

# Gladiators in the Roman Empire

Two men ready their weapons. An excited crowd of Romans cheer loudly in anticipation. Both combatants realize full well that this day might be their last. They are gladiators, men who fight to the death for the enjoyment of others.

As the two gladiators circle each other, each knows that his objective is to maim or trap his opponent rather than to kill him quickly. What's more, the fight must last long enough to please the crowd.

The gladiators jab swords and swing maces. They sweat in the hot sun. Sand and dirt fly. Suddenly, one gladiator traps the other with a net and poises to kill him with a three-pronged trident. The victor waits for a sign from the crowd. If the losing gladiator has put up a good fight, the crowd might choose to spare his life — and the vanquished gladiator will live to fight another day. But if the crowd is dissatisfied with the losing fighter — as was usually the case — its dissatisfaction meant slaughter.

In ancient Rome, death had become a form of entertainment.

## Let the Games Begin



Before fighting, gladiators had to swear the following oath: "I will endure to be burned, to be bound, to be beaten, and to be killed by the sword."

The Etruscans of northern Italy originally held public games, which featured such events as gladiator battles and chariot races, as a sacrifice to the gods.

The Romans continued the practice, holding games roughly 10 to 12 times in an average year. Paid for by the emperor, the games were used to keep the poor and unemployed entertained and occupied. The emperor hoped to distract the poor from their poverty in the hopes that they would not revolt.

Over time, the games became more spectacular and elaborate as emperors felt compelled to outdo the previous year's competitors. The games involved more participants, occurred more

frequently, and became more expensive and more outlandish.

The gladiators themselves were usually slaves, criminals, or prisoners of war. Occasionally, the gladiators were able to fight for their freedom. Criminals who were sentenced to death were sometimes thrown into the arena unarmed to serve their sentence. Some people, including women, actually volunteered to be gladiators.

They were willing to risk death for the possibility of fame and glory. Many gladiators went to special schools that trained them how to fight. A few gladiators boxed. They used metal gloves to increase cutting and bleeding.

Some gladiatorial contests included animals such as bears, rhinos, tigers, elephants, and giraffes. Most often, hungry animals fought other hungry animals. But sometimes hungry animals fought against gladiators in contests called *venationes* ("wild beast hunts"). On rare occasions, the animals were allowed to maul and eat a live human who was tied to a stake.

# 10 Things You May Not Know About Roman Gladiators

By [Evan Andrews](#) March 4, 2014

Beloved by the masses and sometimes scorned by the elites, Roman gladiators were the working class heroes of antiquity. For more than 650 years, people flocked to arenas across the empire to watch these armed and highly trained warriors engage in a blood-soaked spectacle equal parts sport, theater and cold-blooded murder. Get the facts on the enigmatic men-at-arms behind Ancient Rome's most notorious form of entertainment.



## 1. They weren't always slaves.

Not all gladiators were brought to the arena in chains. While most early combatants were conquered peoples and slaves who had committed crimes, grave inscriptions show that by the 1st century A.D. the demographics had started to change. Lured by the thrill of battle and the roar of the crowds, scores of free men began voluntarily signing contracts with gladiator schools in the hope of winning glory and prize money. These freelance warriors were often desperate men or ex-soldiers skilled in fighting, but some were upper-class patricians, knights and even senators eager to demonstrate their warrior pedigree.

## 2. Gladiatorial bouts were originally part of funeral ceremonies.

Many ancient chroniclers described the Roman games as an import from the Etruscans, but most historians now argue that gladiator fights got their start as a blood rite staged at the funerals of wealthy nobles. When distinguished aristocrats died, their families would hold graveside bouts between slaves or condemned prisoners as a kind of macabre eulogy for the virtues the person had demonstrated in life. According to the Roman writers Tertullian and Festus, since the Romans believed that human blood helped purify the deceased person's soul, these contests may have also acted as a crude substitute for human sacrifice. The funeral games later increased in scope during the reign of Julius Caesar, who staged bouts between hundreds of gladiators in honor of his deceased father and daughter. The spectacles proved hugely popular, and by the end of the 1st century B.C., government officials began hosting state-funded games as a way of currying favor with the masses.

## 3. They didn't always fight to the death.

Hollywood movies and television shows often depict gladiatorial bouts as a bloody free-for-all, but most fights operated under fairly strict rules and regulations. Contests were typically single combat between two men of similar size and experience. Referees oversaw the action, and probably stopped the fight as soon as one of the participants was seriously wounded. A match could even end in a stalemate if the crowd became bored by a long and drawn out battle, and in rare cases, both warriors were allowed to leave the arena with honor if they had put on an exciting show for the crowd.

Since gladiators were expensive to house, feed and train, their promoters were loath to see them needlessly killed. Trainers may have taught their fighters to wound, not kill, and the combatants may have taken it upon themselves to avoid seriously hurting their brothers-in-arms. Nevertheless, the life of a gladiator was usually brutal and short. Most only lived to their mid-20s, and historians have estimated that somewhere between one in five or one in 10 bouts left one of its participants dead.

## 4. The famous "thumbs down" gesture probably didn't mean death.

If a gladiator was seriously wounded or threw down his weapon in defeat, his fate was left in the hands of the spectators. In contests held at the Colosseum, the emperor had the final say in whether the felled warrior lived or died, but rulers and fight organizers often let the people make the decision. Paintings and films often show the throngs giving a "thumbs down" gesture when they wanted a disgraced gladiator to be finished off, but this may not be accurate. Some historians think the sign for death may have actually been the thumbs up, while a closed fist with two fingers extended, a thumbs down, or even a waved handkerchief might have signaled mercy. Whatever gesture was used, it was typically accompanied by ear-piercing cries of either "let him go!" or "slay him!" If the crowd willed it,

the victorious gladiator would deliver a grisly coup de grace by stabbing his opponent between the shoulder blades or through the neck and into the heart.

#### **5. They were organized into different classes and types.**

By the time the Colosseum opened in 80 A.D., gladiator games had evolved from freewheeling battles to the death into a well-organized blood sport. Fighters were placed in classes based on their record, skill level and experience, and most specialized in a particular fighting style and set of weaponry. Most popular were the “thraeces” and “murmillones,” who fought with sword and shield, but there were also the “equites,” who entered the arena on horseback; the “essedarii,” who battled from chariots; and the “dimachaerus,” who may have wielded two swords at once. Of all the popular gladiator types, perhaps the most unusual was the “retiarius,” who was armed with only a net and a trident. These warriors tried to ensnare their opponents with their net before moving in for the kill, but if they failed, they were left almost entirely defenseless.

#### **6. They only rarely fought against animals.**

The Colosseum and other Roman arenas are often associated with gruesome animal hunts, but it was uncommon for the gladiators to be involved. Tangling with wild beasts was reserved for the “venatores” and “bestiarii,” special classes of warrior who squared off against everything from deer and ostriches to lions, crocodiles, bears and even elephants. Animal hunts were typically the opening event at the games, and it wasn’t unusual for scores of unfortunate creatures to be slaughtered in a single exhibition. Nine thousand animals were slain during a 100-day ceremony to mark the opening of the Colosseum, and another 11,000 were later killed as part of a 123-day festival held by the Emperor Trajan in the 2nd century A.D. While most animals were merely slaughtered for sport, others were trained to do tricks or even pitted against one another in fights. Wild animals also served as a popular form of execution. Convicted criminals and Christians were often thrown to ravenous dogs, lions and bears as part of the day’s entertainment.

#### **7. Women also fought as gladiators.**

Female slaves were regularly condemned to the arena alongside their male counterparts, but a few citizens took up the sword of their own free will. Historians are not sure when women first suited up to fight as gladiators, but by the 1st century A.D. they had become a common fixture at the games. These lady warriors may not have been taken seriously in the patriarchal Roman culture—the Emperor Domitian enjoyed pitting women against dwarves—but a few appear to have proven themselves in single combat. A marble relief dating to around the 2nd century A.D. depicts a bout between two women dubbed “Amazon” and “Achillia,” whom the inscription says fought to an honorable draw. Women also joined in the animal hunts, but their stint in the arena may have come to an end around 200 A.D., when the Emperor Septimius Severus banned their participation in the games.

#### **8. Some gladiators organized themselves into trade unions.**

Though they were regularly forced to come to blows in life-or-death combat, gladiators viewed themselves as a kind of brotherhood, and some even organized into unions, or “collegia,” with their own elected leaders and protector deities. When a warrior fell in battle, these groups would ensure that their comrade received a proper funeral and grave inscription honoring his achievements in the arena. If the deceased had a wife and children, they would also see that the family received monetary compensation for their loss.

#### **9. Several Roman emperors participated in staged gladiatorial bouts.**

Hosting gladiator games was an easy way for Roman emperors to win the love of the people, but a few took it a step further and actually participated in combat. Several rulers performed in the arena including Caligula, Titus and Hadrian—though most likely under highly controlled conditions or with dull blades. A deadeye with a spear, the deranged Emperor Commodus often tried to wow the crowds by killing bears and panthers from the safety of a raised platform. He also competed in a few gladiator fights, though usually against inexperienced fighters or even terrified and poorly armed members of the audience. When he inevitably won the contests, Commodus made sure to reward himself with the massive sum of one million Roman sesterces.

#### **10. Gladiators often became celebrities.**

Though often dismissed as uncivilized brutes by Roman historians, the gladiators won massive fame among the lower classes. Their portraits graced the walls of many public places; children played with gladiator action figures made of clay; and the most successful fighters even endorsed products just like the top athletes of today. They were also renowned for their ability to make Roman women swoon. Many women wore hairpins and other jewelry dipped in gladiator blood, and some even mixed gladiator sweat into facial creams and other cosmetics.

#### *Did You Know?*

- Many Roman gladiators were a little on the husky side. Fighters trained their bodies to the limit, but their carbohydrate-rich diet of barley porridge often saw them pack on fat around their midsection. This extra flab had a practical purpose, since it helped absorb superficial wounds and protected the gladiator’s vital organs from injury.





