

AN OLYMPIC FAIRY TALE

THE 1996 OLYMPIC FLAME RELAY IN GREECE.

BY RUSTY WILSON

On Saturday, March 30, 1996 at 6:30 a.m., dawn broke over Atlanta. At that minute, half a world away, the same sun brought life to the flame that would carry the spirit of Olympia to the city. With the birth of the flame came an eight-day odyssey that took me to the four corners of Greece. As Athanassios Kritsinelis, of the Hellenic Olympic Committee, told me a year before, "You will have an Olympic Fairy Tale."

In 1985 I served as head of the U.S. delegation to the International Olympic Academy. Three subsequent visits to Olympia were for conferences of the IOA Participants Association. During the 1995 conference, Kritsinelis, the technical director for the flame ceremonies, offered the invitation of a lifetime - to attend the flame lighting ceremonies for the Centennial Olympic Games as an official guest of the Hellenic Olympic Committee.

For days before the ceremonies heavy rains fell on Olympia. With the only dress rehearsal held the day before the ceremonies, and with the added worldwide attention given the centennial celebration of the Games, everyone was very concerned about the weather, but none more than Kritsinelis who constantly kept an eye on the sky. Immediately after breakfast on the day of the rehearsals came a torrential downpour that lasted until just before the rehearsal. But when the time for the rehearsal came at 10:00 a.m. the rain stopped and the sun shone bright.

Later that afternoon, with the good weather still holding, an informal rehearsal was held at the stadium followed by another inside the museum at the ancient site just in case the rain returned the next morning. Days before Kritsinelis

lit a flame by the rays of the sun, as prescribed by tradition, and kept it in a miner's lantern for just such a circumstance. That evening the rains returned.

Since I realized that the flame relay for the centennial Olympic Games would be a major event in my life I decided to keep a journal of my experiences. The following is based on that journal. Through it I hope you feel the excitement of an insiders view of one of the most revered of Olympic traditions.

DAY ONE, March 30th

Saturday morning, the sky was clear and blue with a bright sun. Except for a few spots on the ground not a trace of the previous day's rain could be seen. Approximately 20,000 people packed the north side of the ancient stadium. On the road above the stadium thousands more, together with television trucks from every conceivable country, strained to get a better view. Among the honored guests were First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and her daughter Chelsea.

The ceremonies, traditionally to start at noon, were delayed thirty minutes due to the satellite feeds for the international television broadcast. Following speeches by Antonis Tzikas, President of the Hellenic Olympic Committee, Mrs. Clinton and the president of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), Billy Payne, the three led a select group of dignitaries through the stadium arch, or *krypti*, into the sacred altis for the actual lighting ceremony. Due to the confined area of the altis general spectators were barred from witnessing the ceremony. Minutes later the chosen few came hurrying back through

the arch into the stadium.

Slowly the priestesses, all portrayed by accomplished Greek actresses, came over the hill on the west side of the stadium. They were followed by the head priestess, Maria Pambuki, carrying the flame in an ancient urn. She slowly descended the western slope to the floor of the stadium, placing the urn on the stone marking the location of the aphtes, the starter of the ancient races, that is being used as a makeshift altar. Following dances and incantations in honor of the gods the first torch bearer, Kostas Koukodimos, Greek long jump champion, came forward to receive the flame from the high priestess. To thunderous applause he turned, raised the torch to show the flame to the crowd, and the flame's journey to Athens began.

In eight days the flame covered 1.562 miles across all of Greece, was honored with ceremonies in at least forty-two cities, and was carried by over eight-hundred-fifty runners. Never before had the Greek leg of the flame relay been so extensive. In the past the relay covered only the approximately 200 miles from Olympia to Athens. A more extended relay was chosen in celebration of the centenary of the Games of the First Olympiad held in Athens. The end would come in Athens at the Panathenean Stadium, site of the 1896 Games, on April 6th, the exact date of the opening day of those first Games.

The true story of the 1996 Olympic Flame Relay in Greece was not in the impressive statistics, but in the emotion and passion for the Olympic spirit expressed by the Greek people. If anyone was entitled to have ill feelings toward the Games in Atlanta it were the Greeks who lost a close contest to Atlanta for the Centennial Olympic Games. Other than a few signs of discontent the Greeks showed enthusiastic and fervent support for the flame and Atlanta.

Although ceremonies held in larger cities were impressive, the most memorable and moving experiences came in the impromptu celebrations held in smaller communities. Not far from Olympia, alongside a country road, an old lady dressed in black, her eyes filled with tears of emotion, threw rose petals in front of the torchbearer. She waved enthusiastically, shouting "Yiassas! Yiassas!" At crossroads, where no village existed, hundreds of people waited to see the flame pass. In Pyrgos two young boys came out of nowhere carrying large Greek and Macedonian flags and to the wild cheers of those along the

roads accompanied the flame into the city.

Occasionally family and friends, overcome by joy and pride, mobbed torchbearers following their leg of the relay. At the end of the first day spectators were so abundant on the streets of Kalamata that police could not clear the way causing the flame to stop several times. Everywhere throughout Greece there were children, held high by parents or grandparents to share an experience that would last a lifetime.

DAY TWO, March 31st

The rains that held off yesterday now fell with a vengeance.

'The day started by tackling a problem that arose yesterday with the torch. Soon after we left Olympia many torches would not stay lit, causing them to be discarded.

ACOG flew Dr. Sam Shelton, the mechanical engineer from Georgia Tech University who designed the mechanics of the torch, from Athens where he was waiting to return to Atlanta. Over the breakfast table we used my Swiss Army knife to open the lower portion of the torch. The problem was with the nylon flange that connected the butane tank to the channel leading to the upper cal-dron. Afterward I sat on the porch of the hotel holding the lighted torch

out into the rain to see how long it would burn. It lasted for twenty-seven (27) minutes and 30 seconds. Seventeen (17) minutes and 30 seconds shorter than the guaranteed forty-five (45) minutes, but long enough to last the kilometer that each torchbearer carried the flame.

Another problem could not be corrected this easily. The upper reeds of the torch melted as the flame burned during the relay. Since this was a structural problem it could not be corrected until the flame reached the United States. One enterprising ACOG official came up with the explanation that the reeds were designed this way to simulate the burning of the reeds of the ancient torches that were the inspiration for the Atlanta torch. This characteristic was later corrected in the United States, ironically by a company in my hometown, Columbus, Ohio.

The road through the countryside on the way to Sparta was shrouded in rain and mist. It was cold and windy as we climbed historic and desolate, Mt. Tagetos. But the Olympic spirit of over forty members of the International Olympic Academy Participants Association, who travelled to Greece at their own expense from all over the world to participate in the relay, was not to be deterred. They carried the torch

IN EIGHT DAYS
THE FLAME COVERED
1.562 MILES
ACROSS ALL OF GREECE,
WAS HONORED WITH
CEREMONIES IN
AT LEAST 42 CITIES, AND
WAS CARRIED
BY OVER 850 RUNNERS.

for twelve kilometers over the top of the mountain in the pouring rain, passing the torch from person to person to make sure everyone had a chance to carry the flame.

In the legendary city of Sparta thousands crowded the flower covered streets in the rain to witness the flame and the ceremonies held in front of the majestic statue of a Spartan warrior. At days end a standing room only crowd endured a torrential downpour in Tegea, the city where in 1934 members of the IOC discussed the details for the first Olympic flame relay planned for 1936.

DAY THREE, April 1st

The sun was out and the weather was perfect. From Tegea we went through Tripolis and into the mountains separating Arkadia from the Aegean coast. After a large crowd in Nafplion we were surprised at the sparse crowds in the city of Argos, only to be shocked as we turned the corner of one street and were welcomed by over 20,000 cheering people in the ancient theater which abruptly appeared before us. Many in the entourage were overwhelmed and brought to tears by the enthusiastic welcome. From Argos we traveled to Nemea for a brief ceremony in the stadium, site of one of the four great athletic contests in ancient Greece. In the evening the flame visited Ancient Corinth. As we arrived at the ceremonies from our cars the flame was already burning on the western steps of the Temple of Apollo. Lit by the setting sun the scene was one of the most dramatic of our journey.

DAY FOUR, April 2nd

The flame traveled west along the south coast of the Gulf of Corinth, to Patras on the Ionian Sea. Less than a year before the area was devastated by two earthquakes in fifteen minutes registering 6.1 and 5.4 on the Richter Scale respectively. If we didn't know that the earthquake had hit we never would have known it. The spirit of the Greek people who came out by the thousands to see the flame pass by was phenomenal. Across the gulf we could see the snowcapped Mount Parnassos upon which sits the legendary city of Delphi. Tomorrow evening we will be there looking to where we are today.

The flame arrived in Patras as the sun was setting over the Ionian Sea. We climbed narrow streets in the darkness to the kastro, the medieval fortress high above the city. In the most theatrically produced ceremonies yet the history of Greece from ancient times to today was told in music and song.

DAY FIVE, April 3rd

After traversing the gulf by ferry early in the morning the flame entered the historic city of Missolonghi at midmorning. Thousands, including Lord Byron, died here in the struggle for Greek independence from the Turks in the 19th

century. In front of the mass grave of the defenders of the city several very moving ceremonies were held to honor those who lost their lives and the flame. We continued along the north coast of the Gulf of Corinth through the picturesque seaside villages of Navpaktos and Galaxidi and the port of Itea. After a brief ceremony in Amfissa we climbed the steep heights to the fabled city of Delphi. Delphi had hosted the flame once before during the first flame relay in 1936, sixty years earlier. The flame burned throughout the night in the town square situated on a cliff overlooking the valley and gulf below. The ancient Greeks considered Delphi the center of the universe. It was easy to see why

DAY SIX, April 4th

The view from the heights of Mt. Parnassos as we left Delphi was one of the most dramatic I have seen. We continued down the other side of the mountain to the plains surrounding the ancient city of Thebes. From here we turned north and entered the region of Thessaly in northern Greece.

As we approached the final stop of the day darkness had fallen and the road was lit only by the flame and the headlights of the few cars accompanying it. Suddenly from the darkness we heard the haunting sounds of Vangelis' theme from Chariots of Fire which seemed to come from nowhere. As we approached we saw an area lit by thousands of candles held by those welcoming the flame to one of the most historical sites of Greek, and western civilization - Vergina*), and the tomb of Philip of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great. The highlights of the ceremonies was the guided tour of the inside of the tomb while the crowds waited patiently outside in the rain.

DAY SEVEN, April 5th

We continued north on the seventh day through numerous cities toward the other honored site of ancient Macedonia - Pella*), the second capital of Macedonia, where Alexander was raised. A steady light rain was falling when the torchbearer, the U.S. Ambassador to Greece, Thomas Niles, carried the torch the final kilometer into the ancient ruins. The choice of Ambassador Niles as torchbearer was one of political significance for the Greeks since it showed the U.S. acceptance of the Greek claim of Macedonia as a part of Greece. The question of Macedonia is a point of constant contention between Greece and the former Yugoslavian province of Macedonia. The security was extensive during this stop.

Following a brief ceremony the flame moved on to Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, where it spent its last night on the tour.

One of the torchbearers in Thessaloniki was a young man, hand picked by the mayor, a nineteen year old gym-

nast named Ioannis Melissanidis. "It was a dream for me," Melissanidis said afterward. "When I had my hand on the torch, I felt I had in my hand all the ancient culture of my country." (Our paths would cross again in Atlanta, where I was an English announcer for the gymnastics competition, when he surprised the world by winning the gold medal with a 9.850 score in the floor exercise upsetting the favorites Vitaly Scherbo [Belarus] and Li Xiaoshuang [China].)

DAY EIGHT, April 6th

Early on the final day the flame passed Mt. Olympus on its way to Marathon. It was from Marathon in 490 B.C., as legend has it, that Pheidippides ran to Athens to announce with his dying breath the Athenian victory over the Persians. It was also from Marathon that the first marathon was held in conjunction with the 1896 Olympics. Soon after the flame arrived at the starting line of that first marathon, runners participating in a re-enactment started for Athens. From Marathon, the flame followed most of the original route of that first race during the short trip into Athens. After going through the central district of Athens it arrived at the Panathenean Stadium, site of Games of the First Olympiad in 1896.

Greeted by fireworks, music and a cheering crowd, the final two torchbearers, Nikos Kaklamanakis, who just weeks before became the world champion in windsurfing, and Niki Bakoyanni, 1996 European indoor high jump champion (and eventual silver medalist in Atlanta), carried the flame to the caldron in the center of the stadium. The selection of a male and female torchbearer, reminiscent of the 1976 opening ceremonies in Montreal, was symbolic of the younger generation and the future of the Olympic Movement in Greece.

Following a litany of speakers, IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch presented a specially designed torch, which carried the Olympic flame, to 1992 Olympic gold medalist in the 100 metre hurdles Paraskevi "Voula" Patoulidou, Greece' first ever female Olympic medalist and its first athletics gold medalist since 1912. She ran the first leg of an international relay of Olympic medalists representing every city to host the Games. Patoulidou symbol-

ized the 1896 Games in Athens. After 200 metres she passed the flame to another medalist. This continued until the Games of the XXVIth Olympiad in Atlanta.

At the conclusion of the relay the flame was divided among representatives of all the past Olympic host cities who would bring the flame back to their cities to burn for one week before being returned to Athens to be re-united into one flame to be taken to the United States. The only cities not to receive the flame were Los Angeles, host of the 1932 and 1984 Games, and St. Louis, the site of the 1904 Olympics. The flame would visit those cities during the relay in the U.S.A. After being reunited into a single flame in Athens again, it was flown to the United States on April 27th for the beginning of the American leg of its journey.

EARLY ON THE FINAL DAY
THE FLAME PASSED
MT. OLYMPUS
ON ITS WAY TO MARATHON.
IT WAS FROM MARATHON
IN 490 B.C.,
AS LEGEND HAS IT,
THAT PHEIDIPPIDES
RAN TO ATHENS TO
ANNOUNCE WITH HIS
DYING BREATH
THE ATHENIAN VICTORY
OVER THE PERSIANS.

EPILOGUE

On June 6th, the official halfway mark on its route through the U.S., the flame spent the night in the city of Columbus, Ohio - my hometown - where I was a special guest of ACOG at the local ceremonies. While at the closing ceremonies in Atlanta I frequently looked at the flame and recalled the experiences I had over the past four months and how I was fortunate to be one of only a handful of people to be able to say that I saw the flame at the beginning, the middle and the end of its life. As it began to flicker and die, I

thought of the words spoken by actor Richard Basehart at the Games of the XXIIIrd Olympiad in Los Angeles,

So bright,
so brief,
the Games are over.

Now the memories begin.

*) The ancient cities of VERGINA and PELLA are difficult to locate on many modern maps. VERGINA is southwest of Thessaloniki and southeast of the city of Veria. PELLA is northwest of Thessaloniki and southeast of Gianitsa.
