

HOW I FILMED THE 1896 ATHENS OLYMPICS

BY BUD GREENSPAN

It was Monday, March 25th, 1896.

Some 60,000 spectators awaited an Opening Ceremony that would inaugurate the modern Olympic Games in Athens, Greece.

The newly erected marble stadium was created as a monument to the greatness of ancient Greek Olympic history and a tribute to the philosophy at the heart of these Modern Games—that athletic competition could bring nations of the world closer together in a spirit of peace and harmony.

The stadium was a gift from George Averoff, a Greek philanthropist, and it rose over the ruins of the Stadium of Herodis, built in 330 BC

While the large crowd waited for the Greek royal family to arrive, many fans curiously watched me and my small band of production people as we made final preparations to film the ceremonies and events. Our crew wore long white coats to distinguish us from the athletes and officials. Groups of perplexed people stared and smiled as our technicians mounted six Lumière cameras on tripods.

Four months earlier I had met the Lumière brothers in Paris. They had recently demonstrated their Cinématographe invention, a motion picture camera that filmed a train pulling into a station. For the first time in history, astounded viewers could watch moving images instead of still photographs.

The Lumières seemed intrigued when I told them I wanted to use their camera at the forthcoming revival of the Olympic Games. For a few moments they were hesitant. Then I told them that because Baron de Coubertin, a Frenchman, was the catalyst for the Games' rebirth, it was only right that I seek the assistance of French inventors, rather than call on American Thomas Edison, who was developing his own motion picture camera. Nationalism prevailed, and the Lumières agreed.

My cameras were rolling just before 3 p.m. on the cool, overcast afternoon. The weather could not diminish the enthusiasm of the overflow crowd. It was the day after

Easter, the 75th anniversary of Greek independence and the dawn of a new era in sports and brotherhood.

Lined up in double file across the middle of the infield were about 245 athletes awaiting the Opening Ceremony. The spectators watching from inside and atop the hills outside the stadium cheered and waved, and the athletes, in no particular country formation, waved back.

The athletes represented 13 nations - Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Chile, Denmark, Germany, France, Greece, Great Britain, Sweden, Switzerland, Hungary and the United States. I could tell that the "official" count of 311 participants was misleading. In some instances the same athletes in three events were counted three times. Some track and field athletes watched from the sidelines because they would be competing later. One of them was American James Connolly, who figured to be a strong contender in the hop, step and jump.

While Connolly watched, I made certain one of our cameras "isolated" on him. As a documentalist, I have always done a great deal of research on the subjects I will be filming so I can develop story lines more fully. I already knew that Connolly was an undergraduate at Harvard. When he learned of the Olympics he asked university authorities for a leave of absence so he could bring "honor and glory" to Harvard and the United States.

Connolly's request was refused. He then decided to pay his own way to Athens. And because he was rebuffed, he told school officials he would never return.

At the appointed hour of 3 p.m. word came that the royal family was approaching the stadium. The crowd rose, and trumpets sounded. King George wore the uniform of an infantry general. Beside him was Queen Olga, followed by a bevy of royal princes and princesses, as well as cabinet ministers, church officials and foreign dignitaries.

Crown Prince Constantine was the first to speak, addressing his remarks to King George. The Prince invited his father to preside over the competition that would create

closer links between the people of Greece and other countries of the world. Then, as the crowd thundered its applause (though few could hear him), he called upon his father to open the Games. King George stepped forward and said, "I hereby proclaim the opening of the first international Olympic Games in Athens. Long live the Nation. Long live the Greek people."

A magnificent orchestra, a combination of the army, navy, municipal, and other principal bands, awaited the direction of the revered Spyridion Samaras. Now the moment was at hand - the playing and singing of the Olympic Hymn that Samaras had been commissioned to compose. (It still is the official song today). I wish I could have recorded the sounds to accompany the sights of these first Games, but "talkies" were still 31 years away. The crowd thrilled as the chorus sang the inspirational words:

Ancient immortal spirit, unsullied father of that which is beautiful, great and true. Descend, make thyself known and shine here on this earth and below these skies witness of Thy Glory.

After the anthem, the crowd voiced a crescendo of cheers that grew louder and louder. Several minutes later, with the spectators showing no sign of curtailment of their enthusiasm, the King signaled that the hymn be played and sung again.

Finally the athletes left the field, and trumpets sounded to herald the entrance of the 21 men entered in the 100-meter dash - the first Olympic event in more than 1,500 years. Three heats were scheduled, and the first- and second-place finishers would qualify for the final four days later. They took various starting positions - some stood, others crouched. All wore light shirts and pants that extended to the knees.

The honor of winning the first modern Olympic race, though only a heat, went to America's Francis Lane, one of four Princeton students competing in Athens.

Americans swept the second and third heats behind Tom Curtis and Tom Burke of the Boston Athletic Association. Burke established himself as the favorite for the final with his time of 12 seconds flat, a fifth of a second faster than Lane and Curtis.

Burke's unique starting position gave him a greater spring at the start and a decided advantage. He dug holes in the dirt so his feet would have greater traction. Then he extended his crouch so both hands were on the starting line.

I noticed that the Frenchman Lermusiaux had worn white gloves while being eliminated in his 100-meter heat. I decided to interview him for the film. Without sound, of course, I would have to create captions for audiences to read what we were saying.

"You ask why I wear white gloves," he said with surprise. "Sir, do you not see I am running before the King?"

Because I had learned he was also entered in the

marathon, four days later, I wondered how he trained for both the shortest and longest running events on the program.

"That is easy," he said with a smile. "One day I run a little way very quick. The next day I run a long way very slow." He then bowed and ran off.

The first Olympic final, the hop, step and jump, followed. Ten men were entered, and as each took his first turn, it became obvious that America's Connolly was the class of the field. After Alexandre Tuffière of France took the early lead, Connolly tossed his cap a foot past Tuffière's mark to show spectators where he expected to land.

Another indication of American arrogance, many of the crowd surmised. They didn't know that a number of our best athletes, members of the New York Athletic Club, had chosen to stay home. In fact, the only reigning U.S. champion who had made the trip was Burke, the quarter-mile titleholder.

When Connolly landed a few inches beyond his cap, the crowd roared, now in approval. The first champion of the modern Olympic Games had been crowned.

The crowd stood as the first victory ceremony took place. Greek sailors raised the Stars and Stripes to the top of the flagstaff, and then they hoisted Connolly's number. Our cameras caught all of this dramatic scene. I could also hear the cheers of students from the American School in Athens, as well as hundreds of American sailors on shore leave from the U.S.S. San Francisco, docked in the harbor. As Connolly came to our cameras for an interview, he waved his cap in appreciation.

Connolly was euphoric during our talk until I asked him about his future plans. "I do not know," he said, as his face became grim. "The one thing I do know is that I am not returning to Harvard."

After the two heats of the 800 meters, won by an Australian and a Frenchman, the predominantly Greek crowd awaited the last final of the first day, the discus, in which they were certain their two national heroes, Panagiotis Paraskevopoulos and Sotirios Versis, would decide top honors. It was a foregone conclusion that the discus, an event etched in the culture and tradition of Greece, would be won by one of their countrymen.

Twenty-year-old Robert Garrett of Princeton, scheduled to compete in the shot put the following day, was a surprise entrant in the discus. I asked him for an interview.

"There was not a single discus to be found in the United States," Garrett told us on camera before the event. "So I researched the statues and writings of the ancient Greek Games and had what I thought was a close reproduction made for me. But it was unwieldy and heavy, so I gave up the idea."

“What changed your mind?” I asked.

“Well, this morning when I came onto the field I saw a Greek athlete practicing with a discus, and I asked if I could try it,” he said. “The ‘real’ discus felt very comfortable, and I was able to throw it quite well. At least I knew I would not embarrass myself.”

Later I heard that Garrett had asked de Coubertin himself if he should compete, and the Father of the Games had encouraged the American to give it a try.

With each contestant allowed three throws, the Greek Versis led after two rounds and retired from the competition. In Paraskevopoulos’s final attempt, he threw almost four feet further to take the lead. Garrett had one more attempt.

When his throw landed, the Greek audience grew silent. From a corner of the field came the cheers from the American sailors: “P-R-I-N-C-E-T-O-N, rah, rah, rah!” over and over again. Garrett’s throw, though by no means as classical as his Greek rivals’ efforts, went seven and a half inches farther than Paraskevopoulos’s best. The day’s second gold medal belonged to an American.

I moved a camera close to the stands to interview a Greek spectator. Finally I found one who spoke English. “The Games are a farce and should be discontinued,” he said, displaying much anger. “The Americans are all professionals, and that is a disgrace.”

As the Games continued it became apparent that the Americans could not be stopped. Nine of the first 11 victories in track and field went to U.S. athletes. Only two successes by Australia’s 22-year-old Edwin (Ted) Flack, in the 800 and 1.500-meter events, could interrupt the Americans’ string of spectacular performances.

Three Americans were double winners: Burke in the 100 and 400 meters, Garrett in the discus and shot put, and Ellery Clark in the long and high jump. Clark had to overcome an unexpected obstacle in the high jump when the referee, Prince George, told him he could not mark his take-off spot because this was an act of “professionalism.”

In addition to Connolly in the hop, step and jump, individual honors also went to William Hoyt in the pole vault and Tom Curtis in the 110-meter hurdles.

The track and field events were not the only ones held inside the stadium. Gymnastics, weightlifting and wrestling took place in the infield, while shooting, fencing, cycling and lawn tennis were contested at nearby facilities.

The swimming events were difficult for us to film, for they took place in the Bay of Zea. On shore the area was beautifully decorated with flags and banners, but the start of each race was beyond our camera range.

A steamboat carried the contestants into the bay, where a line of floats marked the start. At the sound of a pistol shot, the swimmers entered the water. The finish line was desig-

nated by two red flags close to the shore.

I convinced the organizing committee to give me permission to cover the start of each race from the jury barge. However, the bobbing of the boat, and the incessant movement in front of our camera lens by excited Olympic officials caused one of my men to throw his arms up in disgust.

He was particularly upset that he missed one of the funniest moments of the Games, when the American Gardner Williams dove into the bay for the 100 meters, bobbed to the surface and, after declaring “I’m freezing!” immediately climbed right out. However, our finish-line cameras did catch the thrilling victories of Hungary’s Alfred Hajos, who won the 100- and 1.200- meter events.

By the fourth day the Greek press still had not fully accepted the revival of the Games as a total success. Greek athletes were performing well in some sports, winning individual titles in rifle shooting, fencing and gymnastics. The public’s frustration, however, could best be understood in light of the fact that as host nation Greece was represented by 230 competitors. The country’s athletes had yet to win a championship in track and field, and the spectators were particularly unhappy when upstart Americans defeated their favored champions in the discus, shot put, 110-meter hurdles and hop, step and jump.

I knew the fifth day of competition would be the most critical in determining how the Greeks would ultimately view the Games. For then the marathon run was scheduled - an event whose name has inspired unparalleled emotion for nearly 2.500 years of Greek history.

It was in 490 BC that a small band of Athenian soldiers turned back a massive Persian invasion on the Plain of Marathon, an engagement historians have said “saved Western civilization as we know it today.” Every Greek child knows the (perhaps apocryphal) story of the legendary Athenian warrior who ran the 40 kilometers from the Marathon battlefield to the center of Athens and shouted, “Yes, we are victorious!” - after which, exhausted by his ordeal, he collapsed and died.

Until this fifth day, most of the Greeks I interviewed spoke admiringly of the American successes, but each was quick to point out that “a Greek will win the marathon.” Not everyone else agreed, of course (Baron de Coubertin reportedly among them), but the Greeks were certain.

Covering the marathon with so few cameras was a logistical nightmare. To film it properly I decided to use all six cameras on this one event. I placed one camera at the finish line inside the stadium and another on the infield isolated on the royal box, to cover the emotions of the royal family, who would be out in full force. My other four cameras would be “rovers”. I would transport them on horse-drawn carts along the course with the runners.

I hired four wagons, each drawn by two dependable horses unlikely to be affected by cheering crowds. It took much

persuasion on my part to get permission. Officials were afraid that too many vehicles would impede the runners. They were already concerned about the medical and official carts, as well as the cyclists who would sprint ahead with news of the runners' progress.

At 2 p.m., 25 runners lined up for the start of the race on the bridge at Marathon. Standing alongside was Greek Army Colonel Papadiamantopoulos, who, pistol in hand, had the honor of starting them off. Thirteen of the runners were Greek. Among the foreigners, the Greeks most feared Australia's Flack, already a double winner in track.

Events continued inside the stadium as the marathoners started their journey, and immediately I realized that my "roving camera" plan would be difficult at best. I had no communication with my other cameramen, and twice along the early stages my cart had to stop for repairs. The roads were divoted and dusty, creating a herky-jerky ride, and my camera team constantly screamed at our driver, who paid little attention.

The Frenchman Lermusiaux started out as if he were running the 1,500 meters and soon was so far in front that he was the only one in my camera range. Flack was second, followed by America's Arthur Blake. When the first bicycle messenger reached the royal box, the news was grim.

As the race progressed, however, it became apparent that only the Greeks knew the pacing necessary for the marathon. After more than half the race, both Lermusiaux and Flack had collapsed with exhaustion and fallen out. We were told the lead now belonged to a young Greek shepherd named Spiridon Louis. He was running so strongly only a disaster could prevent his victory.

While we were isolating our camera on Louis, Colonel Papadiamantopoulos came dashing by on horseback, hoping to be the first to give the good news to the King.

As the crowd along the roadside became aware that a Greek was leading, boisterous cheering began. The good news passed from section to section along the roadway. "Elleen! Elleen!" "A Greek! A Greek!" people shouted, and soon the cries reached thousands waiting in the stadium.

I signaled my driver to move to the stadium as quickly as possible, giving us a third camera for Louis's entrance.

The crowd was roaring as Louis arrived. The royal box stirred with excitement. Prince George and Crown Prince Constantine rushed from their seats onto the track. They would escort Spiridon to the finish line.

Throughout the stadium there were heartfelt shouts of "Ne nekinnen. Ne nekinnen." "Yes, we are victorious."

When Louis crossed the finish line he was embraced by the two Greek princes, who lifted him in celebration. As they moved joyously around the track the cry went up again. "Elleen! Elleen!" "A Greek! A Greek!" White doves with blue and white ribbons were released into the air.

The next day newspaper headlines saluted the momen-

tous Greek victory, and the feeling was widespread in Athens that this renewal of an ancient rite was only the beginning. The modern Games would surely become the world's greatest sporting event.

In addition to exulting over the emotional marathon victory, the Greek newspapers gave considerable coverage to other significant Olympic performances, enhancing the international flavor of the Athens experience.

They considered Frenchman Paul Masson's three cycling victories to be a major accomplishment, and they praised the versatility of Germany's Karl Schumann, who won three events in gymnastics (on a day snow fell) and another in wrestling. Another German, Alfred Flatow, also won three gymnastic events.

But a story that intrigued me more was the pistol shooting success of John and Sumner Paine, both captains in the United States Army. Each won an individual shooting title and became a modern Olympic "first" - the first brothers to win Olympic championships.

The victory ceremonies for all the athletes were scheduled for the ninth and final day, but a driving rain forced the committee to postpone the activities and send home the thousands who had braved the conditions.

I was partly responsible for the decision, for in a meeting with the Olympic Committee I pointed out that our cameras could not function in the rain. The film would be contaminated, and, except for still photographs, the impressive ceremonies would be lost forever.

The next day the sun shone early, and 60,000 people again packed the Olympic stadium. The victorious athletes lined up in front of the royal box, and as their names were called, each walked to a position in front of the King.

Every champion bowed his head as King George presented him an olive branch, an Olympic diploma and a silver medal. The runners-up received a laurel branch and a bronze medal, but, unlike today's custom, the third place finishers received no formal recognition.

The crowd roared for each of the victors, and not a spectator left until the final award was presented. Then a trumpet sounded, followed again by the singing of the Olympic Hymn. The first modern Olympic Games were now over, and I had been a witness to history. Even better, I had it all on film.

Note: Bud Greenspan has written and produced documentary films for six Summer and Winter Olympic Games. The IOC has awarded him the "Olympic Order." He is a member of the International Society of Olympic Historians.

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