

Readers' correspondence

The first Olympic hurdles...

For many years there has been uncertainty as to the precise distance run in the hurdles event at the first Olympic Games held in Athens in 1896. Some historians of sport refer to the event as the standard 110 metres, run over ten hurdles, while a number of others describe it as a 100 metres race, run over eight hurdles. With the idea of clarifying the matter, I wrote recently to a number of authorities, and established that the inconsistency can be traced to "Les Jeux Olympiques, 776 av. J.-C. - 1896": Official Report in second section "Les Jeux Olympiques de 1896" by the Baron de Coubertin, Timoleon Philemon, N.G. Politis and Charalambos Anninos; published by Charles Beck (Athens) and H. Le Soudier (Paris), in which the preliminary heats are described in the French and Greek translations as 100 metre races, whereas the finals are described as 110 metre races (pages 79-80 and 106). The conclusion of the Dean of the International Olympic Academy, Otto Szymiczek, is that the references to 100 metres were the result of a printing error, and that the distance actually run in Athens was the standard 110 metres. The evidence in support of this seems overwhelming:

1. *The programme of the Games, published in the "Bulletin du Comité international des Jeux Olympiques" in January 1895, refers to "110 mètres haies".*
2. *The Greek author John Chryssafis in his "History of the Olympic Games" (1930), pages 228-9, quotes the rules for 1896 as: QKthurdles of 1.06 m. in height, intermediate distance 9 metres, distance from the start to the first hurdle 15 metres and from the last hurdle to the finish line 14 metres.*
3. *The times recorded in the 1896 heats and final are consistent with a distance of 110 metres.*

4. *Newspaper reports of 1896, including "The Field" (England) and "The Boston Post" (USA) refer to the race as 110 metres hurdles, and so do the reminiscences of Olympic athletes Ellery Clark (USA) and George Robertson (GBR).*

My thanks to Madame Monique Berlioux and Messrs. Harold Abrahams, Erich Kamper, Roberto Quercetani, Richard Szreter, Otto Szymiczek and Dave Terry for their contributions to this small investigation.

Peter Lovesey
Cheam - Surrey (GBR)