

# 42,195: A HELL OF A DISTANCE !



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On and on they run, the joggers... Across country or from A to B, round in circles or any old where, there are more of them each day and there is no stopping them. For a race, the “tarmac eaters”, fascinated by the legend, go to the ends of the earth and, above all, to the limits of their strength. With its seal of antiquity, the marathon is more than just a fashion. This prestigious event is in the process of becoming a philosophy.

## **FROM REALITY TO SYMBOL**

**13th September 490 BC, 40 kilometres north-east of Athens.**

A glaring sun sets the vast theatre of Marathon ablaze. Some 20,000 Persian invaders, soldiers of Darius I, lined up behind their shields, await the signal to charge. Facing them on the other side, the Athenian army, only ten thousand hoplites, led by Miltiades, waits cunningly arrayed in an arc formation. In both camps, under the crushing burden of heat and fear, the wait seems interminable. Then, suddenly, rending the silence, a twofold clamour rises

from the plain. The two troops, finally released like two waves of steel, hurl themselves on one another over two thousand metres in a mad rush. There is a dread impact of steel and flesh. The Persian horde, superior in numbers, soon dents the centre of the Greek lines, deliberately thinned out to strengthen the flanks, which Miltiades, that subtle strategist, then closes in a pincer movement around his enemy, caught in the trap. The battle, monstrous and bloody hand-to-hand combat, is over some hours later, with over six thousand Persians massacred and less than two hundred Greek dead.

The idea of taking the news of the Greek triumph over the Persians in this unequal battle rapidly to Greece was a sudden and generous impulse on the part of one individual hoplite. Leaping over the enemy corpses strewn on the smoking ground, this unknown soldier, called by some Philippides, by others Pheidippides (1), and known to a few distinguished Hellenists as Eucles, set off to run towards the capital. Leaving the village of Marathon, the "hemerodrome" - as messengers were called at the time - in arms, soiled with dust and blood, crossed the entire province of Attica via Vrana, climbed the hill of Agios, which peaks at 400 metres, to descend finally into Athens, whose outer districts he descried from afar.

As the sun set blood-red on the horizon, the Athenians, hearing the clamour, flocked out to see the valiant courier and applaud him as he passed. Panting and staggering, wild-eyed, carried only by passion and the desire to be first to announce the great news to the elders of the city, he finally arrives, collapsing before the wise ones gathered in the great temple.

"Rejoice, victory is ours !", he whispers at their feet, before expiring, face aglow. The hero of Marathon thus found his way for ever into the history of mankind.

In order that legends may live, we have to keep on reinventing them.

## THE RETURN OF THE GODS

At a time when the Greece of Herodotus had its stout-hearted hemerodromes, athletes who trained daily in the exercise of their duties, the ancient Games did not include a single endurance event.

Indeed, the sports events at Olympia offered competitors only one race equivalent to today's five thousand metres. A strange ingratitude.

It was the historian and linguist Michel Bréal and not his friend Pierre de Coubertin, as often erroneously reported, who proposed the inclusion in the first modern Olympic Games of a long-distance foot

race to be called a "marathon", over the distance of the legendary exploit.

He submitted his idea to the first Olympic Congress, held in Paris on 24th June 1894. The intention was a laudable one: to commemorate with the marathon both the historic battle and the sacrifice of the soldier Eucles, all in honour of the Greek nation. Accepted by the Congress, Michel Bréal's brainchild became reality on 29th March 1896 during the Olympic Games as revived by Baron de Coubertin.

At 2.25 pm, the starter's pistol sounded for the first Olympic marathon runners at Marathonas, as the town is known today. They covered the road in the very footsteps of their illustrious ancestor who had set out two thousand three hundred and eighty-six years before them. Michel Bréal's dream had come true.

It should be pointed out that before that race, the Greek athletes had not been blessed by the gods, as they had not won a single medal at the revived Games. In order to motivate their runners, rich merchants promised the winner unusual prizes, in addition to the gold cup donated by Michel Bréal. Among them, one ton of chocolate, or clothing and haircuts free for life. The ultra-rich Georgios Averoff himself promised one million drachmas... and his daughter's hand in marriage !

The majority of the participants were Greeks. Two foreigners joined them on the starting line : the Australian Edwin Flack, winner of the 800 and 1,500 metres, and Frenchman Albin Lemusiaux, who led the race over thirty kilometres. For an authentic comment, I shall turn to the words of Baron de Coubertin himself: "Seven thousand spectators were there to witness the arrival of the first marathon winner, the Greek shepherd Spiridon Louÿs, who had trained by fasting and praying before icons. He reached the finish line with no trace of fatigue to thunderous applause which saluted both past and present. To save Spiridon from the rapturous crowds once the race was over, the royal Prince and his brother took the shepherd in their arms and carried him to the marble steps on which the King was seated."

The Greek nation was beside itself with joy over its first athletic hero. Spiridon Louÿs, who was 24 at the time, received the gold cup presented by Bréal and the other prizes and rewards which had been offered, but he had to decline the hand of Averoff's daughter... as he was already married.

Louÿs's time was 2 hours 58'50" - an excellent result when you consider the state of the roads at the time. The second place went to one of his compatriots, Haralombos Vasilakos (3 hours 6'35"). From 4th to 9th place, all the finishers were Greeks. All in all, the Greeks had plenty to celebrate. So it was that, through the 1896 Olympic Games, the marathon became a popular event.

By 19th April 1897, America was already in on the act with the first Boston marathon, an event which is still going strong today. Since then, some of the world's largest international sports events have included the marathon in their programmes, for instance the European Athletics Championships and the Asian, Panamerican and Commonwealth Games. But why this exact distance of 42 km 195 m, or 26 miles and 385 yards? It started with the Olympic Games in London in 1908 and has been kept ever since.

All the specialists agree in thinking that the 385 yards were added so that the finish line would be crossed in front of the royal box at London's White City stadium.

The truth is quite different and more unexpected. It was discovered by the historian and journalist Stan Greenberg. It transpires from his extremely serious investigation that the mysterious 385 yards were added at the request of the Princess of Wales (the future Queen Mary). Simply in order that the start of the marathon could take place under the windows of the nursery of Windsor Castle !

## LEGS OR HEAD ?

Of course, the history of the marathon from 1896 to the present day, covering twenty-five Olympiads, is crammed with

anecdotes, some funny, some pathetic and some even tragic. From the confused runner who turned back in mid-race to the one who crossed the line on all fours. From the exhausted contestant who collapsed a few metres short of the finish to the one who, like Euclès, died after the event. But it is interesting to note the stunning improvement in performances over this period and the extraordinary attraction this event exercised on all continents, which have each produced a runner and several champions since the beginning of the century (the last world record : 2 hours 6'50" set by the Ethiopian Belayneh Dinsamo in Rotterdam on 16th April 1988).

Between the victory of Spiridon Louÿs in Athens in 2 hours 58'50" and that of the Italian Gelindo Bordin in 2 hours 10'32" in Seoul in 1988, there is a difference of almost one hour, and the marathon is run today at an average speed of over twenty km/hour !

Thanks, it should be pointed out, not only to improvements in training methods, though these have played a part, but also to the contribution of sports medicine, a new dietary regime and psychological conditioning.

Without any doubt, the succession of athletes from antiquity to our modern times, such as Alain Mimoun, Emil Zátopek, Abebe Bikila and Carlos Lopes, have all worked, through sometimes heroic feats, for the promotion of the marathon. So much so that it has become part of our weekend sport culture and even entered our political vocabulary. Do we not talk of a marathon trip by the President of the Republic or a marathon debate in the Houses of Parliament? This linguistic penetration is not devoid of significance, since, even if the marathon is reduced to "jogging" or "road-running", it meets a twofold need: the need for physical exercise to make up for our sedentary lives, and the need for a mythological reference carried by collective memory.

It is a sign of the times that the modern runner seeks, both in the word itself and on the road, not so much victory but fel-

lowship and conviviality. The idea is to run together, in a crowd, to identify with the crowd rather than escape from it.

### **FREAK SOCIETY OR SOCIETY OF FREAKS?**

Just as the spoked wheel does not make a cyclist, the air-cushioned shoe does not automatically make a marathon-runner. While road running is something everyone can afford because it requires no sophisticated equipment, it nevertheless needs careful preparations in addition to the inevitable training. Apparent from all the observations and studies carried out on the subject is the particular nature of this type of exercise. An individual sport, though practised in a group, demanding because it responds to an ethic, the marathon primarily concerns those for whom self-assertion and self-transcendence are a rule of life. Those who, as it were, need the group... to go it alone. So who are these freaks who deliberately bring on themselves physical suffering and adopt an ascetic lifestyle? According to the sociologists, they are mostly "decision-makers" in their professional lives: members of the professions, business men and top executives. That is, people with great drive who "fuel up" on effort and willpower, who believe in hard work and constantly seek to prove their worth. These are obviously qualities - even virtues - indispensable to the marathon runner.

Is the marathon becoming elitist? Is the struggle with one's self, the rigorous discipline it requires the preserve of the "in crowd" and the more privileged strata of society? In the majority of cases, yes, say the surveys, which also point out that the marathon is, today, a marketing phenomenon.

Project finalization, course analysis, work scheduling, physical preparation, a sportsman's diet, medical supervision: there is no room on the control panel for chance, fantasy or romance! The pursuit of excellence resembles closely, we must agree, the efforts of a company to launch a new product!

### **THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

It is often said that the fashion for urban jogging came from the United States. To accept this conventional wisdom would be to do an injustice to all the athletes who, in the '60s, ran every day - in suits, admittedly - on the pavements of Paris towards their offices, disdaining the bus, at a time when people only trained on Sundays.

The long-distance runner Michel Bernard, a hero of these same "sixties", even astonished the policemen in New York by running - dressed in a tracksuit - between the cars on 7th avenue. Now, that is a commonplace sight in this same city, where the New York marathon receives applications to take part from over twenty-five thousand men and women every year.

These days, what big city does not have its marathon? From Paris to Tokyo, Rome to Montreal, Los Angeles to Stockholm, all have emulated New York. And if the crowd of onlookers lining the avenues behind the barriers is as enthusiastic as the runners, we should also pay tribute to the media, written, spoken and electronic, our window on the world, for their passionate proselytizing. The marathon, a school of courage, is in the process of becoming, for the fans, a fabulous invitation to visit far-off lands. How can we fail to be thrilled by the fantastic spectacle of the never-ending human snake winding its way across the Verrazano bridge on the occasion of one of these marathon festivals? For the marathon is a true party. It is an opportunity, too, for a precious encounter when, the clock forgotten, the race offers its finest gift: a chance to meet one's self.

*"In this event", Emil Zatopek, three times Olympic champion, used to say, "there are neither winners nor losers there are only conquerors". A felicitous formula which refers us back to the country of philosophers and the good Eucles. An echo, too, of the eternal philosophy of Pierre de Coubertin, the very principle of the marathon: "The main thing is not to win but to take part".*

*J.-P.M.-G.G.*