

# SPORTS MEDICINE : THE DEATH OF PHILIPPIDES NINE VIEWS OF THE “EVIDENCE”



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Good old Philippides, a legendary figure on whom more has been written than on the most royal of weddings. His run across the plain of Marathon which was the cause of his death, is the source of both fascination and discord : No less than nine authors claim to know the “real truth” about his death. For some, he died as a result of an overdose of doping substances ; for others he died precisely because he had failed to take any magic potions. Some even go so far as to quote words which he could not possibly have said. This legendary news item of 2,379 years ago but very much a part of modern Olympic history, teaches us one lesson : in the absence of tangible evidence (witnesses and autopsy), is it seriously worth discussing the death of Philippides in much the same way as some people wonder whether angels are male or female ?

## THE LEGEND

On the north-east coast of Greece lay the plain of Marathon, inhabited by a fierce and war-like race which was the first to worship Apollo and then Hercules, the benign god and the powerful demi-god.

But the name of Marathon would no doubt have disappeared beneath the dust of the centuries had it not been for the

great battle which took place there in 490 B.C. The hegemony of Greece was in danger : Darius, king of the Persians, had sent his nephew Artapherne and 100,000 troops to conquer this rich and civilized country. 10,000 Athenians commanded by Miltiades met them in battle and routed them, killing 7,000 men.

Athens waited in suspense for news of the battle. Suddenly, running along the road from Marathon appeared a soldier

covered in blood and dust. He arrived, exhausted, in front of the sages who anxiously watched this messenger of Fate.

"We are victorious", he cried and, amidst the cheers, expired. Of his own free will he had given his life to save his native city the anguish of a few hours' wait.

(«Les sports pédestres» by Jean Lhermit, ed. Nilsson 1912).

## 1 — Doping overdose



There is no doubt that the most famous runner of all time, doped before he set off, was this Athenian who on 12th September 490 B.C. during the first Persian war ran from Marathon to Athens to bring the city news of the victory of the Greeks over the Persians.

Now, when you realize that the distance between these two towns is only 40 km, it is difficult to see why he would have died unless he had been doped to death.

(Dr. Robert Tolleron, *Le Généraliste*, No 94, 14th January 1978).

## 2 — Lack of doping

Had the soldier from Marathon had access to some kind of restorative product, he would most likely not have died.

(Roger Rivière, professional cyclist — *Le Miroir des Sports*, 28th September 1959).

## 3 — Collapse

On 12th September 1967, 2,457 years will have passed since the soldier from Marathon left, even before the end of the battle, and ran to Athens to announce that victory was assured. Immediately after arriving, he collapsed and died.

He had just completed a long run, too quickly, through mountainous country and in climatic conditions which, on 12th September in Greece, were essentially the same as those experienced by Tom Simpson on the day of his death.

Like him, the soldier from Marathon died from a collapse. But of one thing we may be sure : 2,457 years ago he did not die as a result of taking amphetamines.

(Dr. Philippe Decourt, *Le Populaire du Centre*, 12th August 1967).

## 4 — Physical over-exertion

Over-exertion is found to an acute degree after sports records or forced marches without adequate rest. The messenger from Marathon dying at the end of his run is a typical example of over-exertion in its ultimate stages.

(«Conseils du docteur sportif» by Dr. Barret, ed. Nilsson, 1912).





## 5 — Injured or under-trained

A Greek messenger is supposed to have run the 42 kilometres between Marathon and Athens to announce to the city the news of the victory of their country over the Persians, whereupon he died of exhaustion on arrival. This tragic end may seem surprising, as another legend recounts an even more fantastic exploit, that of the Athenian Philippides who, after the Persians landed on the plain of Marathon, ran to Sparta, arriving 48 hours later after a journey of 255 kilometres through partly mountainous terrain.

But he did even better than this : after one day's rest Philippides then covered the same distance the other way, once again in 48 hours ! 510 kilometres in four days !

In view of this one can only assume that the messenger from Marathon must have been injured or lacked training.

(«Jeux Olympiques» by Wolfgang Girardi, ed. Flammarion, 1971).

## 6 — Excess of acid

Drink fruit juices, eat fruit. These are rich in water, vitamins and easily assimilated sugars. Another advantage is that they are acidic and this acid is transformed directly into alkalinity which is beneficial, particularly if you are thirsty after physical exertion. It was less the exertion than an excess of acid which killed the runner from Marathon.

(A.M.B. L'Aurore, 7th August 1979).

## 7 — Liver failure

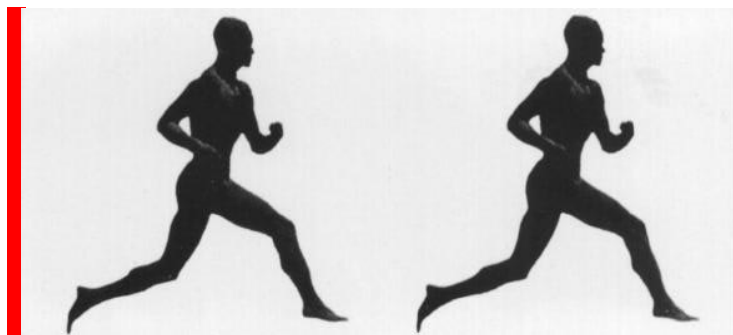
The runner from the battle of Marathon is likely to have died because his liver was not removing toxins. Such a deficiency leads to neuro-muscular disorders which result in all the vital circuits being blocked.

(«Le Sport. Faut-il des surhommes?» by H. Lucot, ed. Hachette, 1967, p. 87).

## 8 — Sunstroke

The most famous of all athletes to die of sunstroke is of course the legendary soldier from Marathon who ran 48 km to Athens under a blazing sun in order to announce that the Greeks had beaten the Persians. In addition, he was heavily armed.

(Gaston Meyer, Editor-in-Chief of L'Equipe, 15- 16th July 1967).



## 9 — Poor military training

The soldier from Marathon, talented as he was, is a victim of poor military training.

(Jean Giraudoux, quoted in L'Equipe, 16th June 1980).

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