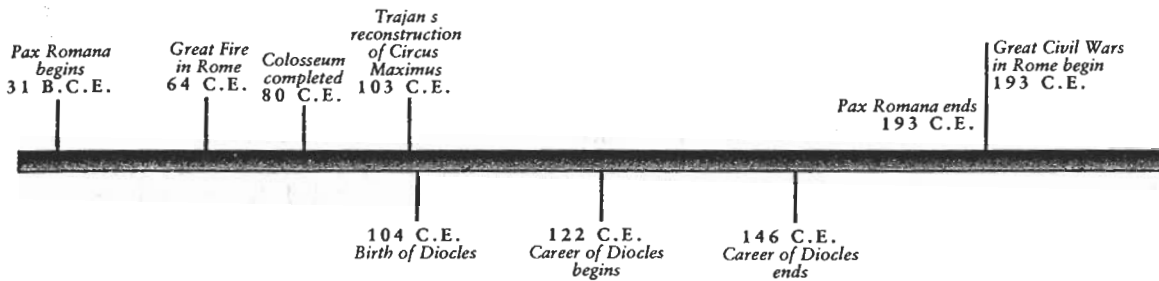




THE CAREER OF DIOCLES, ROMAN CHARIOTEER

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The life of the Roman charioteer can best be seen in the case of Diocles who was the master of his craft from 122–146 C.E. Throughout the history of Rome, the races at the circus proved to be central for the entertainment of the people. The most important of the circuses was in Rome, the Circus Maximus, which reached its fullest level of grandeur under the reconstruction of Trajan in 103 C.E. Located between the Aventine and Palatine hills, the Circus Maximus was 680 yards long and 150 yards wide; the arena area was 635 by 85 yards, an area twelve times the size of the Roman Colosseum. While the Circus had a seating capacity of over 150,000, in its day it probably held far more than that with people jammed in to see the races.



Of the great charioteers adored by Roman crowds and made immortal by their antics, few rivaled Gaius Appuleius Diocles, a Lusitanian from Spain. His career is the best documented of any

driver we know. During the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, Diocles completed a twenty-four-year career that brought him fabulous wealth, prestige, and recognition throughout the Empire.

Only a handful of charioteers over the centuries could boast of similar achievements. In his day, Diocles practically owned the Circus Maximus.

Diocles competed in 4,257 races and was victorious on 1,462 occasions. (He is also credited with three victories and three ties in the two-horse chariot race, but for some reason, while included in his start total, they have been omitted from his win total.) He began his career with the Whites in 122 C.E. when he was eighteen, and it was two long years before his first victory. In 128 C.E., he transferred to the Greens, but he had joined the Reds by 131 C.E. This was a bold move because of the popularity of the Greens, but Diocles suffered no apparent damage. He racked up hundreds of victories for the Reds before his retirement fifteen years later at age forty-two. Obviously, he could have driven for any stable he pleased, but he stuck with the Reds for the major part of his career. He would not have done so if it were not to his advantage.

Diocles' races were almost exclusively in the four-horse chariot, or *quadrigae*, and, in addition to his numerous triumphs, he also placed 1,438 times (most of them seconds). Even the best, however, sometimes come up empty, and Diocles failed to place in 1,351 races. He was no less a "superstar," for 1,064 of his victories came in single-entry races that pitted the best driver from each stable against one another. The prestige of winning such races is clear. Diocles' admirers, comparing his victories with those of a Blue driver named Epaphroditus, pointed out that while the latter had more wins, only 911 were in the single-entry races — 153 short of Diocles' impressive total!

Diocles also captured 110 crowns in opening races, which attracted great attention. These races followed a splendid street parade, and the charioteers participating in the races were part of the procession. Consequently, this initial contest was something like a "feature race" with special significance attached to it.

In almost a third of his victories, Diocles won in the final stretch. More often than not, he held the lead from start to finish. In team-entry races that pitted two or even three chariots (we know of only one case of four) from one stable against the same number from the other stables, Diocles won 398 victories. In these races, success depended less on individual skill than it did on team effort. The stable's "number one" driver was assisted by secondary drivers, whose main function was to interfere with the opposition and help him win. There was little to be gained by competing in such races, and the money could not have been as good as in the single-entry races.

This is probably the reason for the small number of victories Diocles garnered in this category.

Although Diocles broke the records of several famous predecessors, he was not even close to the 3,559 victories of Pompeius Musclosus or the 2,048 of Flavius Scorpas, both drivers for the Greens. However, Diocles was selective in his choice of races. He literally "went for the gold," and when his purses were compared with those of his greatest competitors, he was in a class by himself. By the time he was finished, his prize money totaled almost 36,000,000 sesterces, a sum that would have made him a multimillionaire today. Even so, his earnings did not come easily. From the statistics given for his career, Diocles must have competed in an average of 177 races per year — which means he raced three or four times each circus day. Such a grueling schedule makes the record of Scorpas, who compiled his incredible 2,048 victories before he was twenty-seven years old, all the more remarkable.

Diocles may not have been any better than some of Rome's other celebrated charioteers, but he did have one advantage over most of them: He lived to enjoy his wealth and fame. The race-track was a frequent scene of tragedy, and many drivers met their deaths there. A driver could be crushed against the barrier or lose a wheel; wrapping the ends of the long horse reins around his waist could be fatal if he could not reach the knife in his belt to cut himself free in an emergency; fouling and interfering with his opponents during a race could have dangerous consequences, as could risky displays of showmanship. A brief life was often abruptly ended on a sunny Roman afternoon, and the premature demise of a luminary such as Scorpas brought the pens of even Rome's greatest poets to life. Martial sorrowfully noted the latter's passing at the end of the first century C.E. and spoke of him in the most glowing terms:

Let grieving Victory tear to pieces her Idumaeen palms, and you, Adoration, beat your naked breast with cruel hands. Let Honor put on mourning, and sad Glory cut her hair once crowned with victory, and throw it as an offering on the wanton flames of the pyre. Alas, foul trick of Fortune! Cheated of the flower of your youth, Scorpas, you are fallen, and all too soon you harness the dark horses of Death. Why did the finishing post to which you did so often hasten with speedy course in your chariot become the finish of your own life? (Epigrams 10.50)

Martial also composed an epitaph for Scorpas:

I am Scorpas, the glory of the roaring Circus, the object of Rome's cheers, and her short-lived darling. The Fates, counting not my years but the number of my victories, judged me to be an old man. (*Epigrams* 10.53)

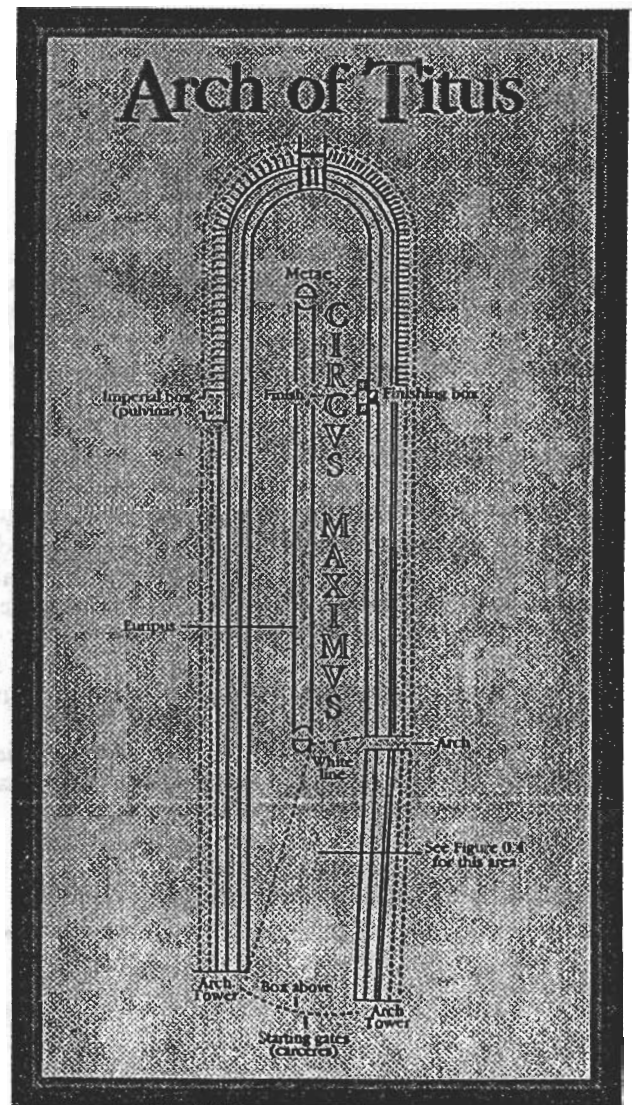
Others did not receive such a distinguished send-off, but their careers ended just as suddenly. Fuscus, a driver for the Greens, had the remarkable distinction of winning his first time out, but his luck only held for 57 more victories; he died at age 24. Crescens had 686 starts and over a million sesterces in his pocket; he was dead at 22. Aurelius Mollicius had already racked up 125 victories by the time his 20 years ran out. His brother made it to 29 and won 739 times. M. Nutius Aquilius lived to be 35, but he started late and had only been driving for 12 years. Some novices were little more than children when they took their fatal spills.

Although life was a fragile commodity for charioteers, some remained competitive to age fifty and even sixty. The latter were exceptional and viewed as oddities. Since skill — not age — dictated when a driver began (Crescens' first victory at thirteen makes Diocles appear aged when he recorded his first start at eighteen) and when he retired, a career could span several decades. Avillius Teres, for example, was racing under Domitian, yet he competed against Diocles in the latter's first victory in 124 C.E. To survive so long, there was little room for mistakes. As if the normal dangers of the track were not enough, drivers pandered to the crowd with novelty races and trick riding that increased their chances for a fatal accident. Diocles was well known for such antics, so it is clear he did not survive by "playing it safe." It was he, for instance, who first raced a team of seven unyoked horses to victory, netting a nice purse of 50,000 sesterces for his trouble. His skill was also demonstrated by the fact that he reached the hundred-victory mark in a single year, an accomplishment few other drivers could boast.

The ancients observed that it was not strength or fast horses that won victories but the brain of the charioteer. certainly, this applies to Diocles, who, unlike many of his colleagues, also had the good sense to know when to quit. Still, he must have left the Circus with numerous scars, since no one was immune to the frequent accidents that characterized the racing scene. Being hurt was bad enough, but the true test of courage may have been surviving the treatment Pliny the Elder describes for curing charioteers' wounds:

Sprains and injuries caused by a blow they treat with the dung of wild boars, collected in the

spring and dried. The same remedy is applied to charioteers who have been dragged or injured by a wheel, or severely bruised in any other way; in an emergency it can be used fresh. Some think that it is more efficacious if it is boiled in vinegar. More cautious doctors burn it to ash and mix it with water; the Emperor Nero is said to have refreshed himself regularly with this cordial, trying even by this method to prove himself a real charioteer. If you cannot get wild boar's dung, the next best is that of the domestic pig. (*Natural History* 28.237)



PLAN OF THE CIRCUS MAXIMVS BY THE EARLY THIRD CENTURY C.E.

Whatever the real or imagined benefits of boar dung, there must have been other, less odious methods of treatment discovered over the centuries and passed on among the brotherhood. Stable doctors had to know every possible remedy to return a charioteer to the track as quickly as possible. Extended absences benefited neither driver nor stable. Also, a drug problem must have characterized the racing scene, since opiates had been in widespread use as painkillers for centuries. The abuse of such substances needs no formal documentation to be believed.

Like all good drivers, Diocles had to be an excellent judge of horses and learned quickly which were the most dependable. The best became "captains" and were positioned as the right-yoke horse, which Romans believed was the decisive position on a team. Over his 24-year career, Diocles drove dozens of horses. Nine of them he led to their 100th victory; one to its 200th. He never forgot to credit his favorites, and we know that five of them — Abigeius, Lucidus, Pompeianus, Cotynus, and Galata — contributed in 445 of his victories. In the year Diocles won 127 times, Abigeius, Lucidus, and Pompeianus participated in 103 of the races. Other charioteers had even greater success with individual horses, but Diocles is credited as the best driver of African horses. African and Spanish horses appear to have been the most likely to win, but the Romans also raced horses from Italy, Greece, Gaul, Mauretania, and Cyrenaica.

The names of numerous horses have come down to us, often with their color noted and who the sire was. Few mares are mentioned, so it appears they were not used in great number. Names were not much different from those applied to modern equines. A white horse was likely to be called Snowy; a fast horse, Flier; an unusually large or powerful horse, Ajax. There were many horses, and names were often repeated. Crescens, Scorpas, and Diocles, for instance, all had a horse named Cotynus.

Stables were equipped with veterinarians, trainers, grooms, harnessmen, and others necessary

to maintain horses at peak condition. The animals were brought along slowly and usually started racing when they were about age five — although it could be earlier. Part of the delay was probably due to the difficulty of teaching the animals to run effectively as a team. Also, horses sent out prematurely were more likely to be injured. Successful stallions were in demand, as they are today, for breeding, but they had to do their duty without furlough, since it was unprofitable to remove a winning horse from the track.

Crowds could become as anxious about a horse as a driver, and the most successful equines were known by sight. Their genealogies were required knowledge among the faithful, and they were pictured in art. Tuscus, for example, had won 386 victories; Victor, 429. Martial complained that he was not as well known as a certain racehorse. Caligula's favorite, Incitatus — who, we are told, was the proud owner of a marble stable, an ivory stall, purple blankets, a jeweled collar, a house, a team of slaves, and furniture — was so successful the story spread that the emperor wished to make him a Roman consul!

Equine careers could be long, and there is at least one example of a horse having his own offspring as a running mate. Generally, Romans let their racehorses retire gracefully, and some were even honored with gravestones after an old age of rest and grazing:

Sired on Gaetulian sands by a Gaetulian stallion, speedy as the wind, in your life unmated, now, Hasty, you dwell in Lethe.
(*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6.10082)

Diocles' end was apparently as restful as some of his horses. When he gave up racing, he retired to the small Italian hill town of Praeneste (modern Palestrina). There, he apparently lived out the remainder of his life with his family in the quietude of rural Italy. A dedication in his name was erected at this place by his son and daughter.



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Describe the life of a Roman charioteer.
2. Why would people submit themselves to the life style described in this article?