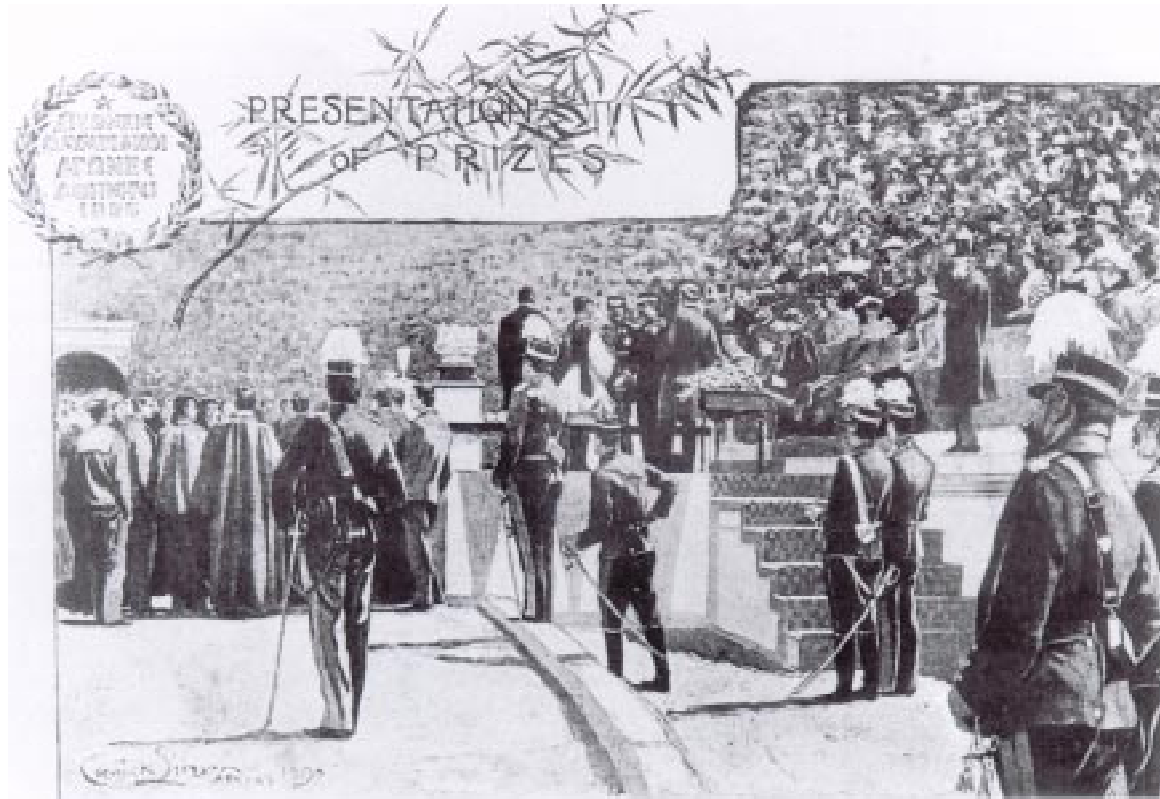

The 1896 marathon in Athens

The crowds had been growing since the early hours of the morning, and the police were having more and more trouble containing them. All the roads around the stadium were congested. Many Greek citizens had come to witness the triumph of one of their compatriots in the marathon race. Since the

by **Alain Lunzenfichter***

start of the race, where they spent the night. The following day, at around 2:00 p.m., the aspiring medallists, who now numbered only seventeen, assembled in two lines, taking positions that had been determined by a draw. After a speech

reached the town of Pikermi. Three kilometres further back, Flack of Australia, Black of the United States and Kellner of Hungary emerged, followed by the Greek runners, who were led by Ioannis Lavrentis from Maroussi. All along the route, crowds of farmers cheered on the runners enthusiastically, with no hint of national favouritism. After Pikermi, some



The King of Greece awarding the winner of the marathon.

start of the Games, the idea that only a local runner could win this race, with its historic tradition rooted in Greece's heritage, had gained ground. In the afternoon of Friday, 10th April 1896, the twenty-five competitors had been transported to an inn in Marathon, near the

by the starter. Major Papadiamantopoulos, the runners were off, accompanied by cyclists, officials, mounted soldiers, and also doctors who were responsible for making sure none of them collapsed. The French runner Lermusiaux gradually broke away, and in 52 minutes he had

of the runners began to flag and eventually disappeared into the huge bottlenecks to the rear. Spyridon Louis from Maroussi stopped at an inn and swallowed a glass of red wine in a single draught. He asked about the athletes who were ahead of him, and boasted

that, not only would he catch them up, but he would overtake them and win the race.

Black withdrew at the 23rd kilometre, allowing Vassilakos to pull into third place. In Harvati, Albin Lermusiaux was still in the lead, followed by Edwin Flack. The laurel wreath prepared by the villagers for the first runner to reach their village was given to the Parisian, who continued his race toward glory. Like his adversaries, he glided under the many triumphal arches that had been erected by enthusiastic spectators. But Lermusiaux had to stop for his trainer, Guisel, to administer some first aid. As he was having his legs massaged with alcohol, the Australian Edwin Flack got his opportunity to slip into the lead. Spyridon Louis was quietly catching up, escorted by a crowd of supporters from Maroussi who lined the route and cheered him on. At the 32nd kilometre, Lermusiaux dropped out. The event then began to come to a head. At the 33rd kilometre, the unflappable Louis caught up with Edwin Flack and overtook him, but could not loosen the Australian's grip. On their heels were Kellner of Hungary, Vassilakos, and an energetic young Greek named Spyridon Belokas. At the 37th kilometre, a few kilometres from Ambelokipi, Louis, who had probably had enough of Flack clinging to his heels, went on the offensive. His first attempt to accelerate paid off and the Australian, seeing victory slip out of his grasp, dropped behind. Flack's second, an Englishman, asked a Greek spectator to look after the athlete while he went to seek help. Flack was delirious, probably as a result of the strychnine which his coach had administered, and thought he was being attacked. He threw a right hook to his guardian's face, knocking him to the ground, before collapsing, unconscious, in a car.

Louis arrived alone at the Rizarios school, where a pistol shot announced his imminent arrival at the Olympic stadium. Now that a Greek victory was virtually assured, the crowd lining the streets could no longer contain its en-

thusiasm and excitement.

However, doubt still reigned in the Olympic stadium. No information on the development of the race had arrived. It was 4:30 and the crowd's impatience was becoming increasingly difficult to control. Although the pole-vaulting event being disputed in the middle of the arena distracted the spectators momentarily, everyone's mind was on the marathon and Greece's victory. Their victory.

Suddenly, a rumour went out that Flack was about to arrive. The German cyclist Goedrich apparently had spread the news. Faces froze, conversation faltered, and the stadium, which had been so noisy just a few seconds before, fell into a heavy silence.

Fortunately, this moment of tension was very short, as Major Papadiamantopoulos entered the stadium on horseback and approached the royal stand to announce "*Louis is in the lead*". The news spread around the tiered seats like wildfire and a great clamour arose from the 70,000 spectators: "*A Greek is in the lead!*" The excitement reached a climax when the chief of police went on horseback from Kifissia Avenue to announce to the crowd that had gathered on Herod-Atticus Road that Spyridon Louis was well ahead and that the winner would be a Greek. His words were greeted with applause. A white-clad runner entered the stadium from the right. It was Louis, the first Greek Olympic champion, followed by a cohort of applauding officials. Princes Constantine and George went to run alongside him. When the athlete reached the official stand, the king bowed in a gesture of respect. Louis was by no means exhausted by his feat. Constantine and George hoisted him onto their shoulders and, followed by Prince Nicholas, bore him aloft to the king, who had risen to stand before the marble throne. The three princes' spontaneous action awoke the spirit of Ancient Greece during Louis' entrance.

What happened in the stadium is difficult to describe. The sailor who had been appointed to raise the winner's

colours on the tallest flagpole did not wait for the other competitors to arrive. At the sight of runner number 17's flag, joy exploded. Dandies threw their hats into the air, and people waved handkerchiefs and small Greek flags frantically. An entire nation celebrated Louis' victory, their own victory. The public called upon the orchestra to play the national anthem. It was a magical moment. A beautiful rich American widow had announced before the event that she would marry the winner, whoever he was. At the end of the race, amid the general excitement, Spyridon Louis was covered in a sea of flowers, hats and even handbags... And the American lady threw him a very pretty ring. But she slipped away without keeping her promise. Louis was carried to the changing rooms. He had covered the 40 kilometres of the event in 2 hours 58.5 seconds.

Louis was a strongly built shepherd who wore the traditional fustanella and knew nothing of scientific training methods. He had prepared with a regimen of fasting and prayer. It is said that he spent the night before the race praying to religious icons by candlelight. "*From that moment on, I was convinced that psychological forces played a much more effective role in sport than had been thought*", Pierre de Coubertin wrote in *Souvenirs*.

After Louis's victory, the town of Maroussi went mad. As the inhabitants were very poor, they offered him a year's free shaving, his own table in a restaurant for the same period, and a lifetime supply of coffee. But he was a simple and unaffected man, and after refusing all of these privileges accepted only two gifts: a horse and a cart, which would enable him to continue his work as water-carrier.

Spyridon Louis was born in 1872 in Maroussi, where he lived all his life, and became a hero. On 26 March 1940 the first Olympic champion died, and became a legend.

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