

Roman Women in Athletics

The women of the Roman world did not have as many opportunities in athletics as did the men. The only competition that excited the Romans was fighting, like wrestling, boxing, and pankration¹. This was because the Romans had been so used to the brutality of the gladiators. The women were able to play in ball games, and in the more violent competitions of the gladiators.

The Romans had a great number of games that involved balls. It was thought the Romans might have started playing soccer, but may not have played it as a team sport. Some other games that were played by Romans that included balls were Trigon, Harpastum, Expulsim Ludere, Pila, and Roman Ball.

A fresco of the bikini girls, which dates from the first half of the 4th century, shows women participating in various athletic activities. One part of the fresco depicts a woman playing with an oblongated medicine ball. Another woman was using dumbbells, and is depicted with the broader shoulders of a weightlifter. There is a last part of the fresco that shows two women playing with a little rubber ball. They are either playing catch or volleying a ball as in Trigon. The Romans had many different types of balls; they had soft bouncy ones and hard ones. There were at least six distinct types of balls; 1. The Trigon, 2. The Follis or Pila, 3. The Follis Pugillatorious or small Follis, 4. The Pila Paganica, 5. The Harpastum, and 6. The Wool Ball².

These types of games were ones that Romans typically did not care for as much, because they did not include fighting. It would have been easier for Roman women to

¹ Edward Norman Gardiner. "Athletics of the Ancient World". The University Press, Oxford 1971

² "Roman Ball Games". <http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/w/x/wxk116/romeball.html>

have participated in these types of games. These would have been looked at as more child's play and more open to women to participate in without much resistance.

Gladiators in the Roman world were both looked up to and down on. On one hand they were looked up to as tremendous athletes, and on the other looked down on because they were a low class of citizens. It was possible for gladiators to gain their freedom from fighting. When this would happen they would be given a wooden sword³. The first known gladiatorial games were held in 310 BCE, as recorded by Roman historian Livy. These games symbolized the re-enactment of the Campanians' military success over the Samnites in which they were aided by the Romans. The first Roman gladiatorial games were held in 246 BCE by Marcus and Decimus Brutus to honor their father Junius Brutus⁴. The tradition of gladiators started according to the Romans as a religious tradition.

The idea of a female gladiator is one of debate. There are many signs that point to the fact that there were females that participated, but many do not want to believe that it was true. Records show that in 63 BCE that Emperor Nero, in honor of the visiting King of Armeninan, had every sort of fighter perform, even women. However, Emperor Domitian is given credit for having the first women gladiators. Domitian had the women gladiators fight against dwarfs. The female gladiator saw an end to her arena days in 200 CE when Emperor Severus banned women from competing. It is unknown as to why he banned them because Severus had allowed them to compete for seven years before banning them⁵.

³ Steven Murray. "Female Gladiators of the Ancient Roman World".
http://ejmas.com/jcs/jcsart_murray_0703.htm

⁴ "Roman Gladiators". <http://tewinkle.nmusd.k12.ca.us/johuy.html>

⁵ Graham Ashford. "Women Gladiators?". <http://www.ludus.org.uk/r/essaywomen.html>

The best piece of archaeological proof of gladiators is from Halicarnassus, which can be found in the British Museum. This stone is of two female gladiators, and has the names of Amazonia and Achillea carved into it. These are said to be the names of the female gladiators that are depicted on the stone. The two women are helmetless and appear to have their helmets on the ground next to them. The inscription on the stone says that both fighters were set free. This means that they received their freedom through fighting and most have been very skilled. They believe that the stone is dated between the first and second century of the Common Era⁶.

Often times it is thought that women gladiators were made fun of because they were women. It is true that sometimes this may have happened since they were forced to fight against dwarfs. This stone however contradicts those thoughts that people may have held. The reason is that it is highly unlikely that a stone carving of these women being freed would have been made if women gladiators were not of some importance or liking.

Women gladiators competed much the same as the men did. They fought against women, they fought against men, and they fought against beast. The women received the same equipment as the men did during their battles. When fighting against men the women would occasionally be in chariots. Not everyone was in favor of women fighting. Some held the view that women should not fight at all, while others just thought that women of status should not fight. It was also thought that senators should not fight either. Juvenal was one that did not think that women should fight at all. His view was that women should not be gladiators. The views and insights of Juvenal are expressed in this attack against female gladiators:

⁶ Graham Ashford. "Women Gladiators?". <http://www.ludus.org.uk/r/essaywomen.html>

Who has not seen the dummies of wood they slash at and batter? Whether with swords or with spears, going through all the moves? These are the girls who blast on trumpets in honour of Flora. Or, it may be, they have deeper designs, and are really preparing for the arena itself. How can a woman be decent? Sticking her head in a helmet, denying her sex she was born with? Manly feats they adore, but they wouldn't want to be men, Poor weak things (they think), how little they really enjoy it! What great honour it is for a husband to see, at an auction. Where his wife's effects are up for sale, belts, greaves, Manica and plumes! Hear her grunt and groan as she works at it, parrying, thrusting; See her neck bent down under the weight of her helmet. Look at the rolls of bandage and tape, so her legs look like tree trunks. Then have a laugh for yourself after the practice is over, Armour and weapons are put down, and she squats as she uses the vessel. Ah, degenerate girls of the line of our praetors and consuls, Tell us, whom have you seen got up in any such fashion, Panting and sweating like this? No gladiators wench, No tough strip-tease broad would ever so much as attempt it⁷.

The common gladiator would have been recruited from slaves or criminals. There were cases of people selling themselves into slavery so that they could compete as a gladiator. A reason given for this is that most of the time a gladiator was allowed to keep all or a percentage of their winnings from their matches. Most of the people who did end up doing this did so for financial gain. After winning their matches, they could use what they won to get themselves out of debt⁸.

Recently there has been a grave site that has been uncovered that is believed to be that of a female gladiators. Some argue that it is not, but there is more proof showing that it is indeed that of a woman's grave. The grave is that of a first century CE woman and was dug up in the greater London area. The Museum of London claims that these are the first remains ever found of a female gladiator. This was the first physical evidence that proved that there were women gladiators. There had always been some knowledge of

⁷ Graham Ashford. "Women Gladiators?". <http://www.ludus.org.uk/r/essaywomen.html>

⁸ Steven Murray. "Female Gladiators of the Ancient Roman World".
http://ejmas.com/jcs/jcsart_murray_0703.htm

this because ancient writings made reference to women gladiators, but this was the first physical proof.

Written proof of women gladiators has long been known. Roman government edicts were made to either limit or ban women from participating in the arena. In 11CE a senatus consultum forbid women under the age of twenty from appearing on stage or in the arena, and men under twenty-five from participating. Then in 19CE an edict was passed that added to the one of 11CE. This edict forbids the recruitment of daughters, granddaughters, and great granddaughters of senators. Then in 200CE, women gladiators were banned completely.

The written records from the ancient Romans does not say much about women gladiators which led many to believe that there were not many. Also that maybe the women were a novelty act. But recently it is believed that the female gladiator was more widespread than previously thought⁹.

In order to describe the life of women gladiators' assumptions must be made about the women gladiators. One is that the women follow the same rules and dress that the men do, two that the women train the same way that the men do. Usually the men that would appear as gladiators were slaves or criminals. The women, however were not slaves or from a lower class. Tacitus (56CE to 117CE) reported that women of considerable social standing competed, and it was not for the money, it was for the excitement and the notoriety. The gladiators were superstars back then. Both men and women lusted after them¹⁰.

⁹ Steven Murray. "Female Gladiators of the Ancient Roman World".
http://ejmas.com/jcs/jcsart_murray_0703.htm

¹⁰ Steven Murray. "Female Gladiators of the Ancient Roman World".
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The typical gladiator would attend a school, where they would learn different forms of fighting. They were usually taught by former gladiators. It is thought that women gladiators would have received their training from their fathers, who more than likely would have gladiators themselves. The training was all done with wooden swords, which helped prevent any slave rebellion. A gladiator would only fight two or three times a year and would not always fight to the death¹¹.

The availability of athletics for women was fairly scarce, but women did have some opportunities. It has been shown that women had the opportunity to participate in traditional athletics that included balls. This opportunity for women was not looked down upon and was a good way for women to exercise. Women also had the chance to be weightlifters, as shown in the fresco.

Women gladiators on the other hand were not looked at as favorably. Their matches were well intended, but a woman that would want to become a gladiator was looked down upon. It became perhaps so socially unacceptable in 200CE and perhaps that is why Emperor Severus banned women gladiators. It is however very clear that women were apart of the gladiators. There is written record of it, although scarce, sometimes making it seem like the women gladiators were only to be laughed. But this is however not true. Women gladiators were popular in and looked forward to. In scheduled events the women would sometimes be late in the day, and be the featured event. Also women gladiators were enjoyed by some, since there are stone carvings of two gladiators battling one another. It might be possible that women gladiators could have started out as a joke, but then people began to enjoy watching the women battle. An

¹¹ Steven Murray. "Female Gladiators of the Ancient Roman World".
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example that could support that is the fact the women battled dwarves. This then changes as women begin to start to battle against men, women, and beast, as the men did. The more popular women gladiators became they met with resistance, from people like Juvenal who did not support women gladiators.

Research over this topic could be more complete if women were able to write in this time period. It would have been very interesting to hear about the life of a female gladiator. If this was the case and we had records as to how the life of a female gladiator was then the assumptions would not need to be made. But unfortunately assumptions about the life of a female gladiator are all that can be made, since the records from female gladiators do not exist.

It is important to note that even though women did not have many social rights at this time that they were still allowed to compete in athletics. The athletics that they competed in were not always popular or accepted by everyone, but the women were still allowed to compete. It is a good thing that the women were allowed to compete as they pleased. The women could choose to play ball games or compete as men did in the brutal arena of the gladiators.

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