

During this year's Super Bowl, you may hear TV announcers talk of "gridiron gladiators." Now, maybe the supersized, superfast, superrich athletes who struggle in the Super Bowl do look a little gladiatorial. But there's a super difference: the Roman gladiator frequently paid for defeat with his life.

### First Blood

The Romans believed they inherited the idea of gladiatorial contests from the Etruscans, who dominated Italy before Rome's rise. There is, however, no archaeological evidence that the Etruscans did any such thing.

On the other hand, the Roman origin of the gladiator--from the Latin *gladius*, or "sword"--is well documented. In 264 BC, the sons of Junius Brutus Pera honored their father at his funeral by holding a contest featuring three pairs of gladiators. Rome fell sword-over-shields in love with the martial display, and for the next five centuries, gladiators commanded more and more attention.

### We Who Are About to Die

The majority of gladiators--condemned criminals, prisoners of war, slaves--had no choice in the matter. By law, such people could be killed for virtually any reason, or compelled to give up their lives for sport. Yet many free Romans chose to become gladiators, too. You just had to swear an oath agreeing to be branded, chained, stabbed, and abused mercilessly against your will.

Why gladiate yourself like that? Maybe for the money (the winning gladiator often got a cash prize) or for the food (three square meals could be hard to scrounge). Or maybe for the girls, as aristocratic women were rumored to relieve their boredom by testing famous gladiators' prowess. No doubt many fought simply because they liked it. Rome was a militaristic society in which death and violence were always near at hand. Gladiators embodied the courage, strength, and military skill at the heart of Rome's rule.

### Cue the "Rocky" Music

Gladiators were, in fact, good with a sword. A new gladiator would be sent to school, where he (or she--female gladiators were a rare but popular attraction) would be carefully trained in the arts of war. Gladiators were, after all, in the entertainment business, and a well-trained gladiator not only provided a better show, but was also more likely to live to wow them another day.

As a gladiator, you could expect to fight two or three times per year. The rest of the time, you trained (not unlike boxers today). By the time you made it into the arena, you'd be well nourished, in peak physical condition, and ready to fight.

### Someone Call PETA

Gladiatorial games typically consisted of three acts. In the morning, you could see a "hunt" (*venatio*), featuring fabulous and fearsome beasts from throughout the land. Lions, tigers, bears,

elephants, ostriches, and nearly anything else would be paraded through the arena--and then killed by men or animals. The displays involved so many animals that some species simply disappeared from the empire.

The second act began around lunch, when condemned criminals were executed. Depending on the show, they might be tied to posts and savaged by animals starved for food, or they might be forced to fight one another until only one man stood. No one knows whether the poor sap who survived won his freedom or merely delayed his fate.

### Speed vs. Power

Afternoon and evening brought the main event: gladiators. Different types of gladiator, distinguished by their armor and weapons, matched up against other types. The lightly armed retiarius ("net man"), who wore no armor and fought with just a net and trident, might match his speed against the slower but more thoroughly armed secutor ("pursuer"), while the "Thracian," who wore a small, round buckler and carried a curved dagger, might face off against the murmillo, with a helmet, sword, and shield.

There were many other gladiator types, including the andabatae who fought blindfolded, the essedarii who fought from chariots, the hoplomachi who fought in full battle gear, and the laquearii who tried to lasso their opponents. New types arose as Rome expanded into new territories and brought home new kinds of prisoners of war, who would then be forced to fight in their native style.

### The Mercy of the Mob

Some fights were purely for show, but most gladiators fought in deadly earnest. When a fighter knew he had been beaten, he would hold up his hand to signal surrender. The aristocrat presiding at the festivities would then--taking his cues from the crowd--"give the thumb," signaling whether the victor should finish his opponent off (perhaps using the modern thumbs up/thumbs down, but no one knows for sure).

If the loser had fought well, he might be allowed to live. But this hope depended on the mercy of a howling mob. By one estimate, the average gladiator's career spanned just ten matches. Few lived long enough to retire. Most were killed, their bodies dumped in a pit and their arms and armor handed down to the gladiators who took their place.

### Not Very Christian

Gladiatorial contests initially took off in Rome because they were politically expedient. Roman senators and emperors could win popular backing by entertaining the masses with fascinating and bloody attractions. Yet eventually, Christianity won Rome over, and the gladiator came under increasing attack.

Constantine, the first emperor to embrace Christianity, tried to abolish the contests in 325, but gladiators, he found, die hard. It took 80 years (and another emperor: Honorius) before

gladiatorial contests were finally prohibited in 404. Gladiators may have continued to fight unofficially for another