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A Gruesome Sport With Executions at Halftime

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If Mike Tyson had been born in ancient Rome, would he have been a great gladiator? The question seemed apropos a few years ago when Tyson announced that, for a certain sum of money, he would be willing to fight a lion.

It's not hard to close your eyes and picture Tyson bare-chested, trident in hand, circling a lion at the center of the Colosseum, with a crowd of Romans going wild for the stout guy from the provinces who fights boldly and speaks Latin with a lisp.

Too bad it could never have happened: (a) The Roman Empire never acquired the Bronx as a province; and (b) gladiators in Rome never fought animals one-on-one. The latter is one of many useful facts about gladiators that emerges from "The Gladiators: History's Most Deadly Sport," a new book by Fik Meijer, a professor of ancient history at the University of Amsterdam.

Also worth knowing: Gladiators attended schools and belonged to unions. Emperor Domitian once organized nighttime games, in which female gladiators fought dwarfs by torchlight. Barley gruel was a major part of gladiators' diet, earning them the nickname "barley-porridge-eaters." And the Colosseum had no toilets.

To quote the character Maximus from the movie "Gladiator," "Are you not entertained?" Well, yes, I was. Even in the hands of a stiff, serious historian such as Mr. Meijer, gladiators remain an entertaining lot.

According to the author, the popularity of the gladiatorial games spanned several hundred years of Roman history. During the late republic and imperial period, tens of thousands of fans packed into sweltering amphitheaters to watch the beefy gladiators hack each other to bits. Mr. Meijer wants to understand why.

"Why did the Romans have such a passion for the gladiator games?" he writes. "Why did they let themselves

get carried away by such an orgy of bloodthirsty violence, time and again over centuries?"

Yet the question of why human beings would enjoy watching female gladiators fight dwarfs by torchlight seems like the wrong question. It's a line of inquiry better fit for psychologists, moral philosophers, theologians, or movie directors - anyone with a penchant for speculating about human motives. Thankfully, Mr. Meijer soon abandons it.

Instead, he turns to describing how the games entertained. Along the way, he devotes chapters to gladiators' backgrounds, training, life expectancies, and love lives. In case there was any doubt, Mr. Meijer's careful academic research shows that, yes, gladiators had groupies.

"Gladiators had plenty of amorous adventures," Mr. Meijer writes. "They knew they were popular with women and they would arrange to meet their admirers at some quiet spot near the exercise ground."

Yet the life of the gladiator wasn't all flowers and agricola's daughters. There was plenty of pain and suffering and death. Most gladiators were not free men. Many committed suicide. Few won freedom. Most died in combat at a young age.

At one point, Mr. Meijer pulls together his research to re-create the program for a typical day at the Colosseum. According to the author, the day of games would begin with hunting and animal fights. To warm things up, a bull might fight an elephant - followed by, say, a rhinoceros versus a buffalo. Afterward, a bunch of hunters might roam through the arena picking off gazelles by the hundreds.

At midday, the games paused for an intermission, during which the crowd ate their lunches and watched public executions. Sometimes, the organizers would dress up the condemned criminals as famous villains or doomed characters from mythology - all of which lends credence to the previously unimaginable notion that perhaps halftime shows actually have improved over the past 2,000 years.

But everyone's favorite part was when the gladiators squared off in one-on-one combat. Gladiators, Mr. Meijer notes, were trained as specialists, differentiated according to their weapons and armor. He provides a taxonomy of gladiatorial types explaining, for instance, the difference between a *thraex* (small shield, sword like a dagger) and a *retiarius* (shielded left arm, trident, net). Organizers continuously would pit different specialists against each other, mixing and matching gladiators for the remainder of the afternoon.

What does this tell us about the Romans? After providing a vast array of detail about the lives of gladiators, Mr. Meijer struggles at the book's end to produce some sort of analytic framework to understand the greater meaning of the games. "I began this book by asking myself how I would have behaved if I had witnessed a gladiator show in the Colosseum," he writes. "Now, after spending nearly two years in the world of the gladiators, the same question remains. I have not found the answer."

Perhaps not. But Mr. Meijer will provide plenty of fodder for future writers, historians, and filmmakers interested in exploring the moral and spiritual implications of staging sporting events that revolved around so much death. Ultimately, the book is short on analysis and interpretation, but it brims with detail about how the games were played - no small achievement considering the gladiators fought in an era of history before the dawn of ESPN.

Mr. Gillette last wrote in these pages on counterfeiting.