘rule over’. It has more of a feeling of graduality and continuity to it than **‘aifew’** or **‘lambahw’** which both mean something more like ‘to seize’. We should not imagine a scenario here where the ‘idiot’ wrestler is thrown dramatically flat on his back from a standing position and then all of a sudden jumps up and grabs his still standing opponent around the throat. We should imagine a situation where the ‘idiot’ wrestler is attempting the strangle or a leveraging hold about the neck from behind, ‘folding himself around’ **‘periplekwn’** the experienced wrestler, and the experienced wrestler makes both of them roll together – but with the ‘idiot’s back, and not his, touching the ground. The ‘idiot’ being too slow to realize what has happened, in his naïve ignorance, keeps going for the chokehold, which the experienced wrestler does not attempt to prevent since he knows that he has already scored the fall, and so the ‘idiot’ is able to finally, to his great satisfaction and amazement, make the choke work, his excitement over this assumed success clouding his perception of what is really going on: namely that he has, to his great dismay, lost. In fact, this situation came up quite frequently in our re-creation of the sport, and it is easy to see how an inexperienced player would not suspect such a clever tactic on the part of the individual being choked.

This passage also demonstrates that the contestants were expected to separate after a point is scored. If they were not expected to, then the follow-up strangle in the passage above would count, and the player applying the strangle would not be termed an ‘idiot’ for not realizing he has already lost.

A third important lesson from this passage is that a submission hold could not have counted for any more than the value of a fall: one point only. If the submission hold were somehow of more value, someone focusing on cinching one in even though being thrown in the process could hardly be characterized as an ‘idiot’. He or she would instead have been making a sensible and calculated gamble.

Galen writes again alluding to the same situation:

α) ἰ) ὡς περ οἱ παντὲς ἠδὲ ἰδιώται παλαισμάτων οὐ γινώσκοντες κείμενοι ἐπὶ γῆς ἐπιθετοῦν τὸν νῦτον αὐτῶν ἐκόνται τῆς πᾶσι οὐ τῶν κἀβαλοῦντων οὐδὲ ἐπιτρέποντες ἀσθῆναι, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ οὐ εἰ ἀμαρτυροῦντες τῶν ἐν τοῖς λόγοις πτωμάτων οὐκ ἐπιτρέπουσιν ἀπαλλάτῃσιν. (Galen. 4.717.)

‘But just as the people who are complete idiots when it comes to wrestling moves, sometimes, not realizing that their back is lying on the ground, keep holding the throat of the people who threw them down, and do not allow them to stand up, in the same way also *these* people being untutored in the falls of words do not allow them to be released.’

This passage confirms the interpretation of the above since Galen is clearly using exactly the same image from the wrestling club to describe the ignorant naïve obstinacy of the people he disagrees with. Here the word **‘ekontai’**, the middle form of the verb **‘ekw’** means unquestionably ‘to keep hold of’.

The only way to ensure the attempt at the choke will not put one in danger of receiving a fall, is to attack a prone or quadrupedal adversary from behind, wrapping first with the legs to stretch the opponent out prone on his/her belly as was outlined above.

Nonnos in one other place in his *Dionysiaca* describes the wrestling-strangle. Dionysus enters a wrestling match with a beautiful woman. If he wins, he can marry her. He has just let her throw him, so she is leading by one point. However, as soon as he sees the opportunity to apply the strangle technique, he rushes in at once to do so.

... **Kai** ἐπιῶνον κέλιτο κούρη
xeirav eφάπλωσα: **titainome**hvd) ἐπιπέθη|
eupal amw|sfhkwsen o(ozugon **auxeha desmw|** (Nonnos. *Dionysiaca*. XLVIII. 169-71)

‘...and the girl lay on the ground
having spread out her hands; and while she was stretched out on the ground
he made her tied-up neck like a wasp’s waist with his skillful bond.’

This is simply a poetic way to say that he choked her. Whether this is the front or rear version of the ‘naked choke’ we cannot know. Perhaps it is from the front since his legs are not mentioned twining around her.

Her father, the referee for the bout does not cry “foul” or protest in the least the way he would have if choking were illegal, but instead sees that Dionysus has scored a point. He does not want them to go on competing because Dionysus’ frightful superiority has been proven through this strangle. He fears:

Mh/min aποκτείνειεν **ε**κwn **a**στέμφει/desmw| (Nonnos. *Dionysiaca*. XLVIII. 176)

‘Lest he kill her while holding her in his unrelenting bond.’

Strangulation was such a defining feature of the ancient sport of wrestling that ‘to strangle’ ‘**αἰχμειν**’ is the first word listed by the grammarian Pollux in his list of wrestling terms everyone should know¹⁸. In fact, we find evidence for the strangle in the writings of the Athenian comedian Aristophanes:

Dhmosqehhj
eξε nun, **a**)ειyon toh **trakhlon toutw|** /
ik' εἶπὸλ **isqahein duhh|ta** | diabol **aj** .
Allantopwl hj

a)l' eu | **e**geij **kai** **paidotribikw|** **tautagi** | (Aristophanes. *Knights*. 490-2.)

‘**Demosthenes**: Come now, grease your neck with this, so that it can escape from slander.
Allantopoles: You certainly speak well and like a wrestling trainer concerning this.’

This passage tells us that enabling the neck to ‘escape’ ‘**εἶπὸλ isqahein**’ from a hold came to the mind of Aristophanes while writing his play and seems to point out the particular vulnerability of the neck in wrestling.

Strangling is associated with wrestling by the Fourth Century B.C. orator Hyperides:

ei | **e**gw|ei) **toute** **aponoia** | **h** | **qon**, **w** | **te a** | **wn** **te** **tosoutwn** **aqrw|pwn**
sunakol ouqouhtwn kai **Diwci**ppou **kai** **Eu** | **fraibu** **tou** **prosgumnastou** **au** | **ou** = **oi** |
tw | **E** | **l** | **h** | **wn** **o** | **ol** **ogoume**hwj **i** | **xuro** | **at** | **oi** | **ei** | **sin**, **ou** | **h** | **xunomhn** **toioutouj**
logouj **legwn** **peri** **gunaiko** | **e** | **euqeraj** **pahtwn** **aqrouhtwn**, **qut** | **edi**ein **mh** \

¹⁸ Pollux. 3.155.

παῖαρχῆμα ἀπολωμαί πνιγόμενοι; ³(Hyperides. *Speeches. In Defense of Lycophron*. 1.6.)

‘Was I so insane that, with so many other people coming along, including Dioxippos and Euphraios his fellow-wrestler who are said to be the strongest of the Greeks, I was not ashamed of saying such things about a free woman with everyone listening, and I was not afraid of being strangled to death on the spot?’

He does not say ‘crushed to death’, or ‘dashed to the ground’ or something like these. He fears ‘being strangled’ **πνιγόμενοι**’ by the wrestlers. If choking were not allowed in Greek wrestling, he would have mentioned another mode of death at their hands.

Wrestling was used frequently by the classical writers as a metaphor for other things. Thus, when we find passages like those above which allude to strangulation, we can be certain that they are coming out of the experience of the wrestling-school, which all ‘decent’ Athenian citizens grew up in. For one example out of many Aristophanes uses wrestling in this way as a metaphor for rough dealing in business. Here the schemer (you) tries to find out:

**ὅστις αὐτῶν ὄψῳ ἐστὶν ἢ πεπῶν ἢ ἢν πεπῶν,
καὶ τὴν αὐτῶν γνῶν ἀπραγμὸν ὄψα καὶ κέχνητα,
καταγᾶγν ἢ Χερρονήσου διαβαλὼν ἀγκυρίσῃ
εἰς ἀποστρέψῃ τὸν ὄψον αὐτὸν ἐκὸς ἡβασῃ**: (Aristophanes. *Knights*. 262-5.)

‘which one of them is raw, or baked in the sun or not,
so you might get to know one who is inactive and open,
pulling him down after throwing him over from the Chersonese after hooking his leg with yours behind his knee

then after you turn his shoulder over, you fall heavily upon him’

We have very vivid wrestling imagery used here. The word **πεπῶν** ‘baked in the sun’ alludes to the sunburnt appearance of athletes who trained outdoors under the hot sun. We then have two very specific wrestling terms: **ἀγκυρίσῃ**’ describing a particular move involving hooking behind the opponent’s knee with one’s own to break his balance, and **ἀποστρέψῃ**’ concerning the ‘turning over’ of the opponent’s shoulder to make his back make contact with the ground.

We find Pindar singling out the neck’s importance in wrestling in his Seventh Nemean Ode. He is speaking in this section about his tongue as a javelin being thrown in that part of the pentathlon.

**γοᾶν γλῶσσαν, ὅς ἐτεπέμψεν παλ αἰσματῶν
αὐχένα καὶ σφῆροισι ἀλιάντων, αἰῶνι πρὶν ἀ(ίλ)υγιον ἐμπέσειν**. (Pindar. *Nemean Odes*. 7. ant. 4.)

‘my swift tongue, which set free the neck and unwetted strength from scoring moves in wrestling, before a limb attacks the burning sun.’

παλ αἰσματῶν’ is the genitive plural form of **παλ αἶσμα**’ which means ‘scoring move in wrestling’. It is the ‘neck’ and the ‘unwetted strength’ which are saved from being scored upon. If the neck were not a legitimate target for scoring upon, nor a part of the body singled out in particular for punishment in this tough sport, Pindar would not have thought to include the neck here. His inclusion of the neck in this passage as something needing to be saved from scoring moves tells us of the importance of the

choke in wrestling. Clearly what can be inferred by this passage is that in the wrestling Pindar witnessed, the body became sweaty and the neck very uncomfortable.

Plato has an athletics trainer describe an unexercised individual as unable to sleep well and:

te kai\αἶτον kai\αἰριβήτοη τραχίον ἐκόντα kai\ἐπτοη ὑπό\μεριμωῶ
(Plato. Lovers. 134b)

‘...and malnourished and having an unchafed neck and skinny because of worries’

The exercised individual, then, would be the opposite of this and thus he would be well-rested, with a good appetite, with a *chafed* neck, strong in body and not disturbed by worries. The chafed neck is clearly a visual indication of participation in athletic training. The only two sports involving the neck are the wrestling and the pankration, and if the trainer here was referring to pankration, he would have said ‘unbruised face’ or ‘unblackened eyes’ or even ‘unbroken limbs’, but then that would go against the whole purpose of getting into shape, now would it not? The pankration’s defining element was its use of both hands and feet to pummel the opponent into submission. Quintus Smyrnaeus says as much when we writes of the pankration as the match of ‘**xersih** οἰῶν kai\ποσῖη’ ‘hand and foot equally’.¹⁹ The greatest fear anyone has of facing Ajax in this competition is:

fobēnto d\αἰα\φρεῖα, μή\τινα xersi
tulyav αἰαμαθηῖν ὑπό\πληγῆσι προσωπον
sugxeh\εἰς\sumehwv, mega d\αἰεῖρι phma gehhtai.

(Quintus Smyrnaeus. The Fall of Troy. IV.484-6.)

‘They feared in their heart lest, having hit someone with his hands, he might eagerly mess up that man’s face with unrelenting blows, and great pain should arise for the man.’

The most identifying feature of the pankration was the pummeling of the opponent into submission. Certainly grappling skills were very important in the pankration but primarily for holding the opponent in a position where he could be battered into giving up. In the same way, bonds were often needed when tying up slaves to be whipped, but even though the bonds are important to prevent the slave from avoiding the blows, it is the action of whipping that is the identifying feature of the punishment. A chafed neck would not be an identifying feature resulting from participation in this sport; a bruised face or crooked nose would be.

There is a section in Plato’s Laws that is frequently mistranslated as, and misunderstood as being, his desire to do away with all but standing wrestling. What it is instead is an expression of his desire to purify wrestling of the ‘win at all costs’ mentality current at his time, the kind Pindar celebrates in his Odes. He has just said how the underhanded tricks devised by famous athletes of myth to ensure victory for themselves are base, useless both for exercise and for war. Then he speaks of the way wrestling *really* should be done:

ta\de\αἰ\οἰ\ρη\ παλῆς, αἰ\ αὐ\ξηρῶν kai\χειρῶν kai\πλευρῶν ἐτεῖλῆσῶν,
meta\filonikiāz te kai\katastasewz diaponoumena met’ eu\xhmonoj r\vw\hj te
kai\υἰεῖαι\z eἴῆκα, tau\εἰ\ πάντα οἰ\τα xrh\tima ou\paretebōn (Plato. Laws. 796a.)

¹⁹ Quintus Smyrnaeus. The Fall of Troy. IV.480.

‘but the matters of correct wrestling: the freeing-up of necks and hands and sides, exercising with eager rivalry and under established rules with beautiful bodily strength for the sake of health, these things being useful for all things are not to be neglected’

This passage can deceive the translator without grappling experience. The word ‘**ορθῆς**’ can indeed mean ‘upright’, it is true, but here only in the sense of ‘correct’ or ‘orthodox’. He nowhere in the lead up to this passage decries the part of wrestling which happens on all fours. He does not do so anywhere. If he wanted to outlaw the ground-wrestling phase of the sport in his ideal city, he would have said so clearly. Also, the ‘**καταστασῶν**’ here is a feminine genitive which here means ‘in an orderly way’ or ‘according to the established way’. This word can only become ‘with graceful poise’ or something along those lines if we toy with and stretch the meaning to try to make it fit the mistranslated ‘upright’. Plato is not at all here recommending the doing away of wrestling rules allowing the knees and arms to touch the ground. He is instead stating how he wants the wrestling in his ideal city to be ideal: just like the city. This becomes very clear in the next few lines where he says that the students of wrestling should be eager to learn and the teachers should teach gently. This is presumably a criticism of the harsh training that the ‘win at all costs’ mentality produced in the agonistic culture of Ancient Greece. Trainers were presumably putting great pressure on their trainees to make them work harder for victory in competitions. The element of wrestling for fun or wrestling for health had been eclipsed by wrestling to win. Anyways, we yet again hear of the ‘freeing of the neck’ being a concern in wrestling. Since there is never anywhere anything written in the ancient sources about strangulation being prohibited in wrestling but in very many places we hear of strangulation not only being practiced, but it being a key wrestling skill and winning move, we can be quite certain that Plato is speaking about the freeing of the neck from strangle-holds.

Of course, a strangle-hold can also be used as a threat to make the opponent turn his back in order to avoid the completion of it. No doubt what Plato says here encompasses this kind of feint strangle as well.

The First Century A.D. Roman poet Statius tells us of precisely the same choking technique as witnessed in Nonnos in his *Thebaid*. Hercules is wrestling with Antaios the son of Mother Earth. He lifts Antaios up off the ground which gives him strength and then:

tunc alte librans inopinum sponte remisit
obliquumque dedit, procumbentemque secutus
colla simul dextra, pedibus simul inguina uinxit.
deficit obsessus soloque pudore repugnat.
tandem pectus humi pronamque extensus in aluum
sternitur, ac longo maestus post tempore surgit,
turpia signata linqvens uestigia terra. (Statius. *Thebaid*. VI. 898-904.)
‘Then balancing him on high he suddenly unexpectedly sent him back down
and landed him on his side, and following the prostrate man
encircled his neck with his right hand, and his groin with his feet.
Being choked, he is discouraged and he resists only out of shame.
After a while his chest is stretched out on the ground
and he on his prone stomach, and after a long time he gets up dejected,

leaving the disgraceful prints on the ground as witnesses.’

This technique is the same as that found in Nonnos above. It is obviously a choke and not merely a hold-down technique. The neck is being encircled by Hercules’ right hand. The word ‘tandem’ ‘after a while’ also gives away the fact that this is a choke, besides, of course, the use of the word ‘choked’ ‘obsessus’ itself. ‘Obsessus’ can also mean ‘encircled’ or ‘besieged’ so some have missed the element of strangulation in their translations of this passage, but since the context here is clearly one of strangulation, there is no excuse to use one of the other shades of meaning common to this word. There are yet other convincing reasons to translate this word as ‘choked’. A choke can take a while to apply, but with the arms and legs wrapped around the opponent, it is only a matter of time before he is strangled into submission. There is precious little that can be done as a defense when one is caught in this manner. It was such a well known part of myth that Hercules strangled Antaeus, and this choke was such a well known part of wrestling that it was hardly necessary for Statius to explicitly say ‘and Antaeus was being strangled’ any more than it is needed for us to specify that a basketball game was won ‘after the winning team put the ball many more times through the other team’s netted hoop than the other team put the ball through theirs.’ If Hercules’ arm had not been specified by Statius as encircling the neck of Antaeus, there might be some room for a misguided debate on the issue, but the explicit placing of arm to neck cinches the argument. ‘Obsessus’ means ‘strangled’. The left arm here is not mentioned, but that must be because it obviously is linking with the right hand to apply the technique, as it must in order to assure that the choke is tightened, and we have explained the mechanics of this above. It is in fact the part of the hand at the base of the thumb that presses into the opponent’s throat, so Statius’ use of ‘dextra’ ‘right hand’ here is more than appropriate and shows an intimate knowledge of wrestling on his part. At the time of Statius, in the First Century A.D., Greek sports were becoming very popular in his native Italy, and there were a number of Isolympic ‘equal to the Olympic’ Games which had been set up on the peninsula, including one at Rome, under the same rules as those current at Olympia. Statius, a devotee of Greek culture, had every opportunity to witness proper Greek wrestling and apply this knowledge to his description of the legendary Greek wrestling match.

Philo of Alexandria, writing also in the First Century A.D. summarizes the methods of scoring in wrestling thus:

ἐπιγῆν... φερεται ταπρωτεια (Philo. On Husbandry. 113.)

For in these things, the one having thrown someone down and stretched him out on his back or his face on the ground ... carries off the first prize for himself.

Here Philo does not explicitly say ‘choke’, but he is not trying to explain the rules of sports. His goal in this section of the text is to point out how the physical Olympic games are as nothing to the spiritual Olympic games under the supervision of the Jewish God. The fact that he feels compelled to mention that wrestling can be won by a throw followed by touching the opponent’s back to the ground or stretching him out on his face tells us clearly that touching the back to the ground is not the only way to win. Philo is trying to be brief and forceful in his argument, so to him this definition of wrestling must have been the most condensed possible. This passage has been taken as evidence for the

mere tying up the opponent in a prone position counting as a fall. The reason that this is illogical is that, since we know for a certainty that choking was allowed due to the myriad references to it, we must expect Philo would have reveled in the chance to say that in these mere physical games doing base things like casting someone onto his back and throttling him gain the prize. But he does not mention ‘throttling’. This must be because the stretching out on the face is indeed the throttling and the reader would clearly understand this. In Philo’s Platonic mindset, the lower down things are, the baser they are and the further from God. Thus, things happening on the ground are baser than things happening higher up. God lived up in the sky, so the closer one is to God physically, the closer, at least symbolically, to God one is. Having these competitors at the ‘base Olympics of the flesh’ having their backs and faces pushed into the dirt is just the kind of base symbolism Philo needs here to ram his point home. So instead of using ‘throttling’, he prefers to use ‘stretching him out on his face’, which the reader would know means throttling since choking tends to entail stretching the opponent out on his face as a necessary precursor; and also happily adds the base element of face being pushed into dirt.

There is however some evidence for carrying an opponent out of the wrestling-ground counting as a fall. It comes from the Christian writer Nilus:

Mesol aboutwn h(gav kai\ew ballohtwn tou skammatov, ofer kai\au)to\ ei)kai\mhptwma, a)l) o(wv h)ta/esti - - - (Nilus. PG 79. 1049.)

‘grabbing us by the waist and throwing us outside of the wrestling-ground, is the very same thing, even if not a fall, but it is equally a defeat.’

All wrestling styles have to decide what to do when the contestants end up going out-of-bounds. That throwing the opponent out of the bounds counted as a victory and was an element in Greek wrestling seems far too congruent with the general simplicity of the sport to doubt the verity of this Christian writer’s assertion. We cannot be sure of the size of wrestling-grounds but Vitruvius makes his palaestra’s grappling area three hundred Greek feet wide and presumably a square²⁰. Lucian tells us that the athletic competitions were held in the same buildings as those used for training purposes, so this testimony of Vitruvius must give us an indication of the size of the competitive wrestling area²¹. This gives about 92.5 metres square. It is a very large square. We must guess that the competitions took place starting at the center of the ground and so rarely would they end up out of bounds. Therefore, we must conclude that throwing someone out of the bounds was not the main focus of the sport the way it is in Sumo, which utilizes a very small circular wrestling space. However, if for some reason one of the contestants was driven out of the bounds, it was his loss.

At Elis, where the Olympics took place, the wrestling was held out-of-doors in the Stadium, on a part of the racing track called the *Skamma*, which means ‘dug-up’. Where exactly on the track this *Skamma* was located, and whether the runners’ track was broken up with pickaxes²² or whether sand was imported to create it, or whether it was simply a marked-off area within the stadium, we do not yet know. Certainly the maximum possible width of this area comes nowhere near that of the palaestra, which was really created for training, where multiple pairs of wrestlers could exercise simultaneously at any given time. The length of the stadium is 212.54 metres and the width is 28.5 metres.

²⁰ Vitruvius, XI. 1.

²¹ Lucian. *Anacharsis*. 8.

²² As Theocritus tells us in *Idylls* 4.10

If we might assume a rough square being the area allotted for wrestling, we have a 28.5 by 28.5 metre area, which is still a very large area. The Fourth Century A.D. orator Libanius speaks of the wrestling area as a **pleθron** 'Plethron', which is a measure of 100 Greek feet or 101 English feet²³. This is 30.8 metres; remarkably close to the measurements we have surmised for the Olympic wrestling-ground. Perhaps this 'Plethron' is the official length and width for the wrestling-area, in the same way that the 'Stade' is the official length of the Stadium. In all events, there is no doubt that lifting and casting the opponent out of the *Skamma* must have occurred very infrequently.

For larger competitions, we must assume that outdoor venues were preferred and so a city's stadium or hippodrome would be the obvious places for hosting the combat events. In fact, we hear of three kinds of wrestling-pits being found in palaestra: sand, mud and expensive oiled-mud²⁴. One must wonder if training in all three was seen as necessary to be ready for competitions where the rain had made the ground slippery. Lucian merely tells us that the mud-pits were used to strengthen the grip, but this may not have been the only reason for training in this kind of medium.

We know that joint locks were allowed in Greek wrestling through two sources: one providing proof that finger-bending to force submission was a legitimate way to win, and another proving that it was not. The first is found in Pausanias' travel guide to Greece where he remarks of a statue put up at Olympia by the wrestling victor Leontiskos of Messene that he won by twisting his opponents' fingers until they surrendered²⁵. Unfortunately, Pausanias says that 'it is said that', so we may have an incorrect memory of what the wrestler really did. Of better use to us is the discovery at Olympia of a Sixth Century B.C. inscription banning the breaking of fingers and the empowerment of the judges to whip the offenders²⁶. It may have been that the decree was forgotten in Leontiskos' time, or it may be that the tale of Leontiskos was mere hearsay and had no basis in fact; for our purposes it hardly matters. The fact that on the one hand we have seeming evidence for the allowance of finger-twisting to cause submission and on the other we have a decree forbidding finger-breaking only, we can be absolutely certain that other limb-twisting techniques were perfectly legal. Nowhere is there any evidence of limb-twisting techniques being disallowed. In fact, there are statues where arm-locks are clearly being applied²⁷. No doubt arm and other joint locks were used primarily as a way of forcing the opponent to turn over onto his back. However, if he refused to move he would have to submit and thus threat of forcing a submission lies behind the use of these locks. It is not to be doubted though that at times players did indeed submit because of joint locks or other crushing moves. To be sure, the crushing, twisting, falling, spinning and utter domination witnessed in Ancient wrestling surely contributed to its great appeal and to the great respect in which skilled wrestlers were held.

St. Ambrose, writing in the Fourth Century A.D., alludes to the rules of wrestling in his commentary on Psalm 36:

²³ Libanius. *Orationes*. 10

²⁴ Plutarch. *Moralia*. 638c-d.

²⁵ Pausanias. VI. 4. 2.

²⁶ Poliakoff, M. *Combat Sports in the Ancient World* (Yale:1987) p. 28 and notes.

²⁷ See, for example, Double Armlock. Bronze statuette, Hellenistic era. Munich Antikensammlungen S. L. 18. or Armlock. Bronze statuette, Hellenistic era. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore 54.1050.

‘In hoc itaque saeculari agone alii sunt qui simplici quodam et legitimo genere luctantur et ligaturis tantum et corporis certant, verberare non norunt, qui palaestritae vocantur’ (Ambrose. Commentary on Psalm 36. 55.)

‘And so in the contest of this age there are some who wrestle in a certain way without fear and according to law and they compete only with bindings and of the body, they do not learn to hit, they who are called wrestlers’

‘...nec aufertur bravium, nisi fuerit fusus in uentrem aut distentus uinculo lacertorum.’ (Ambrose. Commentary on Psalm 36. 51.)

‘nor is the prize gotten, if he has not been laid prostrate on his belly or distended with a bond of the biceps.’

Here it appears that simply forcing an opponent on his belly counts as a fall, and we come across a similar situation in the wrestling match in Heliodorus’ Ethiopian Tale. This depends on the meaning of the word ‘aut’. Does it mean simply ‘or’, as it can, or does it mean ‘or rather’ or ‘or more specifically’, as it also can? This passage is in fact ambiguous, but seeing the ‘aut’ as meaning ‘or more specifically’ to elaborate upon the ‘fusus in ventrum’ ‘prostrate on his belly’ is far more probable an interpretation. If ‘laid prostrate on his belly’ is enough to score, then why must Ambrose add ‘distended with a bond of the biceps’ as something different? The prostrating the opponent should be enough, and distending the opponent with the biceps hardly marks itself out as a different form of victory. Distending the opponent is an integral part of laying him out prone. It seems far more sensible that the distending with the biceps is indeed part of the laying the opponent out prone and therefore the ‘aut’ should mean ‘or more specifically’ here. It is hard to see how touching the belly to the ground would count as a fall if the purpose of wrestling is to avoid turning the back at all costs. As long as the wrestler on the bottom is not being strangled into submission, there is nothing preventing him from struggling out of the hold. The contestant on top is at a disadvantage in terms of balance since his centre of balance is higher and he can easily be rolled off of the other’s back if he does not complete the choke fast enough. Anyways, the briefly described laying out prone and the distending with the biceps we find here fits in all too well with the detailed descriptions of the ‘naked choke’ which we come across in the sources. Besides, what part of the body is small enough and weak enough to be distended by the biceps if not the neck?

The wrestling match in Heliodorus’ Ethiopian Tale has generated some debate as to whether it is a real wrestling match or whether it is some debased form. The match takes place outside of the Greek world in an exotic setting under the supervision of a non-Greek king. The debate circles mostly around the seeming use of striking in what otherwise appears to be a perfectly normal Greek wrestling match:

**ἀγρόβη τε ἐπίδραμῶν τὸν τε πῆχυν τῷ αὐχέῃ τοῦ Θεαγένου ὡς περ
τῆναι μολὸν ἐπαρᾶσει καὶ βόμβου πρὸς τὴν πλῆγην ἐπακousσῆντον** (Heliodorus. X. 31. 4.)

‘And suddenly, having run up, he dashed his forearm into Theagenes’ neck just like a prying-bar and while the thump from the blow was being heard far away...’

The Ethiopian is indeed hitting Theagenes here. It seems that he is bending the rules rather than fighting as if it were the pankration. He is not hitting Theagenes with the hands or kicking him, as he would do if it were legal to do so. The Ethiopian is ‘playing rough’. The blows with the forearm could be taken as attempts to grab hold of

the neck and so are the kind of thing the referees in a Greek wrestling bout might let slip since it is inevitable that bodies will sometimes collide with each other in wrestling. Eventually, Theagenes gains the upper hand when he casts him forward, unbalancing him somewhat and:

Καὶ ὑποὺν τῆν μάσχα ἠναδὺν τοῖν τε νωτοῖν περιεχεῖτο, καὶ παρὰ τὴν γαστέρα χαλεπῶν ταῖν χερσὶ διαζώσας τὴν βάσιν τε κατὰ τὰ σφύρα καὶ ἀστράγαλον τῆν πτέρην ἰσφοδρῶν τε καὶ παρὰ τὴν ἰχθυὸν ἐμoxλεῦσας εἰς γόην τε οὐκ ἴσασαι βίασάμενον ἀμφιβαίνει τοῖν ποσὶ καὶ τοῖν κατὰ τοῦν βουβωνῶν τὰ σκέλη καταπεῖρας τοῦ τε κάρπου οἱ ἐπερείδομενον ο(Αἰθίοβ) ἀείξει τὰ στήθνα ἐκρούσάμενον καὶ τοῖν κροτάφοις εἰς ἀίμα τοῦν φκέις περιαγάγων ἐπὶ τε τὰ μεταφρένα καὶ ὠμῶν ἀεὶ κων ἐφαπῖσας τῆν γῆν τῆν γαστέρα καθνάγκασε. (Heliodorus. X. 32. 1-2.)

‘And having hooked him under his armpit he gripped around him tightly at the back, and with difficulty he girded his stomach and fastened his hands together, and having pried the bottom of his foot at the heel along the ankles and the ankle bones violently and continuously, and having forced him to bend down onto his knees, he encircled him with his feet and with the parts below his groin (i.e. inner thighs), having attacked his legs, and lifting up the wrists which the Ethiopian was leaning heavily upon while struggling to keep his chest away (from the ground), and leading his forearms around the man’s temples in a noose and stretching them up towards the man’s middle-back and shoulders he forced his stomach down to spread out over the earth.’

The main article of dispute in this passage must be whose forearms encircle the Ethiopian’s temples. The ‘**τοῦν φκέις**’ ‘the forearms’ does not give us the possessor. It however makes a great deal more sense to assume they are the forearms of Theagenes, especially since they form ‘into a noose’ ‘**εἰς ἀίμα**’ around the Ethiopian’s temples. Forming a noose with the Ethiopian’s own forearms around his own temples is not feasible; it is too easy to resist, and it is silly. Instead what we have here is Theagenes exploiting the weakness that all necks have, since the neck is the weakest and most vulnerable part of any human, by forcing the Ethiopian’s head back, drawing it back towards the man’s own back. This is not a choke, but instead an attack on the vertebrae of the neck. Judo has several techniques which can cause sufficient discomfort to the vertebrae of the neck to induce a submission, but this particular technique of Theagenes is illegal in Judo due to its dangerous nature. Clearly, the Ethiopian has played rough, and so has Theagenes, but certainly well within the rules of Greek wrestling, that wrestling which Theagenes is said to be highly skilled at; in fact, he has just scored a fall on a bull. Once Theagenes pulled away the supporting arms of the Ethiopian, the arms are out of play since they cannot reach behind with strength enough to counter Theagenes’ pulling-backwards on his head. This bout ends with the Ethiopian in a painful and awful contortion: a submission move. It is no wonder the King does not give the Ethiopian time to tap out as we know wrestlers did in Greek wrestling, since a moment more could have resulted in his neck being broken. Theagenes is intended for sacrifice and this bout is a mere diversion for the people before he is to die. The Ethiopian warrior-champion is chosen to wrestle with Theagenes because of Theagenes’ feats with the bull, to please the people. The entire scene replete with elephant and camel certainly rests for inspiration on the author’s experiences of the games of the amphitheatre. The king does not want his champion to die.

The author of the only coach's manual to survive from antiquity, Philostratus, tells us how large shoulders which stick up are a key defence in wrestling, protecting the neck:

Οἱ γὰρ τοιοῦτοι καὶ κάμπτουμένου τοῦ αὐχένου καὶ στρεβλομένου ὑποὺ τῆν παλὴν ἀγᾶτοι ἔσονται ἀκὲν προσεῖδόντες τῆν κεφαλὴν ἐκ τῶν βραχιόνων.
(Philostratus. On Gymnastics. 35.)

‘For such shoulders, even while the neck is being bent and wrenched by the wrestling, are good guards, pressing against the head from the arms.’

This bit of advice demonstrates to us very clearly that it was important for wrestlers to defend against neck-encirclements and choke holds. As has been already stated, applying pressure with a hold around the neck can be a very persuasive way to make an opponent turn onto his/her back. Unconsciousness can result within three or four seconds if a neck-hold is applied well, and even if it is not applied so well as to force immediate submission, it can force the opponent to go in the direction one wants him/her to. Evidently, shrugging the shoulders to avoid a choke was every bit as important to the Ancient Greeks as it is today to modern Olympic Judo athletes or submission wrestlers.

The popularity of wrestling in Philostratus' time can perhaps be estimated from the fact that he devotes more than four times as much space in describing the ideal wrestling physique than he does for that of any other single sport.

When he writes: **οἱ δὲ ταύρων ἀπαυξενίζοντες οἱ δὲ αὐτῶν λόνταν.** ‘And some men forcing back the necks of bulls and lions.’ after having just told us that some men of legendary times raced against horses and hares, we must suspect that the ones racing against the animals were training for the foot-races and those forcing back the bulls' and lions' necks were training for wrestling: another indication of the importance of putting pressure on the neck in wrestling.

Lucian, the Second Century A.D. comic writer of satire, describes the ‘naked choke’ four times in his Anacharsis of which two instances will be of interest to us here. The other two are mingled in with other combat-sport references and are less descriptive, being mere reiterations of what the character Anacharsis, the foreign visitor to Sixth Century B.C. Solonian Athens, has already described. The two instances we shall study here are specified explicitly by Lucian as being wrestling and not the Pankration. In the very first sentence, we find some wrestlers **οἱ δὲ ἀγχοῦσι** ‘who are strangling’ their practice-partners²⁸. This is exactly the wrestling-term listed by Pollux in his grammatical work. Anacharsis continues to describe the wrestling he sees, and soon we hear more about choking. In fact, his depiction of choking takes up half his description of the wrestling activities he witnesses.

Εἶτε ἐπικαταπέσων ἀνακῦπτεῖν οὐκ ἐπι-συνωγρά-κατῶ εἶτε τὸν φιλόν:
τελὸν δὲ τῆν περιπέτασιν αὐτῶν τὰ σκελῆ κατὰ τῆν γαστέρα τὸν φῆξιν ὑπόβαλῶν
τῶν αἰμῶν ἀγχεῖ ἀλλῶν, οὐδὲ παρακροτεῖ εἶτε τὸν ἄλλον, ἰκτεῦλν οἱ αἶμα, ἠὲ
μητέλεον ἀποπνίγει. (Lucian. Anacharsis. 1. 9-13.)

‘Then, having fallen upon him, he does not allow the man to lift up his head, pressing the man's head into the mud. And to finish him off now, having twined his legs around him along the man's belly, having laid his forearm under the man's throat, he strangles the poor guy, and the poor guy pats his strangler's shoulder, begging, I suppose, that he not strangle him to death.’

²⁸ Lucian. Anacharsis. 1.

This is precisely the same ‘naked choke’ witnessed in Nonnos above. The tapping out, is, interestingly, also evident, confirming that tapping out was a key feature of the ancient sport.

Later, after describing the benefits of boxing and the Pankration, the character Solon describes what techniques wrestlers learn:

Οἷοι δὲ αὐτῶν κατὰ τὴν σὺννευκότην παλαίωσιν, καταπίπτειν τε ἀσφαλῶς μακροῦσι καὶ ἀνίστασθαι εὐμαρῶς καὶ ὠγισμοῦ καὶ περιπλοκᾶς καὶ ὠγισμοῦ καὶ ἀγχεσθαι δυνασθαι καὶ ἐκ τῶν ἀβάστασαι τὸν ἀντίπαλον, (Lucian. Anacharsis. 24. 18-21)

‘The ones pressing together below are wrestling, and they learn to fall down safely and to stand back up easily, and pushings, entwining, bendings, to endure to be choked, and to lift the other wrestler up high.’

Here we have the techniques of Ancient Greek wrestling encapsulated for us in one sentence, and choking is an integral part.

Having seen all the myriad references to strangling in wrestling from the ancient sources, we must accept the vast preponderance of evidence and accept that strangulation and submission-holds in general were an essential and inseparable part of the most popular form of wrestling in the Greek and Roman worlds.

What then were the rules?

The Rules of Ancient Greek Wrestling

To summarize the above arguments we propose the following as being the rules of Ancient Greek wrestling:

- 1) No intentional hitting or kicking is permitted
- 2) No gouging the eyes or biting is permitted, since even the Pankration does not allow these
- 3) It is at the discretion of the holders of the games whether or not twisting the fingers with the intention of forcing the opponent to concede defeat is permitted
- 4) Grasping the genitals is not permitted
- 5) All other holds intended to persuade the opponent to concede defeat through pain or fear are permitted and are an integral part of the contest
- 6) Infractions shall be punished by immediate whipping by the referee until the undesirable behaviour is stopped
- 7) Three points must be scored to win the match
- 8) A point can be scored in any of three ways:
 - a) the opponent’s back touching the ground at any time
 - b) by the opponent tapping or in some other way making clear that s/he concedes defeat through pain or fear
 - c) by the opponent making contact with ground outside the allocated wrestling-match ground with any part of his/her body or by being lifted and carried out
- 9) After scoring a point, the opponent must be given time to rise on his/her feet and a few moments more before the wrestling may continue

- 10) The match is both started and ended at the signal of the referee
- 11) The referee can at any time stop the match if s/he believes a point has been scored but the contestants have continued to wrestle unaware of the point having been scored
- 12) The referee or other officials in charge of the contest, if other officials are presiding, shall resolve any dispute the contestants have over scoring, and their decision shall be final
- 13) The wrestling-ground shall be a large square, 28.5 by 28.5 Metres, or any other size determined by the holders of the games, and it shall be all of sand or earth
- 14) The contestants shall begin the match at the center of the wrestling-ground outside of each other's touching-range, the precise distance being at the discretion of the referee
- 15) All other more specific details are at the discretion of the officials presiding over the games

Ancient Greek Wrestling Re-Created

Using this set of rules as a guideline, with the help of the Kakure Judo Club in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, we were able to practice and film the resurrected sport of Ancient Greek Wrestling. The video of this is available for those interested. The similarities between modern Judo and the ancient sport are such that it was thought Judo athletes would be in the best position to adapt their tactics to the ancient Greek rules with a minimum of difficulty. The experiment was held as a fully competitive event using three senior members of the club who all have more than ten years experience in Judo and other forms of wrestling. However, instead of running it as a tournament, we ran it as if it were an imagined Ancient Greek practice session, where the scorer stays in and the loser cycles out, thus making for a more interesting and challenging session where the stronger and more skilled players could eventually be defeated by the better-rested weaker players and thereby permitting a greater range of successful techniques involving competitors of various sizes and levels of skill. We made a list of the submission-inducing techniques most attempted and most often successful in scoring. Images of them appear below ranked according to frequency attempted.

They are, from left to right, top to bottom:

- 1) The naked choke applied from the front while standing
- 2) The naked choke applied from the front while kneeling
- 3) The naked choke applied from the rear while lying prone (view 1)
- 4) The naked choke applied from the rear while lying prone (view 2)
- 5) The naked choke applied from the rear while lying prone, with a variant grip
- 6) A distension of an arm encouraging submission
- 7) A twisting of an arm and hooking of a leg to induce the opponent to roll onto his back (view 1)
- 8) A twisting of an arm and hooking of a leg to induce the opponent to roll onto his back (view 2)

While we hold that we did indeed re-create Ancient Greek wrestling, we do not suppose that the competitors were in a position to fully exploit the rules to their advantage, even

after holding several practice-sessions prior to filming. In fact, once, a contestant made the mistake of turning onto his back in order to more successfully apply a choking technique. Also, the lack of clothing made gripping much more difficult than what the Judo athletes were accustomed to.

While the list of techniques shown above and the accompanying images speak for themselves, there are certain things worth noting. The neck was a prime target for gripping with the wrists and forearms, ideally to induce submission, but more often to put the opponent on the defensive or persuade him to move in one direction or another. Arm distending and twisting techniques were also attempted, although less often than chokes, and primarily to induce the opponent to turn over onto his back. There was, however, one successfully applied arm-lock which resulted in a submission. Trippings, turnings, draggings and all other movements common to wrestling styles everywhere were frequently attempted and frequently successful. A crushing of the head and neck to induce submission through pain alone succeeded once. The more exhausted the competitors, the more time was spent in the ground-fighting phase of the match.

Of note also is that the athletes enjoyed this sport very much, finding it to be fast-paced with frequent scoring, open to a vast array of visually spectacular movements, constantly changing in positioning, non-threatening, non-injurious, good exercise, and in their opinions good training for self-defense.

The contestants are as follows:

David Malar (Coach of Kakure Judo Club)

Mike Anacleto

Christopher Miller

With help from:

Angelika Jardine (video-photography)

James Lee (still-photography, assistant trainer)

L. Robert and Zina Miller (photographic equipment)

Appendix: A List of Ancient Exercises from Galen's *De Sanitate Tuenda*

Philostratus mentions that jumping weights are to be used by all athletes for strengthening the shoulders and hands, and round ones for the fingers as well²⁹. The round ones are clearly harder to grip and thus afford better exercise for the fingers. The fact that he says the jumping weights are for the shoulders and hands is telling, since the jumping-weight exercises listed by Galen seem to exercise these parts and not the biceps, which is the target muscle area first coming to mind to many when they think of dumbbells. It may well be that the stone weights used by the athletes were normally too light or too off-balanced and awkward to use for bicep-curls. This is all Philostratus has to say about solo training outside of sport specific workouts such as hitting small and large punching bags for the boxers and pankratiasts respectively.

Galen divides his exercises into three categories, which we may term 'strong', 'rapid' and 'violent', which is a combination of the preceding two³⁰. Galen's listing of the exercises gives us a fascinating glimpse into the everyday activities of the palaestrae, gymnasia and other more leisurely-areas of the ancient world. The affinities they have with the various sporting events can be made out: kicking of the legs for pankration, rope-climbing for wrestling, holding the arms up for boxing,

Strong:

- 1) Digging
 - 2) Picking up something heavy
 - 3) Picking up something heavy and walking with it
 - 4) Walking uphill
 - 5) Climbing a rope using hands and feet: commonly done to train boys in the wrestling schools
 - 6) Hanging-onto a rope or beam for as long as possible
 - 7) Holding the arms straight out in front with fists closed
 - 8) Holding the arms straight up with fists closed
 - 9) Holding out the arms while a partner pulls them down
 - 10) The preceding three exercises but while holding something heavy such as jumping-weights
 - 11) Breaking loose from a wrestling waist-lock
 - 12) Holding onto a person trying to escape from the waist-lock
 - 13) Picking up a man who is bending over at the hips and lifting him up and swinging him around
 - 14) Doing the same but bending oneself at the hips also when picking him up
 - 15) Pushing chest to chest trying to force the opponent backwards
 - 16) Hanging from another's neck, attempting to drag him down
- Exercises requiring a wrestling-pit:
- a) Entwine your partner with both your legs around one of his and try to apply a choke or force his head backwards
 - b) The same but using only one leg to entwine the opponent's leg closest to yours

²⁹ Philostratos. *Gymnastika*. 55

³⁰ Galen. *De Sanitate Tuenda*. II. 8-11.

c) The same but using both legs to entwine both of the opponent's legs

Rapid

- 1) Running
- 2) Shadow-boxing
- 3) Boxing
- 4) Hitting punching bags
- 5) Throwing and catching a small ball while running
- 6) Running back and forth, reducing the length each time by a little until finished
- 7) Stand on the balls of the feet, put the arms up in the air and rapidly and alternately bringing them forward and back; stand near a wall if afraid of losing one's balance
- 8) Rolling on the wrestling-ground rapidly by oneself or with others
- 9) Rapidly changing places with people next to one in a tightly packed group
- 10) Jumping up and kicking both legs together backwards
- 11) Kicking the legs forward alternately
- 12) Move the arms up and down rapidly with open or closed fist, increasing in speed

Violent:

- 1) Digging rapidly
- 2) Casting the discus
- 3) Jumping repeatedly with no rest
- 4) Throwing heavy spears and moving fast while wearing heavy armour
- 5) Any of the 'strong' exercises executed rapidly: presumably running uphill, swinging jumping-weights forward and back, and lifting them up and down, chin-ups and so on

Other exercises:

- 1) Walking
- 2) Bending up and down repeatedly at the hips
- 3) Lifting a weight up from the ground
- 4) Holding up an object for a long time
- 5) Full and loud breathing
- 6) Placing two weights on the ground approximately six feet from each other, picking up the one on the left with the right hand and then the one on the right with the left hand, then in turn placing them back where they came from on the ground and doing this many times while keeping the feet stationary

What do these exercises tell us about Ancient athletics? They tell us certainly which muscles were most prized. Clearly the back and shoulder muscles were considered of especial importance since so many of the exercises focus on these muscle-areas. The legs too get some attention with the jumping, kicking, walking and running. The focus on training for both applying and resisting chokes is apparent in the wrestling drills mentioned here. If we could only find push-ups, sit-ups, and benches, the list would seem to include quite everything a Twenty-First Century athlete could reasonably hope to find. But, push-ups, so good for the pectoral muscles, are not found here, nor are they alluded to. Exercises specifically for the stomach also seem to be lacking; in fact, bellies on ancient statuary protrude slightly. It may perhaps be too much to expect to find weight-lifting benches in ancient gymnasias, since they take up a lot of space that could be

used for other activities. Certainly those exercises involving the picking up of weights involved the use of the biceps. We should of course not forget that wrestling is itself a form of weight-lifting and bodybuilding so wrestling would have developed many parts of the body not covered by these exercises.

Images



They are, from left to right, top to bottom:

- 9) The naked choke applied from the front while standing
- 10) The naked choke applied from the front while kneeling
- 11) The naked choke applied from the rear while lying prone (view 1)
- 12) The naked choke applied from the rear while lying prone (view 2)



- 13) The naked choke applied from the rear while lying prone, with a variant grip
- 14) A distension of an arm encouraging submission
- 15) A twisting of an arm and hooking of a leg to induce the opponent to roll onto his back (view 1)
- 16) A twisting of an arm and hooking of a leg to induce the opponent to roll onto his back (view 2)

Herakles Strangling the Nemean Lion. Artist: Suzanne Miller. © 2004 Reproduced here with permission.



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