

PLEASING THE ROWDY ROMANS GLADIATORS AND CIRCUSES

The bleachers in the Colosseum were full, but the audience was growing impatient. The games were late in starting. People shouted and stamped their feet. The animals roared from their cages beneath the floor of the arena. The smells of animal manure, sawdust, and human sweat mingled with the tantalizing odors of sausage snacks and wine as the audience waited in the hot Italian sun. At last the trapdoors opened, and wild animals burst into the huge arena. A gory show began.

Martial, a Spanish poet who lived in Rome, wrote an eyewitness account:

The terrified trainers prodded the rhinoceros until its anger flared hot. . . . With its double horn, it threw a heavy bear into the air as easily as a bull might toss a straw dummy. Then the rhino effortlessly lifted up two steers, and a fierce buffalo and a bison surrendered to him.

66 MARTIAL.
FRONTO, SIDONIUS
APOLLINARIS,
ROMAN RECORDS,
GRAFFITI FROM
POMPEII, AND
SENECA THE
YOUNGER

66 Martial, *On the Games*, 80 CE



What looks like the floor level of the Roman Colosseum is actually its basement, where the gladiators and wild animals waited before they went out to fight in the arena.

ludi = “games”
 “Ludicrous” comes from the Latin word, *ludus*, which means “game.” Something that is ludicrous makes us laugh.

This was just one of many public shows that the Romans called *ludi*, or games. The games often involved animals. Sometimes animals were chained to one another—a bear, for example, chained to a bull—so that neither could escape a battle to the death.

Staged hunts were popular, too. In this brutal sport, animals imported from all parts of the empire were set loose in the arena. Slaves dressed as hunters chased and slaughtered elephants, bears, buffaloes, and even exotic creatures such as crocodiles, pythons, and ostriches. But the “hunters” wore no protective clothing, and many were wounded or killed.

The games were usually bloody, and always colorful, loud, and free. The people expected their government to entertain them—the more noisily and violently, the better. Politicians used the *ludi* to gain favor with the people and court their votes. Fronto, a writer and politician of the second century CE, warns that an emperor should take care “not to neglect actors and other performers of the stage, the race-track, and the arena, since the Roman people are devoted to two things: food and free shows. Political success depends as much upon entertainment as on serious matters.”



Two gladiators fight in the arena against a lion and a wild boar. Because they fought wild beasts, these gladiators were called *bestiarii*.

64 Fronto, *Elements of History*, 165 CE

Fronto knew what he was talking about. He had seen court life firsthand as tutor to a future emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who ruled Rome from 161 to 180 CE. He knew that an emperor could even take away the people’s voting rights and still be popular. All he had to do was keep the racetracks busy and the Colosseum full of exciting events.

Rome’s *ludi* started out as religious festivals, honoring certain gods who controlled the harvest, the weather, and the hunt. The *Ludi Cereales*, for example, honored Ceres (the goddess of grain) and were celebrated every year in April. The biggest festival of the year was the *Saturnalia* in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. During this week-long celebration in December, the Romans exchanged gifts and threw extravagant dinner parties. These parties were unusual because, at this time only, masters waited on their slaves.

Gradually, more and more festivals were added as thanksgivings to the gods for military victories and to celebrate patriotic events. On the festival of the Lupercalia on February 15, for example, runners raced around the Palatine Hill and whipped the spectators with thongs made of goatskins.

The Romans also loved plays. At first they presented them on temporary wooden stages. The earliest surviving comedies were written about 200 BCE by Plautus, who took Greek plays and made them even more uproarious to please the rowdy Romans. Drama was so much a part of life that the Romans often used theatrical decorations in their homes.

Of all the public entertainments, chariot racing was the oldest, dating back to the time of Romulus, Rome’s legendary founder. From the beginning it was a great crowd-pleaser. Rome’s chariot races were held in an enormous race course called the Circus Maximus. As Rome grew and became wealthier, the Circus Maximus was expanded until it held 250,000 people. No stadium in the modern world holds so many spectators.

Although one emperor staged a chariot race with camels, most races had chariots pulled by four horses. The



This ivory statuette shows a heavily armored gladiator, covered from head to toe. His opponent might have only a net and a dagger, but at least he could move.

Roman poet Sidonius Apollinaris, writing in the fifth century CE, described a race in which his friend Consentius was one of the drivers. The chariots were decorated in different colors—red, blue, white, and green—so that the spectators could keep track of their favorite teams.

Before the race began, the horses reared up, snorting and prancing with excitement. Their grooms tried to soothe them as they kicked against the wooden gates that held them back. When the trumpet sounded, the horses bolted onto the track. The drivers, standing in their chariots, leaned forward so that they could whip the backs and even the shoulders of their horses, urging them faster, faster around the track. The chariots raced down the straightaway, jockeying for place as they made the turns. One of the drivers pulled out of the race; another lost control of his horses. Towards the end, only two teams remained in the race: Consentius and the fourth driver. Sidonius describes the race much as a modern sports announcer would:

Consentius drives straight and fast. . . . The fourth driver pursues Consentius recklessly, hoping to overtake him. He cuts in sharply across the track. His horses lose their balance and fall. Their legs become tangled in the spinning chariot wheels. . . . The driver is hurled headlong from the shattered chariot. And now the emperor presents the palm branch of victory to Consentius.

Many Romans were addicted to the races and made large bets on the outcome. Competing teams of brightly decorated horses drew fierce loyalty from the spectators. People shouted for their favorites as the chariots crowded together on the turns, lap after lap. Fights and riots occasionally broke out among the fans.

A chariot driver put his life on the line each time he raced. He did it for the same reason that people do dangerous things today: for money, fame, and excitement. Some drivers became so wealthy that even emperors sometimes envied their riches. The Romans kept careful records. We

64 Sidonius Apollinaris, *Poems*, 469 CE

learn from them that Diocles from Spain was very successful as a chariot driver. He raced for 24 years and won 1,462 races out of 4,257. He “was in the money 2900 times. He was second 861 times, third 576 times. . . . He failed to place 1351 times. . . . He won a grand total of 35,863,120 sesterces.” How much money is that? Diocles’s total winnings equaled a year’s pay for 30,000 Roman soldiers.

Other public entertainments also drew the public’s attention: footraces in a stadium and even mock sea battles staged in an artificial sea fought with full-sized ships. Though these battles were a pretense, the ships were real. So were the deaths of the men who died in the fighting.

The best-known of all the Roman games were the gladiatorial matches. **Gladiators**, like Spartacus, were chosen from the strongest, fiercest slaves. They were trained to fight in special schools where they learned to use various kinds of weapons and equipment. Often the battle raged between brute strength on one hand and agility and quickness on the other. One gladiator would wear protective armor, carry a curved shield, and be heavily armed. His opponent would wear almost nothing and be armed only with a net, a small dagger, and a trident—a spear with three prongs.

Rome’s largest gladiatorial shows were held in an **arena** called the Colosseum. Not all gladiatorial battles ended with a death. Sometimes a wounded gladiator would appeal to the crowd for mercy. If he had fought well or was popular, the crowd might beg the emperor to spare his life. If they thought he deserved to die, they would gesture with their thumbs, although historians are not sure whether the gesture was “thumbs up” or “thumbs down.” The *ludi* gave the emperor a chance to show the people that he was on their side by sponsoring the games and by following their wishes when he spared their favorite gladiators. Most gladiators lived to fight many, many times. To their owners and trainers, they were valuable properties, almost like modern rock stars. And like rock stars, they had many devoted fans. Archaeologists have found ancient *graffiti* to prove it.

64 Roman records, about 130 CE

“Gladiator” comes from the Latin word *gladius*, which means sword.

arena = “sand” or “dust”; “a sandy place”
Rome’s Colosseum is an oval arena with a dusty sand floor, surrounded by rising rows of seats, like a modern football stadium. It has long been believed that when the gladiators entered the arena, they shouted to the emperor, “We who are about to die, salute you.” It makes for good drama. Too bad it isn’t true.

☞ Graffiti from Pompeii, 79 CE

Written on the walls of Pompeii were these breathless words: “The slasher Celadus makes all the girls sigh,” and “The net-fighter Crescens has captured the hearts of all the girls.”

Roman culture was full of violence, but most Romans weren't bothered by its presence in their lives. Seneca the



**HISTORIAN AT WORK:
AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR KATHLEEN COLEMAN**

Kathleen Coleman, professor of Latin at Harvard University, teaches a course called “Roman Games.” She has been a consultant to Hollywood and has participated in several television shows on the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, PBS, and, in England, the British Broadcasting Company (BBC).

How did you become interested in the gladiatorial games?

I was translating the set of poems that Martial wrote about the games that the emperor Titus put on to celebrate the grand opening of the Colosseum in 80 CE. Martial wrote the poems to honor and flatter Titus. But they contain the most fascinating details. Martial describes beast hunts, mock sea battles, and gladiatorial combat, but also public executions. In one of these executions, a prisoner was dressed to look like Orpheus, a character in Greek mythology. The audience would have known the story very well. Orpheus was such a fine musician that he could charm even wild animals with the music of his lyre.

As the show began, the doomed prisoner stood in the arena, plucking the strings of his instrument while tamed animals walked

calmly around him. But then a ravenous bear was released into the arena. The prisoner was defenseless, and the bear mauled and killed him. The audience found the surprise ending hilarious.

Were all the games this violent?

Definitely not. The Romans thought that criminals and prisoners of war deserved to die, however cruelly. In their eyes, these lives had no value. But gladiators represented a big investment. Just as some slaves were trained to read aloud to their masters, to teach children, or to do accounting, gladiators were trained to fight in the games, and each one fought in a particular style—net fighting, for instance. They were more like modern prize-fighters who only fight once or twice a year. And in between fights, they ate well, had good medical care, and received reasonable treatment.

Younger, a philosopher of the first century CE, was an exception: he found the gladiatorial games revolting. He writes: “There is nothing more harmful to one’s character than going to these shows. . . . When I come home from one, I find that I am greedier and more aggressive. . . . I am more cruel.”

☞ Seneca the Younger, *Letters*, 60 CE

Many people believe that the gladiators had a 50-50 chance of survival—that one of them had to die. But that wasn't the case.

How do we know?

The gladiators' tombstones give us some of our best information—and they are found all over the Roman Empire. This tells us that the games were not just held in Rome itself but also in Syria, Turkey, France, and elsewhere. Gladiators, or their loved ones, boasted on the tombstones about their skills: how many times they went into the arena, how often they fought to a draw, and how many times they won. Even if a gladiator was defeated, his life might still be spared. One gladiator's tombstone shows that he lived to be 45, which was old in ancient times. He may have been a successful gladiator who retired and then taught in the gladiatorial schools.

Did any gladiators themselves write about their lives?

Nothing has been found, but mosaics provide another source of information for us. Mosaics are pictures made from small colored tiles that decorated people's floors and walls. They often show gladiatorial combat. In mosaics, we can see the weapons and armor of the gladiators. Sometimes the men are shown fighting, and sometimes we see

them at the end of the match, with one left standing and the other lying defeated on the ground. Some mosaics show referees ensuring a fair fight.

Could women become gladiators?

They could, but it didn't happen very often. Women gladiators were a great novelty. People then, like people today, got tired of seeing the same things over and over. So a female gladiator was something new and different. Like the men, they had “stage names.” The only two women gladiators that we know about were called Amazon and Achillia.

If you could go back in time and interview a gladiator, what would you ask him?

I'd have many questions, but one would be about living conditions. We know that some of the gladiators in Rome lived in barracks near the Colosseum. The rooms were about 11 feet square, but we don't know how many men lived in each room. I'd also want to know how it felt to live with other gladiators—eating, exercising, and practicing together—and then to go into the arena to fight “for real.” These men usually fought in pairs, so they would have known each other quite well. Wouldn't it have been terrible to face a friend in a battle that could end in the death of one or both?