

# The Olympic Games - Athens 1896 \*

## *IX - Description of the Games*

Seventh day

31st March

According to the general programme, the following were due to take place : at Phaleron, in the afternoon, there was to be a band competition, and sailing contests were to be held, a cycling marathon race with the finish at the cycling track, and in the evening, a great torch procession in Athens.

The competition between the bands did not take place, probably because the various philharmonic bands did not reach the capital in time, and owing to this lack of time they could not practice. The sailing races were cancelled since we had no proper boats for this, nor did any foreign ones appear for the contest. The remainder of the programme was carried out.

### The rifle range

First of all, in the morning, the unfinished contest for army guns at 300 metres was continued and completed. On the previous day, Frangoudis seemed to be in the lead. But on completion of the contest, the results showed that the winner and Olympic victor was George Orfanidis, son of the University Professor D. Orfanidis. He had 35 successful shots with 1,583 marks. Frangoudis was second.

The contest finished at 1 p.m. and the crowds withdrew happily, congratulating the winner.

### Marathon cycle race

The name of Marathon and anything connected with it, especially after the victory of Louÿs, had a particular prestige for the Greek public. That is why this contest, toilsome yet important, was the only one to attract public interest after the Games of the previous Friday.

The contestants were six in all – the German Goedrich, the Englishman Battel, and four Greeks, Constantinou, Iatrou, Aspiotis and Constantinidis. According to the programme, they were to start from the last kilometre of Kifissia Avenue, follow the Marathon road up to the 40th kilometre and, after signing there the protocol certifying their arrival, in the presence of the delegated official, return by the same road, and then via Herodes Atticus Street and Olga Avenue, go down the road to Old Phaleron, and then along the shores of Phaleron, by the tram lines, and arrive at the New Phaleron Cycle Track. This whole distance was 87 kilometres. At different parts of the route, controllers had been placed to see that the programme was kept faithfully. At various parts of the route, the contestants had other cyclists who served them as pace-makers.

At 17 minutes past 12, in front of a good many inquisitive onlookers who had collected, the cyclists started at the sound of the pistol shot, from the starting

\* Official report - see "Olympic Review" since N° 152-153.

point in Kifissia Avenue opposite the Evangelismos Hospital, and shot away like arrows into the depths of the street. They gobbled up the distance, passing by inns, through villages, without stopping. Constantinidis, who became the hero of the day, arrived first at Marathon in one hour and fifteen minutes ; he signed the protocol in haste, which the representative of the Committee was keeping there, and immediately started the return. Goedrich arrived second, and the others in turn. But on the return run, while they were cycling at short distances from each other, various dramatic episodes occurred. The bicycle of Constantinidis suffered damage and became unusable. The Englishman Battel,



*At the cycle track.*

who was following him, thus passed him. But Constantinidis borrowed another bicycle from a pace-making friend and, cycling furiously, caught him up a few kilometres before Athens. Luck, however, continued to be unfavourable for this intrepid cyclist. At the turning of Kitissia Avenue in Herodes Atticus he skidded, fell in the mud and was injured ; yet he was-not discouraged. He siezed the bicycle of another of his accompanying friends, and with vertiginous speed caught up with Battel, who had passed him in the meantime. Battel, exhausted and tired out, fell from his cycle in the Phaleron road, while his opponent continued towards the cycle track.

The crowd that arrived was dense owing to it being Sunday ; it had closed Kifissia Avenue up to Ambelokipi, awaiting the return of the cyclists from Marathon. On their appearance, it burst into shouts, encouraging those passing by. At Phaleron again plentiful onlookers had foregathered, wishing to share in the emotion of anticipation and see the arrival of the winner. The circular platform was full of spectators, while many other sightseers stood around. The Royal Family with its official guests, having arrived at 3 p.m., awaited at its

special stand, while they were entertained by the music. Finally, lively cheers were heard from outside. Constantinidis, covered with mud as was natural from his repeated falls, arrived first at the finish. He was an Olympic winner. He had covered the distance in 3:2.31. The Greek flag was hoisted on the mast and floated for the first time as winner at the cycle track. There followed, though on a smaller scale, a repeat of that which had happened on Friday at the victory of Louis at the stadium. There was an indescribable burst of enthusiasm. Goedrich arrived second, coming 20 minutes after Constantinidis. Third was Battel, badly bruised from his fall.

#### The torch procession

One of the finest sights of the series of festivities was undoubtedly the torch procession that took place in the evening of this Sunday, leaving indelible impressions on those who saw it.

The place for meeting had been fixed in the wide and long Athenas Avenue, and the time for starting at 9 p.m. But long before that the people had foregathered in thousands in the streets and squares, shining with lights, so that they could take up suitable positions to see the procession. After 8 p.m. the crowd in the central parts was suffocatingly dense, while communications became difficult.

In spite of this, the bodies which were to take part in the torchlight procession continually foregathered in Athenas Avenue. The cavalry company which was to proceed in the vanguard of the procession was placed at the Omonia Square end of the Avenue. After that, the men of the various bodies of the Athens garrison were placed in order – cavalry, artillery, sappers – about a thousand in number. Then there was a great number of men from the infantry. The soldiers carried beacons and pine-wood torches, which were to be lit at the moment they started. Soon, to the strain of bands, the pupils of the gymnasia arrived, carrying multicoloured Venitian lanterns fixed to the end of poles. Following this, the wave of two thousand students of the University flowed from Omonia Square, also bearing lanterns attached to the ends of poles, and with difficulty arrayed themselves behind the infantry. After the pupils and the students, the sailors from the navy were arrayed, then the civilians, members of the guilds, etc. When the torches were lit, the whole of Athenas Avenue was lit from end to end and constituted a fine sight.

At nine o'clock, two bugle calls were heard. It was the signal for attention. All were arrayed ready, the soldiers in fours. The third bugle call was heard, and the vast illuminated mass set forth. The van was taken up by the cavalry company, then the garrison band followed by the military, then the students, with the philharmonic band of Corfu in front of them. They were followed by the guards of the stadium in their red tunics and white helmets, bearing the flags of all the countries who had competitors in the Olympic Games. Then other bodies followed, led by the philharmonic bands – those of Laurion, Leucas, another from Corfu, from Cephallonia, from Zakynthus, the philharmonic band of Athens, the naval band... The whole of this endless procession entered Stadium Street and the sight was incredibly fine. The illuminated arches, which became smaller as they receded into the distance, becoming parallel arches ex-

tending to the horizon, the illuminated and flag-bedecked houses, that fiery river of torches, the thousands of lanterns that were being swayed, and the dense crowds on the pavement all together made a sight of magic phantasmagory, while there was a strong reflection in the air, as if there were a fire. The shining torrent advanced to the sound of the marches of the bands which played continuously to the sound of cheers. It reached Constitution Square, which by its lit arches, its illuminated little garden and the thick crowd in it, made another most harmonious picture. The procession then proceeded towards the Square of the Palace and passed below the Palace. The whole of the Royal Family, King Alexandria of Serbia, the Grand Duke George and their retinues admired the majestic sight from the marble balcony of the Palace, while the courtiers foregathered at the propylaea. As the bands passed in front of the balcony, they played the National Anthem ; the soldiers and the other torch-bearers cheered the Royal Family, and the other foreign officials saluted with emotion. The procession of these ten thousand men continued endlessly, and when the vanguard had already proceeded down the opposite street to Constitution Square, the tail was still at the Omonia Square end of Stadium Street. The endless illuminated flood then poured into Aeolos Street, where the windows and balconies were filled with spectators, and thence through Omonia Square they came up University Avenue. The procession halted there in front of the University, and around 11 p.m. was dissolved, the soldiers returning to their barracks to the echoes of the bands, while the public returned home.

#### Banquet at the Palace

This very same day there was another noteworthy event – the banquet offered at the Palace in honour of the athletes who had taken part in the Olympic Games. Representatives of the press, both Greek and foreign, the Greek and international committees, the commissions, all those who had contributed in some way to the success of the Games, were invited. A total of two hundred and sixty guests sat at the royal table in the Great Hall of the Palace, all wearing morning dress in accordance with the invitation, One American, indeed, wore cycling shorts, and only the Hungarian athletes wore the regulation dark suits. The general centre of attraction, however, was Louis, wearing with charm the national costume, who was cheered as he came into the Palace. The winner of the Marathon race was accompanied by his elderly father, a kindly and worthy peasant, reminding one, through his proud emotion, of Diagoras the Rhodian.

The time for arrival indicated on the invitations was 11.30 a.m. The King entered the Hall and the Corfu Philharmonic, which was drawn up, played the national anthem and the Olympic one by Samaras. The King sat at the centre of the table wearing an admiral's uniform, having on His right Prince George and on His left Prince Nicholas. The Crown Prince sat opposite having on His right the President of the Parliament, Zaimis, and on his left the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Skouzès, both of them members of the twelve-membered Council of the Olympic Games. Her Majesty the Queen, being indisposed, did not appear.

At the end of the meal the Ring arose and speaking in French, addressing Himself to the visitors, said the following :

“Let me tell you, Gentlemen, the joy we have all felt at seeing you come to Greece to take part in the Olympic Games. Through the welcome that the population has extended to you, you will have been able to judge for yourselves how happy the Greek people was to receive you. I also take advantage of this opportunity to convey my warmest congratulations to the victors. In a few days you will be leaving to return to your respective countries. I do not bid you good-bye, I say to you au-revoir here once more. Reserve, I beseech you, a kind remembrance, and do not forget the enthusiastic emotion that all felt at the arrival of the Marathon winner in the stadium. Unfortunately the Queen is indisposed ; she regrets that she could not be present today. She has asked me to convey her greetings to you all. I drink to your health and repeat My sincere thanks”.

Lively cheers in every language interrupted every sentence of the Ring’s toast. When after a fair time silence had been resumed the Ring, rising again, said the following in Greek :

“The revival of the Olympic Games in their classical cradle has been crowned by full and unexpected success, and I am happy today in congratulating all of you who have worked to bring about this line result. (Cheers)

“These thanks I grant in the first place to your President, the Crown Prince, who conscientiously presided this work with perseverance, and with tireless toil brought it to a conclusion. Disregarding all the obstacles and all the objections brought forward, He led you to success, because He was inspired by the love of His motherland, and He was convinced that He was working for an objective of the greatest national benefit. (Prolonged cheers) Yet equally I extend the thanks of the nation and of Myself to the great benefactor of the nation, George Averoff, who, generously as always, so too in the expenses of the restoration of the stadium, proved himself a second Herodes Atticus, and contributed above all to the success of the work. (Cheers also for Averoff)

“I also extend thanks to the Princes George and Nicholas, who organised and carried out the Games, in the firm conviction that they were executing a patriotic work, and especially to Prince George, who also as President of the Committee of judges, worked with the greatest devotion. The same thanks I also extend to the indefatigable General Secretary, Mr. Philemon, who even at the sacrifice of his health worked with enthusiasm and unquenchable zeal. (Lively cheers)

“Gladly I also extend My thanks to the members of the various committees, as also to the champions who distinguished the Games, both Greeks and non-Greeks, and to all those who honoured the Greek arena. The foreign athletes who will be leaving Greece will be heralds, I feel sure, conveying the progress of the land and of the great works which were carried out in the very short time for the success of the Games. (Cheers)

“Greece, the mother and the nursery of athletic contests in Panhellenic Antiquity, in undertaking and carrying out these today with courage under the eyes

of Europe and of the New World, can, now that the general success has been acknowledged, hope that the foreigners who honoured it will appoint our land as a peaceful meeting place of the nations, as a continuous and permanent field for the Olympic Games.

“With this wish, Gentleman, I drink especially to all those who contributed to the success of this First Olympiad.”

These fine words of the King kindled general enthusiasm and the cheers of those present reached heaven. At the wish of the Sovereign, Mr. Philemon replied by eloquent sentences, happily inspired, moving the King and the others listening even to tears. Afterwards the French journalist, correspondent of the Figaro, Mr. Hugues le Roux, made a witty and enthusiastic toast, and after him the correspondent of The Times of London spoke. Following this, on a signal from the King, all rose from the table and repaired to the neighbouring room, where coffee was offered. Here the King spoke with all present. He conversed with most especial sympathy with Louis, and reserved particular solicitude for his aged father. The gathering was dissolved around 3.30 p.m.

The words of the King created a most favourable impression, especially the idea which he stressed both in French and in Greek that Athens might have the right to be the permanent headquarters of the Olympic Games.

The words of Mr. Philemon, in replying to the Royal toast, are worth recording. Philemon said, in an unprepared speech, the following :

“The diamonds which dropped from Your mouth a few moments ago, oh King, shine with such brilliance that they could not be dimmed by the most outstanding eloquence. Perhaps they can be enhanced by sincerity and enthusiasm. In this moment you have shown that You well understand the great title that You bear, that You are King not only of the Greeks within Greece, but of the Greeks living in the still irredeemed lands and those residing everywhere on the earth’s surface... I thank God that before I breathe my last He granted that I should see such a day”.

The eloquent toast that Mr. Hugues le Roux read was as follows :

“Sire,

“It is not only for those of my blood and of my race that I crave permission to lift my glass. It is for all of us that You have brought together and welcomed. All of us brought here this wish : ‘Provided that one of ours wins the Marathon Cup !’

“Yet, when we saw at the end of the stadium the peasant appear who was arriving first, there was not one of us, of whatever nation he may happen to belong, who did not thrill with joy. We felt that the Greek earth had run below its son to bring him victory. It had to be that it was a Greek who might come and say : ‘Forget that which divided you. The barbarians have been repulsed. Civilisation triumphs for a second time’.

“At that moment, when Your two sons took that child of Greece in their arms, when they introduced him to you, Sire, there were no longer in the stadium either Greeks or foreigners ; there were only Your subjects”.

(To be continued)