The Spartans Physical and Military Training

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For the Spartan’s of Northern Greece physical training was an integral part of their culture. Their focus on physical training was primarily for military purposes and the Spartans were expected by the state to serve in the military for the greater part of their lives. The Greek states were often at war so training for the military was common among all of the states. The Spartan’s went to the extreme when it came to this training. Fighting skills were closely tied to physical skills and the Spartans worked hard to have the best soldiers in Greece. For them it became necessary, and was required by the government, that they achieve and maintain very high levels of physical fitness (Dalleck & Kravitz, 2002).

In Sparta survival of the fittest began at birth for both male and female babies. At birth the babies were inspected for health and for fitness, first by their parents and then by the state. When male babies were born their mother would wash them in wine instead of water to test their fitness level. If the wine caused a fit the baby was not considered to be strong enough. The state would need to inspect every baby and ultimately they decided if the baby was strong enough. If the baby was considered to be weak in any way they were left in the hills to die from exposure (Ancient Greek Civilizations). Sometimes a baby that was found weak or deformed was thrown in Kaiada, the Apothetae, a chiasm on a cliff of the Taygetos Mountain (Papakyriakou/Anagnostou, 2010). From birth, for every Spartan their commitment to the state took precedence over their commitment to anything else including their family. They started training children early and continued training throughout most of their lives. Discipline began as early as the first year of a boy’s life. Spartan nurses did not allow babies to cry or scream, to be fussy when eating, or to be afraid of the dark (Garland, 1998). Mother’s did not use, as the mothers of other Greek states did at the time, phaskia which were special cloths for children. The Spartans thought that these could be bad for the babies and they did not want the child’s body to
become deformed or for the child to become nervous or stubborn (Papakyriakou/Anagnostou, 2010). The Spartan mothers’ also tried to remove everything that could in any way cause the child to feel disgust, to cry, or to feel fear (Papakyriakou/Anagnostou, 2010). Although the Spartan boys stayed at home with their mothers through the age of six, even this early their training had begun.

When Spartan males turned seven they were removed from their home and sent to a type of boarding school with dormitory living for both athletic and military training (Hooker, 2003). The boys were, as required by the state, taken from their mothers as it was thought that the softness of their mothers would not be good for them (Garland, 1998). The training they received was very challenging and difficult. The fighting skills they were training for, were associated with fitness levels, so they began rigorous strength and endurance training through a large number of different methods. They were conditioned using such things as track and field events as well as wrestling and martial combat (Eger, 2007). They were taught a lot of gymnastics and combat skills. All of this training was geared toward making the young Spartans better soldiers. The schools also taught discipline, toughness, and endurance of pain, which was often very severe pain, and survival skills (Hooker, 2003). The boys learned to deal with as much as possible, pushing themselves to the limits of their ability in many areas and in many ways during their training.

From the age of seven, when formal military training began, until they were adults the boys continued to train to become soldiers. The government was responsible for the raising of the boys and their goal was to prepare them to be the very best soldiers they could be. This took years and years of training. The education of the boys was focused on preparation to become
soldiers so the physical education training was much more important than book learning. Although these boys were taught to read and write they were taught only the basics as it was not considered nearly as important. This was not considered to be worth more than a small amount of their time.

While being trained, the boys were fed very little. They were given a weak broth to eat, which was not really enough to feed them, so their hunger was not satisfied. The idea behind feeding the boys such a small amount was to teach the boys how to live and survive while taking care of themselves and they were supposed to learn ways of finding their own food. One way the boys could take care of their appetite was to steal food. Although the boys were encouraged to steal food, so they would learn how to be successful at it, they were punished very harshly if they got caught stealing. This punishment was not for stealing the food, the punishment was for getting caught stealing the food. Another way the boys could feed themselves was to find enough food to keep them strong. Here the idea was to have them learn to live off of the land, an important survival technique for a soldier. Also, for an entire month, when the boys were finishing their training, they ate honey and exercised. This part of their training was called the month of honey (Papakyriakou/Anagnostou, 2010).

A game that was played each year to test these young male students was a game where the boys were supposed to try to steal cheeses. This game was played in the front of the altar of Orthia Artemis. The reward for being able to steal the cheese was, of course, food. Unfortunately if they were not successful and got caught, the boys got whipped extremely severely. They were whipped so badly some of the boys would die from this punishment. Those that survived and
were able to withstand this whipping without crying were crowned with wreathes
(Papakyriakou/Anagnostou, 2010).

The next section of training in a male Spartan’s life began when the boys reached the age of twelve to thirteen years. At this time, their training moved to a higher level. These boys were taking out of their previous barracks and moved to training with the older boys. The state gave them one tunic, a piece of clothing, which was all they had to wear and they wore this one tunic for an entire year. They were expected to wear this one garment both day and night. They also went barefoot and they lived out in the open so they were being exposed to the weather and elements all day every day. They bathed themselves in the river Eurotas, in cold water, and they did not use any type of blanket. They slept on the top of beds made of reeds and straws which they made from gathering them from the river banks. These reeds and straws they were expected to gather themselves and cut them without the use of a knife. Their hair was cut extremely short and they were expected to be naked and barefoot during training, not even wearing their single tunic (Garland, 1998). This year of exercise and endurance with minimal extras was supposed to help teach the boys survival skills at a more challenging level. The skills they learned throughout this year were meant to help them be better soldiers and these skills could be used if they were to fight in another country, far from Sparta.

They Spartan males were, when they turned thirteen, put under the guidance of a brave youth called an Eirena. This relationship was supervised by Paidonomos, a Spartan official. The young men were taught a wide variety of physical skills. They practiced jumping, running, gymnastics, throwing a spear, and throwing a discus. They were also taught to endure hardship, pain, lack of sleep, exhaustion, cold, thirst and hunger (Papakyriakou/Anagnostou, 2010).
During this section of the young man’s training, which lasted until they were twenty years old, they played very intense games of war, which would sometimes cause injury or death for the boys. The games included armed invasions on the helots, their agricultural slaves, and other non Spartans living near (Eger, 2007). These games were brutal but they did teach the boys physical skills as well as military skills. They learned such things as small unit tactics, the art of ambush, surveillance techniques and the art of reconnaissance (Eger, 2007). As with the other Spartan training methods, these training techniques were very rigorous and very harsh which is why it was not unusual for them to be injured or for these games to cause death.

The basis of the training of the Spartan youth was to train them both physically and mentally. Their training was very rigorous and included strength training, and a large amount of physical conditioning which was taught through, among other things, a variety of track and field events. Furthermore, the methods of martial combat they were taught, were supposed to make them deadly (Eger, 2007). All of this was geared toward making these boys into first rate Spartan soldiers.

When the Spartan male turned twenty he was tested for fitness. Passing this fitness test was required in order to become a citizen, which also meant becoming a soldier of Sparta. Failure to pass this test meant that he did not become a citizen of Sparta and this would be a huge disappointment since they had spent almost their entire lives training for this. By the time he was twenty, he had already trained for thirteen years. He was trained both physically and emotionally in order to become a highly regarded Spartan soldier. Still, even when they passed this test, at the age of twenty, his training was not nearly over. They continued to train and live with other soldiers in the barracks. In fact, the Spartan soldiers lived out most of their lives with other
soldiers. They lived in the barracks sleeping with other soldiers and eating his meals with the other soldiers, often until they reached the age of sixty.

Spartan males did not become full citizens with full rights, an equal to the other Spartan men, until they reached the age of thirty. At this time, they were finally allowed to marry, have children, and hold public office (Eger, 2007). Even when a Spartan married he lived in the barracks rather than with his wife just visiting home on occasion (Hooker, 2003). Men continued to live with the other men in these group settings and it was rare that they were even allowed to sleep with their wives. This life style went on until the Spartan was sixty years old. At the age of 60 the Spartan was finally allowed to retire. Until this time, the physical training, which was focused on training needed to be an accomplished soldier, continued. The life of a Spartan was dedicated to the state and to the military. It began early in life and it ended late in life. Because of the strong focus on physical training and this amount of training the Spartan soldier went through the Spartan soldier was considered to be, by the citizens of the other Greek states, a highly skilled soldier.

The physical training and the importance of it was not limited to the males of Sparta. The women of Sparta also trained a great deal and they were expected to be physically fit. Their life was also, like the males, primarily dedicated to the state of Sparta. Because it was thought that strong mothers would make strong children, it was important to the state that the women trained physically.

When the females of Sparta were teens they began physical training, which included gymnastics training. Their training also included teaching them lessons such as their lives were to be dedicated to the state (Hooker, 2003). Although the women of Sparta did not go through
the military training the men did, in many ways their physical training was similar. Their training included athletic events such as fighting, gymnastics and wrestling. As did the young boys, the girls had competitive sports although they were expected to compete exclusively with the other girls. Throughout the Greek states it was only the Spartans who were serious about training not only the men but the young girls. For the Spartans, this training was not just considered to be a good idea it was the policy of the state. As it was handled with the boys their academic education was not the focus of their training. The focus was physical education and that physical education was very demanding and challenging (Hooker, 2003).

It follows that Sparta was the first of the Greek states to have female Olympic athletes. The Olympics were, as today, held every four years. During this month a truce was declared between the often warring city states so all interested persons were free to attend the Olympic events. Although women were limited to a small number of events in the Olympics at this time, the Spartan women competed and did well. The first woman to breed horses, Kyniska, the daughter of the Spartan King Archidamus, also was the first woman to win two Olympic victories (Papakyriakou/Anagnostou, 2010). She won the four horse chariot race in both 396 BC and in 392 BC (Ancient Athletes of the Olympic Games). This occurred when most Greek women were kept out of sight in seclusion. They were not allowed to learn skills of physical exercise such as riding or hunting. In contrast Spartan women were raised to excel at these types of things and they often disliked household duties (Ancient Athletes of the Olympic Games).

In Sparta a child’s education, while it would include such things as reading and writing, was focused on athleticism. It is understandable why then that Spartans went on to win many Olympic events in Athens through the years (Ancient Greek Civilizations).

Ancient Greek Civilizations, Minnesota State University, Retrieved from http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/prehistory/aegean/culture/spartaculture.html


