

The Historical Perspective of Athletic Sudden Death



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KEYWORDS

• Sudden death • Athletes • Historical perspective • Sports cardiology

KEY POINTS

- From ancient Greece to modern elite-level sports, the athlete has been celebrated within small communities and at the international level.
- Athletic sudden death is a rare event, but the sudden death of an athlete, particularly in youth with the paradox of vitality and mortality, seems particularly tragic and often difficult to reconcile, increasing the magnitude of the tragedy.
- Screening athletes for conditions associated with sudden death varies by country, competition level, and physician opinion.

INTRODUCTION

Since antiquity, the athlete has been elevated to a heroic status both within small communities and at the international level. The paradox of heroic fitness and the shocking occurrence of an athlete's death increases the magnitude of the tragedy within and beyond the athlete's community. Although population studies reassure us that sudden death is rare for the athlete, sudden death of an athlete, particularly a youth, seems especially tragic and often difficult to reconcile. Death in the athlete as a written subject is reviewed in an effort to better appreciate the upsetting impact of an athlete's death. Over the past 2 centuries, initiatives have increasingly developed to protect the athlete, which have provided modern medicine with the perhaps impossible task of keeping athletes safe. In addition, the historical origin of sport, the athlete as a status, and sudden death are examined to understand their respective inputs to the calamity of athletic sudden death. In this article, athlete sudden death is analyzed from a historical and literary perspective and the development of modern initiatives to protect athletes from sudden death is reviewed.

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ATHLETICS AND THE ATHLETE

Definition and Origins of Ancient and Modern Sport

At one time or another, organized athletics have been used to worship deities, mourn at funerals, determine pay grade, train soldiers, celebrate rulers, entertain spectators, and as a means to fame and profit.¹⁻⁵ Athletic contests began in various ancient civilizations around the Mediterranean as early as 4000 BC.¹ Although the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Chinese, and Japanese practiced athletic competition, the Greeks provide the most famous example of elite athletics from antiquity.^{1,6,7} In addition to numerous local festivals, there were 4 primary international games for elite athletes in ancient Greece: the Olympic games dedicated to Zeus at Olympia beginning around 776 BC; the Pythian games dedicated to Apollo at Delphi beginning around 586 BC; the Isthmian games dedicated to Poseidon at the Isthmus of Corinth beginning around 582 BC; and the Nemean games dedicated to Zeus at both Nemea and Argos beginning around 573 BC.³ Dedicated spectators endured arduous travel to the festival camp not only from around the Peloponnese but as far as Cadiz and Egypt.⁴ Athletes competed in 12 sports at Olympia over the course of 5 days, which included 2-horse and 4-horse chariot racing; Pentathlon, which combined discus, javelin, long-jumping, running, and wrestling; youth competitions; 200-m, 400-m, and 3600-m running races; wrestling; boxing; the pankration, a violent sport similar to modern mixed martial arts; and a race-in-armor.⁴ Herodotus and Plutarch noted that victors of the preeminent games won relative fortunes in proportion to the athlete's fame, event popularity, and reputation of the festival.² The prodigious influence of athletics on ancient Greek culture is highlighted by the widespread use of the athlete, sport, and festivals as a common subject in Greek art, religion, literature, and mythology.^{3,8-11}

Although the origins of specific sports are scattered throughout the world, the resurgence of modern athletics in the West is predominately attributed to the British, with increasing organization of sport in the nineteenth century.¹ The first national championship in athletics is attributed to the Amateur Athletic Club in 1866, and the first governing athletic association to the Amateur Athletics Association in 1880. This development was shortly followed in the United States by the National Association of the Amateur Athletes of America in 1879 and Amateur Athletic Union in 1888.¹ The Olympic games themselves remained on a 1502-year hiatus as a stage for international competition until their revival in 1896 by the French Baron Pierre de Coubertin.^{1,4,12} The popularity of athletics exponentially increased over the following century, and the centennial Olympic games in Atlanta included 10,600 participants from 197 countries.¹² Participation has similarly increased at the national and local levels, with the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) noting that more than 470,000 athletes participated in varsity college athletics during the 2013–2014 season.¹³

Heroic Status of the Athlete

The elite athlete has enjoyed a celebrated status since antiquity.^{2,4,14} Not only were Greek champions greatly admired but some also were heralded as gods among mortals.^{2,12} In circa AD 170, Lucian, addressing Apollo in writing, wittily mocks the god that his shrines are no longer as popular as the statues of the athlete Polydamas for both worship and prayers of healing.² Pausanias melds the athlete with mythology in the story of Theagenes, a champion of both the pyx and pankration at Olympia and Delphi, by attributing Theagenes's success to being a purported illegitimate son of Herakles rather than purely human.² Greek deities themselves were also portrayed as

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