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## Is *Mens Sana in Corpore Sano* a Concept Relevant to Honors Students?

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# Is *Mens Sana in Corpore Sano* a Concept Relevant to Honors Students?

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Belief in a “healthy mind, healthy body” is as relevant to twenty-first-century honors students as it was to their ancient counterparts. The ancient Greek athlete and the honors student-athlete both share the dedication and discipline needed to excel, and our culture still finds praiseworthy those who exhibit excellence in both mind and body. At the University of Nevada Las Vegas, the library is sponsoring a poster series promoting literacy by featuring student-athletes reading their favorite books. An honors college student athlete will be featured in the near future, a symbol of distinction somewhat akin to Myron’s *Discobolos* (Discus Thrower).

Yet we should examine the phrase in its literary context. The line comes from the Satires of the Roman poet Juvenal, known for his biting and bitter verses about the foibles and injustices of life during the *Pax Romana*. In his tenth Satire, Juvenal ponders the correct use of prayer—not for wealth, power, or revenge, but for a sound mind in a sound body (10.356). However, considering Juvenal’s cynical views, he might also be commenting on the rarity of a sound mind in a sound body. One thing is certain: Juvenal was not discussing the scholar-athlete.

Although *mens sana in corpore sano* is a Latin phrase, it evokes in our culture the Classical Greek ideal of the scholar-athlete. As the perfect combination of brains and brawn, the idealized image was held up for emulation by founders of the modern Olympics (Young, 22). Many in the nineteenth century considered the ancient Greek athlete with a mixture of awe and nostalgia, mistakenly viewing the Archaic and Classical ages of Greece as times of harmony between mind and body, when the gymnasium was a place to study philosophy and when Plato wrestled and competed at the games.

Athletic competition was an integral part of Greek society and identity. The Olympic games are traditionally thought to have begun in 776 BCE, just as Greece was climbing out of its Dark Ages. At nearly the same time, the first written accounts of the *Iliad* were published. In Book 23, Achilles organizes an athletic competition to honor his beloved fallen companion

Patroclus. From the beginning of the epic, Achilles has been outside the community of warriors, but through athletics he restores his humanity and becomes reconciled to the community.

Ancient Greek society valued success and competition—on the battlefield, in the political arena, the courts and at the games—and awarded winners many accolades. The lyric poet Pindar is known for his poems exalting the accomplishments and skills of winning athletes. Success at the games meant more than simply being memorialized by words; triumphant athletes might receive cash prizes and free meals for life as well as see their image replicated in bronze or marble and placed prominently in the polis.

Such adulation also brought criticism. A contemporary of Pindar, poet and philosopher Xenophanes, proclaimed that “the current custom of honoring strength more than wisdom is neither proper nor just” (qtd. in Miller, 183). Later, the provocative playwright Euripides wrote his famous diatribe on the cult of athletes: “Of the thousands of evils which exist in Greece, there is no greater evil than the race of athletes. . . . What man has ever defended the city of his father’s by winning a crown or wrestling well or running fast or throwing the discs far or planting an uppercut on the jaw of an opponent” (qtd. in Miller, 183).

Separated by more than two millennia, the modern college athlete receives both the exaltation and the fierce criticism of the ancient competitor. Like Greek athletics, college sports were once the realm of the elite. Individual and team sports began in the Ivy League schools. Richard Davies asserts that Yale invented football in the late nineteenth century (Davies, 66), and prior to World War II the biggest college weekend event was the Harvard-Yale football game.

In spite of the ideal of ethics in sports, early college football games were vicious, engendering concerns about the level of violence, the rowdy behavior after games, and the dubious academic achievements of some players. At first, many in academia demanded the abolition of football, and the Carnegie Foundation sponsored a 1929 study that resulted in a blistering indictment of college sports: “Apparently the ethical bearing of intercollegiate football contests and their scholastic aspects are of secondary importance to the winning of victories and financial success” (qtd. in Davies 147).

The United States is perhaps as fiercely competitive as ancient Greece, and no other country supports and finances collegiate athletics like the United States (Davies 62). Just as victors at the ancient games received antiquity’s form of media adulation, so do today’s NCAA superstars, aided by 24-hour sports television. Schools with high scholastic ranking—such as the University of Southern California, Stanford, and Notre Dame—also excel in sports.

Today, scholars of recreation and leisure studies, university administrators, sports commentators, and pundits voice endless concern about the role money and fame play in collegiate athletics. Many have criticized the monstrous budgets of college athletic departments and astronomical salaries paid to coaches while others worry about the lack of genuine educational skills offered to athletes as well as their often woeful graduation rates. With television contracts and the national spotlight focused on winning teams, the educational or intellectual mission becomes muted. Yet, like the ancient competitions, college athletics is an integral part of the American social fabric and identity.

Although perhaps not as biting as Euripides, the modern media stereotypes are still brutal. From the football players in the Marx Brothers comedy *Horse Feathers* to Moose, the dimwitted athlete in *Archie* comics, to countless television stereotypes of the dullard in a uniform, the modern college athlete may be idealized and rewarded but often not respected. Yet no other students are asked to miss a third of their classes to keep their scholarships. As audience was vital for the Greek athlete, so it is to the modern one, now numbering in the millions for televised high-profile games.

The phrase “healthy mind, healthy body” was not intended to refer to athletes, scholars, or honors students. The memorable words have been taken out of context and misused for eons. However, the phrase and its misappropriation do demonstrate the tension inherent in sports and athletic competitions as well as the human desire to find harmony between mind and body and to acknowledge excellence. Although improperly used, the Latin phrase is as valid today as it was in ancient Greece. Both the ancient and modern athletes demonstrate perseverance, hard work, and a suitable thick skin to weather criticism. Honors students in particular can, like Juvenal, appreciate the implicit irony in its misuse.

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