MUSCLE BOYS

GAY GYM CULTURE

ERICK ALVAREZ
Acclaim for
Muscle Boys: Gay Gym Culture

“Alvarez clearly knows his territory.”

—The Gay & Lesbian Review

“Accessible prose and experienced insight. This book provides the reader with a timely idea: the importance of the gym in allowing gay men a place where they can find each other and, most significantly, themselves. This very readable book politely kicks sand in the faces of those who impugn the gym as anything other than a unique, healthy, surprisingly diverse communal culture worthy of study, comment, and maybe even membership. This insightful history gives voice to the countless gay men who found the strength to assert themselves and in doing so redefined masculinity.”

—Tom Cardamone,
Author, The Werewolves of Central Park

“An informed history and breezy analysis of gay men’s thirsty interest in body image. Athlete Alvarez is a trainer who leaves his muscular signature on this entertaining book that covers early physique magazines, steroids, and pro athletes like Dave Kopay and Tom Waddell, inventor of the Gay Games. As a longtime gym-insider, Alvarez writes about what he knows. He captures the mystery and history of gay gym culture, of self-fashioning notions of masculine identity, and how gay muscle flexed gay power and uncolseted our Platonic Ideals into straight mainstream advertising.”

—Jack Fritscher, PhD,
Author, “Gay Sports” in Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer — Sex, Art, and the Salon
Around Drummer Magazine
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Erick Alvarez
Para Aracelly, mi adorada madre.

Gracias mamá por apoyarme en todos mis proyectos y aventuras, aunque algunos fuesen tan extraños y atrevidos como el escribir un libro.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erick Alvarez, BS, grew up in San Francisco, where he attended San Francisco State University and earned his degree in kinesiology and exercise science. Muscle Boys is his first book. For more information, check out www.erickalvarez.com and www.gaygymculture.com.
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Chapter 1

Gay Gym Culture

This book started as a study of the gay gym, that cultural phenomenon and, until recently, somewhat obscure social institution that first surfaced during the 1970s in the gay ghettos of San Francisco, West Hollywood, and New York. But as I started consulting references and interviewing gay men at gay gyms, I had some important realizations: One, there is a startling number of gay men who are sharing a lifestyle; that it is them who make the gym gay; and, that over the past three decades, they have created a subculture all of their own. Two, in comparing one gay gym with another, even within the same city, the dynamics of one gay gym can be dramatically different from the others’ depending on the demographics of each particular one (younger men, older men, bears, circuit boys, etc). Third, and most important, that far away from the gay ghettos, in every American city, suburb, and rural area, as well as abroad, gay men of every age, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are living and practicing the lifestyle established by the gay gym and revolving around new norms in terms of aesthetics, body image, self-image, athleticism, socialization, and, most important, interpersonal relationships. Because of these realizations, the book shifted its focus from the gym to the gay men who go to the gym and the social ethos that brings them together. These men are better described by the popular jargon used today: muscle boys.

In less than two decades, the physical and social trends of the gay gym have propagated far from the gay ghettos of San Francisco and New York; this is largely due to travel habits of modern gay men and the use of the Internet. The culture of the gay gym has been globalized. What had once been the domain of a small number of trendy gay men in urban enclaves is now a lifestyle for many gay men—urban, suburban, and rural. The gay gym has become a cultural trend, a sub-
culture all on its own. This subculture—gay gym culture—is what this book is about.

The body culture of the gay gym—identified by a focus on a built muscular body—is most present in media, but it has come to affect gay life in many ways, from the way we identify and describe ourselves to the way we meet for sex, dating, or more serious relationships. Simply browsing at the personal ads on any popular gay Web site is case in point that lifestyles built around working out and the gym are used not just to describe an increasing number of gay men, but desired and sometimes required from their potential partners and friends.

In the most basic socialization between gay men, the longstanding “What do you do?” has been replaced by “Where do you work out?” From mating to entertainment, gay gym culture has become such a powerful and influential ethos that unless you isolate yourself from gay life it affects you one way or another. Whether you are twenty-two or forty-nine, and whether you are a self-described gym rat or you have never set foot in a gym, if you are a gay or bisexual man living today, then this book is also about you.

In this chapter we will take a look at the demographic that makes up modern gay gym culture and discuss its stereotypes and ideals. We will look at Western history, dating back to the Greeks, to find out where gay gym culture came from, because in examining how a subculture emerged and evolved in the first place we get more than statistics—we begin to understand it. Last, I will discuss the most visible product of the gay gym—the gym-built body—and the role that it plays in modern gay society.

WHAT IS GAY GYM CULTURE?

Gay gym culture is somewhat confusing because the entire genre often gets categorized under one group as if it was made up entirely of an identical set of men. Yet my research shows that it is made up of a diverse group of men: the gym and issues associated with it can represent very different things. For this reason I have identified the six principal subgroups that make up gym culture today:
1. **The Muscle Boy**—This is the largest group within gay gym culture; it is made up of eighteen-year-olds to men in their forties who do not strongly identify with some of the other subcultures of the gym such as the circuit or bear culture.

2. **The Older Male**—The forty-plus group is largely made up by gay Baby Boomers, many of whom have been active at the gym for years and even decades. For this group, health is becoming the number-one reason for participation in the gym, with socialization and aesthetics coming in second and third.

3. **The Poz Jock**—This group is made up HIV-positive men who use the gym and exercise as an important aspect of managing HIV and AIDS. Bodybuilders by default, this group has been very influential in introducing steroids into gym culture and determining current standards of musculature and definition for the male body.

4. **The Athlete**—Sports men and jocks make up this group. For these men, the gym is an extension of their sport, a cross-training tool. This group is largely made up of noncompetitive, recreational athletes, and sometimes includes elite and professional athletes.

5. **The Circuit Boy**—Party boys and men make up this group. They train hard to meet the standards of the circuit and have the strength and endurance to party all weekend. A cosmetic athlete, the circuit boy is for the most part influenced by the high beauty standards and aesthetics of the circuit and gay urban nightlife.

6. **The Muscle Bear**—One of the newest additions and fastest-growing groups within gym culture. Big, burly, and strong as hell, these unconventional guys are not concerned with looking pretty. Real men, they say, look buff, hairy, and rugged.

### Why It Matters

Gay gym culture is present in just about every aspect of gay media and gay life. Open up a magazine, watch any of the gay-themed television shows, or attend a gay social event, and the product of the gay gym—the gym-built body—is there to remind you.

Browse through the personals ads online or any gay newspaper or magazine and you will find only a few out of thousands that do not use the parameters and ideals of the gay gym to describe their body types. Interests based on particular body types, fitness-related lifestyles, and gym-related social activities, all associated with gym cul-
ture, often determine what it is that gay men today are looking for in a potential mate. In short, gay gym culture has become a very influential part of modern gay identity.

In this book I will candidly examine just how much the ideals set forth by the gay gym affect the many aspects of modern gay cultural life and in doing so discuss the following questions:

- Why do we go to the gym?
- How is the gym connected to modern gay socialization?
- How does gay gym culture influence self-esteem?
- How does body image affect sex, dating, and relationships?
- What is the connection between masculinity and muscles?
- Is the gay athlete a new phenomenon, or is he just out of the closet?
- How does the party scene and circuit culture shape our ideals about body image?
- What is the role of the gym in the aging process for older gay men?
- Why are gay men using steroids? How did the trend start?
- What is the role of the media and the porn star in our standards, fantasies, and ideals?
- Why does the locker room generate much controversy, anxiety, and excitement among gay men?

Gay gym culture carries a lot of weight (not just literally) because it is establishing a social structure and hierarchy, and gay men are increasingly using the parameters of gym culture to identify socially. Our identification within these groups comes quite close to the heart, affecting and—to a large extent—deciding our choices for friends, sex partners, dates, and even life partners. When it comes to socializing, the gym and our relationships to our bodies are equally as important—if not more so—as socio-economic status or education level.

Methods Used

I first surveyed and interviewed 200 gay and bisexual men in San Francisco at the various gay and gay-trafficked gyms. Respondents came in all shapes and sizes, races, ethnicities, and across the socio-economic stratum. They were Asian, white, Latino, African American, and every mix in between. They came young and old, and included those with a high school education and those with PhDs.
Some identify as bears or athletes, others as circuit boys, some have been working out for thirty days and others for thirty years.

The demographics of the respondents were so diverse that I became interested in expanding my research outside of San Francisco. With the help of Andy Wysocki and Bill Sanderson, publishers of two of the most popular muscle-bound Web destinations in the world (bigmuscle.com and bigmusclebear.com), I conducted an online survey. Andy and Bill posted information about my research for this book with a link to the survey on both Web sites making it available to the combined 40,000 members (at the time) of bigmuscle.com and bigmusclebear.com. Members of both Web sites were given the option to take the survey anonymously; I explained in a disclaimer that their answers and information obtained would, in part or whole, be published in this book.*

The results were overwhelming. Five thousand five hundred and seventy six gay and bisexual men around the world took part in the survey. Respondents were as young as fifteen and as old as seventy-nine, and they came from as far north as Iceland and as far south as Argentina, and from as Westernized-as-it-gets Los Angeles and Dallas to cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Dubai—they hailed from a total of sixty-five different countries. Crawfish farmers and opera conductors alike shared their feelings, experiences, thoughts, and concerns about the issues this book discusses, from body image and steroids to sports and sex in the locker room.

In addition to the data that surveys and interviews can provide, my professional life for a period of twelve years took place at the center of gay gym culture. From 1992 to 2005, I worked as a personal trainer at gay gyms throughout San Francisco. During this period I closely worked with and trained hundreds of gay men, while meeting thousands more. Some of these interactions lasted a few minutes, and others a few years, and in the process I’ve come to learn and understand what gay gym culture is and what drives the muscle boys. I present to you over a decade of observation and thought, an intimate insider’s account of what gay gym culture and muscle boys are all about.

*To ensure accuracy, the survey was conducted utilizing surveymonkey.com software. The survey was posted on bigmuscle.com and bigmusclebear.com. When a member took the survey, the member was directed to the surveymonkey.com Web site. Members of both Web sites have to be registered with valid e-mail addresses to avoid “bogus” takers.
In each of the chapters in this book that covers a particular subgroup of gay men, I discuss the gym and the reasons that this distinct group involves itself with the gym. Although I will explain the general aspects of a given group and even though most of us have a tendency to attach a person to a group or to a stereotype, it should be made clear that because it is also in our nature to be multifaceted, many of us oscillate between groups and subcultures. However, because every group within gym culture has a stereotype attached to it, let’s look at what this means.

Humans are social animals; as far back as we know we have lived and traveled in herds. It is our nature to gravitate toward groups of those that are like us, and, in the process, we get stereotyped as representative of that group. Stereotypes are more than a hypothetical representation of a set of rules and norms; they are the generalized version of these rules and norms. Stereotypes are largely a mental picture of what other people are like.

In the gay community, most of the subcultures seem to have a body type attached (i.e., jock, bear, muscle boy, leather man, circuit-boy, twink, etc.). It is interesting to ponder to what extent our body types determine the social circumstances we will end up in. How much does our physique open doors, and how much does it close them? An entire generation of young gay men is growing up and socializing based on how they are built and what they look like, and this will, no doubt, have a weighty effect on the future of gay culture. Avoiding stereotypes does not help us overcome them; understanding them does.

With this in mind, in this book we will discuss the muscle boy stereotypes and subcultures for what they are, not because they are good or bad. Yet in fully understanding them, we will also discuss the perceptions, negative and positive, associated with each. For this reason I invite you to also look at these subgroups as stages in a person’s life. The muscle boy will be part of that group only as long as he is of a specific age, the circuit boy will be part of that group as long as his ideals represent those of the circuit, and the athlete only when his life is built around his sport. Some of these subcultures and the stereotypes they create are often circumstantial stages rather than perma-
The origin of gay gym culture

It all began with the ancient Greeks and the most powerful male ideal ever conceived: the Greek ideal (Chapter 2), a body type characterized by well-defined muscles that are developed without being overly bulky, symmetry in the upper and lower body, and an absence of body fat. The ancient Greek statues of Apollo and Hermes reflect the ideal, and the writings of Homer, Pindar, Plato, and Aristotle expound on it. As if that was not enough, the ideal was furthermore represented in the surviving paintings and drawings of ancient Greece. But intellectual debate about and artistic representation of the ideal did not stop in ancient Greece; without looking too hard we can find the ideal in the writings, sculptures, paintings, and now movies, videos, and photographs of modern times.

Ancient Greek gym culture is of special interest to us because homosexuality was as much a part of it then as it is today. Likewise, when we speak of the Greek ideal, the propagation of the ideal and homosexuality are inseparable and historically well documented, albeit barely explored. The Greek ideal is truly more complex than its physical representation; for the ancient Greeks it was the embodiment of mind and body in perfect harmony. Very similar ideas today are shaping a growing mind/body-conscious gay subculture.

The Greek ideal reemerged in the paintings and statues of the Renaissance: this set the stage not just for gay gyms to sprout up in the 1970s, but for modern male body culture as we know it to take its shape. In Victorian times, the sport of bodybuilding revived, and this led to the gym becoming a modern social institution.

Historical and anthropological discussions of gay gym culture are important for two reasons. First of all, it helps us understand how history created the stereotypes that are defining us (for better or for worse) today. Second, when I looked into the evolution of these ideals, I have found that homosexuality was not at all divorced from the creation of these ideals; rather, it was a founding factor. As I will discuss in the next three chapters, gay gym culture is a modern phenomenon with ancient and homosexual roots. Homosexuality has not just influenced gym culture—it is heavily responsible for its creation.
THE BODY BEAUTIFUL

When we look at the influence of homosexual males in terms of body and gym culture, we realize that gay gym culture influences gay/queer history as much as it does mainstream history. A mistaken generalization about gay gym culture is that it is the result of the media’s overindulgence on the body beautiful, and that gay men have become the puppets of Madison Avenue. This is not entirely false, but it is neither entirely true. I have pondered the media’s involvement from a less critical and more historical and anthropological perspective and will discuss the influence of “muscle media” (Chapter 4) as it has shaped modern culture. In pondering the influence of media on gay body culture, we must recognize that gay men are a big part of Madison Avenue. Sure, the media is a driving force, but it is often driven by gay men. We are not the victims or the puppets of Madison Avenue—we as a cultural force are quite often the puppeteers.

The most obvious product of gay gym culture is the developed male body—the body beautiful. Most commentaries about the gym and gym culture, whether in admiration or critique, ask the question: Why are gay men obsessed with the body? Where did this preoccupation with the body beautiful come from?

There is no simple and definitive answer; the answers are many. The body, and the way it is perceived, changes dramatically from person to person, from one age group to another, and from one subgroup to the next. The only wrong answer to the question, which unfortunately is also the most common one, is the one that assumes a single answer for everyone. As we will learn, the body and the gym have very different meanings for a twenty-five-year-old circuit boy (Chapter 9), than they do for a forty-seven-year-old muscle bear (Chapter 10), or a seventy-nine-year-old retired professor (Chapter 11).

Yet the body is central to every group regardless of how different its members are from one another. The body, specifically the homosexual body, is also central to homosexuality; this is another parallel we find throughout history. This is an important parallel because it is at the core of gay identity. For this reason the male body is the nucleus of this book, and I place quite a bit of emphasis on the larger picture that the male body represents. Not your body, or my body, but how the male body has been viewed and perceived at different times in history and how these representations connect to both modern body culture
and the gay agenda. In doing so we will discuss the body as it has been represented in marble, photographs, and paintings (among other media), and, more importantly, what place these representations take in our minds to form ideals and subcultures built around those ideals (Chapters 2, 3, and 4).

The history of the body beautiful in relationship to homosexuality has important lessons for queer people. We know that men have been pondering its influence for the last 2,500 years. We also know that the appreciation of the male body beautiful by other males has traditionally been linked to homosexuality. In this history we can chronicle much of the struggles for acceptance that homosexuality has encountered. Today, the body beautiful represents for the most part a superficial celebration of beauty, but in the recent and ancient past, the same images represented symbolic and political statements. In this book I examine the role that the body beautiful and its representation have had in gay history and gay liberation (Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5), as well as the impact it continues to have in modern gay society (Chapters 5-12).

CRITICS

On the desirability scale in gay culture, the muscular male has little competition. He rules. He has become the ultimate object of desire. The gym-built man has the kind of power that sometimes even money cannot buy or education bestow. Wielding that kind of power guarantees examination, and this is one of the reasons gay gym culture has generated the criticism it has. Another factor is that gym-built men have become a large and very visible group. The criticism, often based on myths created by those for whom gay gym culture is foreign or threatening, is problematic for two reasons: much of it is based on erroneous information and anecdotal evidence, and it continues to mystify gym culture rather than understand it.

One cannot argue with the points some writers make about the superficial nature of gym culture. But these writers assume that the gym is about nothing but aesthetics. Is the gym about aesthetics? Absolutely. In Chapters 6, 9, and 10, I will entertain you with just how much, but the gym is also about a lot more. I will discuss the role that aesthetics plays in modern gay life and examine both our superficial motives and our deeper ones. Any psychologist will tell you that our most superficial motives are always tied to our deepest ones. This is
where it gets interesting, as understanding those superficial aspects will help us understand the more complex ones. In this book you will meet young men for whom the gym represents only an outlet to bigger biceps, but you will also meet others for whom the gym and athletics have been the catharsis for life-changing and sometimes life-saving experiences.

Because the only precedents to such a subculture in which homosexuality and the gymnasium were interlinked were documented in ancient Greece, and because today thanks to gay social critics the only literature on the subject is more negative than positive, it is imperative that we examine gay gym culture objectively. The philosophers and writers of the ancient world celebrated the body and the importance of a mind-body connection, while also discussing the downside of too heavy a preoccupation with the physical. Their modern counterparts fail to see what’s beyond the physical and focus only on what’s wrong with gym culture rather than what’s right with it. In this book I aspire to take a balanced approach between the two points of view.

**Conclusion**

In urban gay America, the gym is now an extension of gay social (and sometimes professional, recreational, and political) life. It has, as in ancient Greece, become the nucleus of gay life. If in the 1970s and 1980s the gay gym became a social institution for gay men in gay ghettos, now it has become a social movement without walls or borders. The gym is fast becoming the *third space* for a lot of gay men of all age groups. The gym has largely replaced for many gay men the bars and happy hours so popular among gay men in the 1970s and 1980s.

By taking into account the sociology, psychology, anthropology, and history of gym and body culture, in this book I examine the gym and its subcultures beyond the realms of exercise and fitness and explore it as the social institution it has become. I aim to have a frank discussion about ideals and stereotypes that shape modern thought. This book is intended to be an intelligent and unbiased dialogue that discusses both the benefits and drawbacks of the subculture and concurrently examines some of the biggest myths of muscle boys entertained by those who are not familiar with the men of the gay gym.
In gay culture today, athletics and the pursuit of a sculpted physique are increasingly becoming an important aspect of our social and cultural lives—so much so that a backlash has arisen against gym and body culture. Many modern gay writers and social critics have spent quite a bit of ink condemning what one suggests has contributed to the “fall of gay culture.”¹ Michelangelo Signorile in *Life Outside*, Edisol Wayne Dotson in *Behold the Man, The Hype and Selling of Male Beauty in Media and Culture*, and Daniel Harris in *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* have dedicated much of these titles to bashing gym culture and the cultivation of the body.

As someone who had spent over a decade working closely with gay gym culture, I found the previous books and similar articles inaccurate and misleading for two simple reasons. One, their collective deductions are heavily based on anecdotal evidence coupled with recently acquired folk wisdom, and almost completely ignore 2,500 years of history and philosophy. And two, if we examine how social structures are built and the societies in which they thrive, it does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that a social trend like gay gym culture is a direct, albeit complex, result of the rise and liberation of gay culture—not its downfall.

To better understand and explain human phenomena—gay gym culture, in this case—we must examine its foundation as well as the social structures that created it. That is exactly what this chapter and the next one are about. The foundation and social structures of gym culture, athletics, and the male body ideal prevalent today are found in one place: ancient Greek gym culture. When we look to Greek art and literature we find that twenty-first-century gym culture is nothing

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¹ Signorile, Michelangelo. *Life Outside*. Published by The Haworth Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008. All rights reserved.
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new: Greek society of 2,500 years ago shared many similarities to today’s gay gym culture. There is enough evidence in the art and literature of classical Greece to substantiate that not only was the Greek gymnasium a male-centered institution, but a homosexual male-centered one. During the Golden Age of Greece (around the fifth century BC), the high point of Greek culture and influence, the Greek gymnasium became prominent. The culture of the Greek gymnasium, where Greek athletics were born, the Olympic games were set in motion, and the male body ideal was conceptualized, can be best described as one that was largely made up by men who were sexually and romantically interested in and involved with other men.

Now that gay gym culture has become a substantial cultural and social group in modern society, it is constructive to examine the differences and parallels in Western culture of two very similar male-centered physique movements that thrived 2,500 years apart. In this chapter I discuss Greek homosexuality, take a look at how Greek homosexuality, often intertwined with gym culture, was documented by the literature and art of classic Greece, and explore the homosexual-influenced social structures that were founding aspects of the Greek athletic ideal and the Greek gymnasium.

GREEK HOMOSEXUALITY

Documented Western gay history can be said to have begun with the Greeks, and many of our ideologies and belief systems about sex, homosexuality, and the body can be traced to the same origins. Countless references in art and literature have taught us that homosexuality in ancient Greece was as much an accepted and normal behavior as heterosexuality. The Greeks did not even have nouns that described the sexual orientation of men; it was simply normal for men to love or lust after young men as much as after young women. Sexuality did not include the divisive, distinctive definitions that it entails today, and homosexuality most definitely did not have to be explained or excused. In explaining on a superficial level why homosexuality during the fourth century BC was such an accepted culture, K.J. Dover said it best: “They accepted it because it was acceptable to their fathers and uncles and grandfathers.” It’s a simple, yet legitimate explanation, which could very well be used in understanding the prevalence of exclusive heterosexuality today.
In fact, because of the higher status that men had over women, male-male relationships were in many cases considered not only noble but also superior to male-female relationships. Heterosexual relationships served the purposes of procreation and the family, but the union of two males often represented higher love. In *Symposium*, one of Plato’s most renowned books, the philosophers discuss Eros between men:

Those sectioned from a male pursue the masculine; because they are slices of the male, they like men while still boys, delighting to lie with men and be embraced by them. These are the most noble boys and youths because they are by nature the most manly. Some say they’re most shameless, but they’re wrong: they don’t do it out of shamelessness but out of boldness and courage and masculinity, cleaving to what is like themselves. A great proof: actually, it is only men of this sort who, when they grow up, enter on political affairs. When they reach manhood they love boys, and by nature pay no heed to marriage and the (be)getting of children except as compelled to it by custom and law; it suffices for them to live out their lives unmarried, with one another. So this sort becomes wholly a lover of boys or a boy who loves having lovers, ever cleaving to what is akin. When the lover of boys . . . meets his own particular half, they are then marvelously struck by friendship and kinship and Eros, and scarcely willing to be separated from each other even for a little time.3

*Pederasty*

Greek homosexuality has, for the most part, been studied as the by-product of the pederast type of relationships that according to historians were common in ancient Greece. The pederast relationship was typically made up of an older man or *erastes* (lover) who would undertake a male youth as his lover or *eromenos* (beloved); aside from consuming a sexual and romantic relationship would also become his mentor and ensure his education. A common mistake many people make when discussing pederasty in Greek homosexuality is to assume that these relationships were, unlike today, only of a sexual and brief nature, and again, unlike today, not a way of life but a rite of passage. However, enough evidence suggests that quite often, homosexual relationships involved two men of or about the same age, and, as I
will discuss, akin to relationships today, including everything from brief sexual encounters to lifetime partnerships. Furthermore, even if we do accept the pederast theory as dominant, it should be noted that Greek males evolved through different stages of the pederast relationship, from “beloved,” *eromenos* during youth to “lover,” *erastes* during mid- to late stages of adulthood, which means that they were practicing homosexuality throughout their life and not briefly or as a rite of passage.

An important fact that until recently many classic and queer-studies historians often overlooked is the strong connection between Greek homosexuality and pederasty to Greek athletics and the ancient Greek gymnasium. The most notable exemption has been made recently by Thomas F. Scanlon, author of *Eros and Greek Athletics*, in which he discusses authoritatively and in depth the fusion of homosexuality and Greek athletics. Pederasty involved education, and as I will explain, gymasia were a significant component of education. Homosexuality/pederasty and ancient gym culture were for the Greeks part of the same equation; one cultivated the other and vice-versa. As Cicero himself pointed out, albeit perplexed, “to me at any rate this custom [of pederasty] seems to have been born in the gymasia of the Greeks . . . where those loves are unrestricted and permitted.”

### Literature

We can further our understanding of homosexuality, the beauty and appeal of the male athlete, and the ancient Greeks’ body ideal by referring to some of the most respected and oldest literature of Western civilization, that of Homer, Pindar, and Plato. The magnitude of athletics and of the male athlete can be found in the oldest surviving literature in Western culture, the *Iliad* of Homer. Aristotle gave Homer his highest praise as a poet, and Alexander the Great is said to have always had at hand his copy of the *Iliad*. Yet, as David Sansone writes in *Greek Athletics and the Genesis of Sport*, the larger-than-life blind poet did not find it unsuitable to dedicate the twenty-third volume of the *Iliad* to the athletic contests held at the funeral of Patroclus. (The twenty-third volume of the *Iliad* also relates in part the legendary love affair between Achilles and Patroclus, as the games were held to honor the love and passion that Achilles felt toward Patroclus.)
The poetry of Pindar (518-438 BC), considered by the most serious scholars to be the greatest Greek lyric poet who ever lived, was so revered that when Alexander the Great destroyed Thebes in 335 BC he ordered his warriors to spare only the temples and Pindar’s house. Pindar’s surviving work, the four books of the *Victory Odes*, were composed to celebrate the champions of the athletic games. Although Pindar’s interest in the games was mostly philosophical, he nevertheless dedicated much of his life to writing about the physical prowess of athletes, and in so doing gave us a peek into the significant roles that athletics and male athletes played in Greek culture.

From the Greek gymnasiums emerged the young wrestler Aristocles, who had made a name by twice winning the wrestling prize at the Isthmian Games. He would eventually become better known by his ring name, a name that would come to describe one of the most influential thinkers of all time: Plato. Most scholars have agreed that Plato was exclusively homosexual, and some maintain that aside from the Bible, Plato’s *The Republic* has influenced Western thinking more than any book. In the Socratic dialogues of *The Republic*, Plato and his counterparts discuss the steps necessary in finding the ideal harmony of the soul and of the state. In their ideal republic, the philosophers discuss the importance of gymnasiums in the education of heroes. The following is a dialogue between Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus as narrated by Plato in *The Republic*:

And what shall be their education? Can we find a better than the traditional sort?—and this has two divisions, gymnastic for the body, and music for the soul.

True.

Shall we begin education with music, and go on to gymnastic afterwards?

By all means.

And when you speak of music, do you include literature or not?

I do.