

The legendary History of the Marathon...

by GASTON MEYER of *l'Equipe*, Paris.

In the year 490 B.C., Miltiade a Greek general from Athens inflicted a serious defeat on the Persians in the plain of Marathon, small village in Atticus, northwest of Athens. An eye witness of the time gave the following account of the event, it was a Greek soldier who ran, at a stretch, the road from Marathon to Athens in order to convey the news of the victory, he collapsed and dropped dead with exhaustion after having carried out his mission. This soldier's name was Philippidès.

This legendary history is probably purely fictitious and sheer invention, but it became the source of inspiration of famous sculptors, principally of Cortot, whose magnificent

statue of the dying soldier adorns the garden of the Tuileries in Paris, where it was installed in 1834.

Moreover, in no time did the Greeks ever think of commemorating this event on the occasion of the celebration of the Ancient Olympic Games which had already been taking place for three hundred years and which came to an end in the year 393 of our modern era... The idea of commemorating the memory of the soldier of Marathon is due to a Frenchman, Mr. Michel Bréal, famous member of the Institute, who presented a cup to the winner of the long distance race introduced for the celebration of the renascent Olympic Games. Coubertin hesitated a long time before giving his

consent to enter in the Games' Programme a race of such long duration, for, the distance which separated Marathon from Athens is about 44 km. finally, a distance of 40 km. was decided upon. If the actual distance of the present Marathon is 42 km. 195... it is only due to the fact that the Britishers who were in charge of the London Games organization in 1908, chose the road Windsor to London (Olympic Stadium) which covers exactly that distance ! On how trivial a matter things do depend !

The Olympic Marathon is the most glamorous event at the Games because it appeals to the imagination of the public, but it is less liked by the technicians. As a matter of fact, this event would be accepted readily in these days if the organizers took all the necessary precautions... Distance

is no longer a drawback (all the runners of half distance races cover an average of 40 km. per day), nor does the fact of the heavy running of the track enters into consideration.

But it is a crime to ignore the probabilities of excessive temperature. By a temperature exceeding 25° in the shade, Marathon racing might become deadly, several cases of death have occurred in the past. Besides, heat combined with the rarefaction of the oxygen in the air, have been often the cause of incorrect timing of results. Whatever happens, the fact remains that thirteen Marathons have been contested since 1896. It fell to the French alone to have the honour to win this event three times... Our readers will no doubt be interested to read a

...Brief Chronicle of past Marathons

1896. — Athens

25 athletes competed in this marathon, six finished the race which was made difficult on account of clouds of dust raised by the hoofs of the horses mounted by the officials supervising the correct running of this contest.

It was a Greek shepherd by name of Spiridon Loues (erroneously named Louys), who won the first Marathon in 2 h. 58' 50". The Heir apparent to the Greek throne escorted him in the sprint of the last 100 m. The enthusiasm was so great and the rush of the crowd so delirious that jewels of great value were found on the track ! The Greek winners were then placed 2nd, 4th, 5th and 6th !

1900. — Paris

The Marathon was run on the Paris tour (round the outside bulwarks and passed almost unnoticed) as did the rest of the race. The winner of this event was the gardener of the Racing Club of France, Michel Theato who run easily the 40 km. 260 in 2 h. 59' 45".

1904. — St-Louis

First appearance of coloured runners, of South Africans, jugglers at the World Exhibition. One of the favourites, Fred Lorz, gave up the race at the 15th kilometre and climbed in an old car, the engine stopped and he had a breakdown I Lorz left this vehicle and finished the race on foot. When he reached the Stadium he was acclaimed as the hero of the day but the real winner Thomas Hicks (U.S.A.) who, arrived 20 m. later lodged a strong protest. Lorz was then disqualified. The intense heat and the

clouds of dust caused by the cars accounted for the time taken by Hicks, namely 3 h. 28' 53" for 40 km. Hicks was stimulated by injections of sulfate of strychnine, to the view and knowledge of all present !

1908. — London

Recognized Olympic Champion : the Italian born Dorando Pietri finished the race but, all in collapsed when he reached the Stadium and had to be assisted by two officials. He was outclassed by the American runner John Hayes who covered the 42 km. 263 m. in 2 h. 55' 18"4. In 1956, one of the guilty official died and made a statement in his will whereas he proved that Pietri was doped and stood in serious danger of death, fact that justified the assistance given him by the two officials. This man was haunted by remorse all his life.

1912. — Stockholm

Good weather conditions therefore a perfectly normal run. The distance of 40 km. 200 m. was run by the South African athlete Kenneth Mac Arthur in 2 h. 36' 54"8.

1920. — Antwerp

The Finnish athlete Hanners Kolehmainen, who was the great champion of athletics at the Stockholm Games (He won the 5 and 10 km. and the cross-country) won the long distance over 42 km. 750 m. in 2 h. 32' 35"8.

1924. — Paris

This marathon was contested on the dusty roads of the northwestern suburb,

on a road exposed to the scorching rays of the sun. this event covered a distance of 42 km. 195 m. and was won by the Finnish veteran Albin Steenross in 2 h. 41' 22"6.

1928. — Amsterdam

The favourites ended in a fierce and desperate struggle. El Oouafi won the race in 2 h. 32' 57" ahead of a Chilean competitor. He was acclaimed and received the traditional accolade from Mr. Paul Mericamp. Later on in life he became poverty stricken having squandered the little money he made when he turned a professional for a short time. (He earned about 30.000 frcs.)

1932. — Los Angeles

The heat was so intense that the young Argentine athlete Juan Carlos Zabala gained with difficulty a few seconds advance on his rival the Englishman Samuel Ferris (2 h. 31' 36" achieved by the former against 2 h. 31' 56" from Ferris) he had been leading steadily for more than 30 km.

1936. — Berlin

The first "scientific" victory in 2 h. 29' 19" 2 which was realized by the Korean athlete, Kithei Son, competing for Japan. Son had been remarkably well coached ; he ran wearing special shoes made to keep the big toes apart from the other toes.

1948. — London

Murderous race on account of the heat ; the Belgium parachutist Etienne Gailly led the field and was first to enter the Stadium.

The last hill nearly knocked him out, he collapsed and was overtaken by the Argentine runner Delfo Cabrera in 2 h. 34' 51" 6, and was even outrun by the Welsh crossman Thomas Richard.

1952. — Helsinki

Third Olympic Record and prodigious performance achieved by the famous Czechoslovakian athlete Emil Zatopek in the record time of 2 h. 23' 03" 2 heading the Argentine runner-up Reinaldo Corno by the comfortable margin of 2' 30".

1956. — Melbourne

Intense heat and heavy going race. From 0 m. altitude the hilly road rose to a gradient of 85 m. The days for the marathon racers averaging 16 km. 500 are over ! Mimoun stands out in a class by himself and was not worried by competition. Zatopek who was placed 6th, could not repeat his peak performance of 1952.

1960. — Rome

It may be hot and for this reason it would be preferable to hold this event **BY NIGHT**. In this case, the likely Olympic winner of this race will be the athlete who is capable to cover the 10.000 m. between 29 and 30 min.