

Gladiators

By Vickie Chao

Back in the old days of Rome, people loved to see gladiators fight. Gladiators were professionally trained warriors. Their job was not to defend the nation. Instead, it was to battle against each other in public. To the onlookers, such combats were fun and exciting. But to gladiators, they were not. To them, such combats were excruciating matters. Every time they marched to the center of an arena for a match, they put their lives on the line. If they made one false move, they could easily get injured or worse, face the most horrible outcome of defeat - death!

Interestingly, though ancient Rome was famous for this brutal form of sport, it did not invent it. The credit should really go to the Etruscans. The Etruscans believed that when an important man died, his spirit needed a human sacrifice to survive the afterlife. To honor the deceased, they would stage a battle at the man's funeral. They would have two gladiators fight until one killed the other. As the loser lay dying on the ground, his listless body became a burial offering.



The Etruscans ruled Rome for about a century. While it is quite possible that they first brought the custom to Rome during that period, there was no proof that the Romans actually practiced it. Historical records show that the first gladiator fight in Rome occurred in 264 B.C. It was long after the Etruscans were gone. That display was for honoring a man named Brutus. At his funeral, his sons held a contest among three pairs of gladiators. The fight must have gotten a lot of buzz around the town. Slowly, it took root in Rome and became a popular sport. With more and more people watching the game, the scale of it grew bigger over time. It went from the initial three pairs to three hundred, and then to five thousand!

For the most part, gladiators were usually criminals, slaves, or prisoners of wars. Held against their will, they were enrolled into special schools called *ludi*. Once there, they had to learn how to use weapons. They had to learn how to engage in fights. Upon "graduation," they each would be assigned to a specific class. The class would later dictate the type of weapon a gladiator could use. It would also dictate the type of gladiators he could fight. For example, in a gladiator game, the organizer would pit a fight between a "net man" and a "pursuer." The former had only a net in his right hand and a dagger in his left. The latter came fully armed. As the two warriors faced each other in the arena, the "net man" would try his best to cast the net over the "pursuer." If he managed to do that, he could then use his dagger to kill the opponent.

Of course, death was the most common outcome of a gladiator fight. But it was not the only one. When a gladiator was wounded, he could raise his forefinger to beg mercy from the audience or the high-ranking officials at the game. If they wanted to spare his life, they turned their thumbs up or waved their handkerchiefs. If they wanted to slay him, they turned their thumbs down or toward their chests. Usually, the audience's response was enough to determine the fate of the wounded gladiator. However, the final decision was always in the hands of the emperor (if he was there) or the game organizers.

Undoubtedly, a gladiator's life was a sad one. Each time he entered a game, he knew very well that it could be his last. Each time he made the pledge "We who die to salute you!" at the onset of a game, he meant what he said. If a gladiator was lucky enough to win enough combats, he could receive a discharge from further service. A successful gladiator enjoyed fame and fortune. But his popularity would never erase his past. That was because the Romans had mixed feelings about their gladiators. On one hand, they despised them for their shameful backgrounds. On the other hand, they admired them for their strength. The conflicting emotions were like a tug-of-war. While most people looked down on gladiators, they followed the sport wholeheartedly. They cheered on their favorite contestant whenever he was in a match. They showered him with praise. They even depicted him in poems and paintings.

Gladiator fights fell into disfavor during the fourth century. Emperor Constantine I issued an edict (ruling) in 325 A.D. and officially banned the sport. His order, however, was not taken seriously. For the next several

Name _____



Date _____

decades, the Romans continued to flock to arenas and watch gladiators dueling out in public. They did not give up this entertainment until Emperor Honorius came along. Emperor Honorius ascended the throne in 393 A.D. Shortly after he gained control, he banned the sport again. This time, he made sure that his order was taken seriously. With determination, he was finally able to put this violent pastime to a stop. The last known gladiator fight in Rome was on January 1, 404 A.D. After that, it faded into history and became a thing of the past!

Gladiators

Questions

- _____ 1. Who came up with the idea of gladiator fights?
 - A. The Romans
 - B. The Greeks
 - C. The Etruscans
 - D. The Egyptians
- _____ 2. Who were least likely to become gladiators?
 - A. Criminals
 - B. Slaves
 - C. Prisoners of wars
 - D. Nobles
- _____ 3. What was the original purpose of staging a gladiator fight?
 - A. To honor the deceased
 - B. To celebrate a new year
 - C. To show off wealth
 - D. To please gods
- _____ 4. Gladiators were divided into several categories based on their strength. When they fought at arenas, they could use any weapon they felt comfortable with.
 - A. False
 - B. True
- _____ 5. How many contestants were there in Rome's first gladiator fight?
 - A. Two
 - B. Ten
 - C. Six
 - D. Eight
- _____ 6. What would a wounded gladiator do to beg mercy from the audience?
 - A. Raise his forefinger.
 - B. Stretch his arms.
 - C. Cry out "Help!"
 - D. Lower his head.
- _____ 7. In which hand did a "net man" hold his net?
 - A. Left
 - B. Right

Name _____



Date _____

- _____ 8. Who first banned gladiator fights?
- A. Alexander the Great
 - B. Honorius
 - C. Constantine I
 - D. Caesar
- _____ 9. For how many years did Rome have gladiator fights?
- A. 668 years
 - B. 843 years
 - C. 385 years
 - D. 140 years
- _____ 10. Who was finally able to put an end to gladiator fights?
- A. Caesar
 - B. Constantine I
 - C. Honorius
 - D. Alexander the Great

Suppose you were a gladiator. You just returned from a combat. Describe how the game went.

Why do you think Emperor Constantine I wanted to ban gladiator fights? Suppose you were he. Draft a speech to explain your reasoning.



Date _____