

# FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF BRÉAL<sup>1</sup>

BY KARL LENNARTZ

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The interested marathon runner nowadays knows, that the origin of the marathon does not date back to ancient times but can be found in the first Olympic Games of modern times in Athens 1896. It was the French Baron Pierre de Coubertin who organized a sports congress in the Paris Sorbonne in 1894. The congress concluded with the resolution to revive the Olympic Games. Athens was appointed to be the first host in 1896.

The congress also dealt with the Olympic disciplines. It was clear that track-and-field athletics would play a major role. An observer of the event, archaeologist Michel Bréal later wrote to Coubertin and suggested including the marathon in the agenda of the Olympic Games. In addition we only knew little up till then from two autobiographies of Coubertin which state that: ‘The idea for this competition came from a famous member of the “Institut de France”, Michel Bréal. He wrote me an enthusiastic letter one day after the resumption of the Olympics. He informed me that, as this competition had had an extraordinary meaning in olden days, he had donated a dish as a trophy.’<sup>2</sup>

A letter must have existed. A historian is only satisfied if he is able to use primary sources of information for his judgement. As a result I searched for this letter for over ten years. I presumed, since Coubertin had saved many things, that the letter had to be in the IOC archive and his correspondence which is kept in Lausanne. The

IOC however, has long-term been very restrictive towards the desires of historians as far as the utilization of the archives is concerned. This was due on the one hand that the archives were not catalogued and on the other hand that the IOC wanted to avoid possible negative coverage of Coubertin and the Olympic Movement. Towards the middle of the eighties, these policies changed fundamentally. New buildings had been erected for the library and the archive and IOC-President Samaranch pursues a different public policy. In spite of this, I received the answer that the letter was not to be found.

In the summer of 1988, I had the possibility of working in Lausanne during other research activities. I met the person responsible for the archives, Karel Wendl. It turned out that he also was a passionate marathon runner and, as me, had run several marathons. Thus contact was easily made. Wendl was also interested in finding this letter. Against all expectations our problem was solved within minutes since Coubertin's correspondence had meanwhile been filed electronically. I soon held a copy of extraordinary quality in my hand. The aforementioned letter was written by Bréal on 15th September 1892 from Glion (Vaud) in Switzerland. Coubertin was just getting ready to travel to Greece in preparation of the Games. The letter consists of four pages, The crucial passage is as follows: "Since you are going to Athens, check if it is possible to organize a race from Marathon to Pnyx (a hill in Athens, on which the public meetings were held. Subscript by the author). This would have ancient character, If we knew the time the Greek warrior needed for this stretch, we could make a record of it. It is my suggestion to donate a "Marathon Trophy".

It is general knowledge that the Greek Spiridon Louis won the first Olympic marathon. At the victory ceremony, which took part on 12th April 1896, he received a medal, the olive branch, a diploma, an ancient vase which pictured a long distance runner. In addition to this, he, of course, received the trophy donated by Bréal. Louis died in 1940. The medal is nowadays in possession of the Greek state. For a while it was exhibited in a display case in the new Olympic stadium in Athens. But where is the trophy?

At the end of May, 1989, the 13th Congress of the International Society for Sport History took place in Athens and Olympia. The day previous to the opening, Andreas Hofer, a sport historian of the German Sports University, Heinet Gillmeister, the famous tennis historian, and myself drove to Maroussi, Spiridon Louis' place of residence, to search for traces. On arrival in Maroussi, (a very busy suburb of Athens), we at first stood around rather helpless. The city hall was closed. We asked passers by where Louis'

place of birth was, Initially the people were at a loss and a general shaking of the heads was the answer. An old woman speaking a little English and French, sent us to a side street a couple of yards away. The street sign read "Louis' Road", Thereafter she showed us a tiny shack built of mud with a tiled roof. It stood dilapidated between three-storey houses,

The place of birth! Was that it?

Our helper accompanied us to another street nearby and shouted some Greek words into a house, From out of the house appeared a woman of roughly 70 years of age who could only speak Greek and also a young, pretty, dark haired girl who could speak English very well. The girl appeared to be the great-granddaughter Katharina Louis. She functioned as a translator for the old woman, who was introduced to us as Eutychia Louis. She is the only living daughter-in-law of the Olympic winner of 1896. At first our interlocutors were rather taciturn but they quickly realized that our intentions were honest and we were ushered into the house.

Suddenly, Mrs. Louis fetched a plastic bag from inside the wardrobe. She drew from it the old silver trophy that had been donated by Bréal. I caught my breath and my hands were shaking a little, I had literally arrived at the source.

The trophy had, of course, collected patina and was slightly damaged at its base. It is about 25 centimetres high. An inscription could clearly be read: "Olympic Games 1896, marathon, donated by Michel Bréal".

There was yet more to come!

Mrs. Louis now sought out a large chest which contained nearly all important documents concerning Louis, such as certificates, newspaper articles, invitations, medals of remembrance, as well as the invitation to the 1936 Olympic Games and even the invitations for the guests of honour, She showed us two large carefully framed pictures: One showed Louis entering the stadium; the other, - we do not want to exclude this - the photo which showed Louis presenting the olive branch from Olympia to Hitler. The manipulation of the great sportsman through a dictator.

The family Louis did not want to let us go quickly. Two grandsons were presented to us. We were invited to a look around inside the house, were offered a drink and a little refreshment. Greek hospitality at its best!

From 18th July until 2nd August, 1994, the 35th session for young participants of the International Olympic Academy took place in Athens and Olympia. On the first day of the stay in Olympia, a new congress centre was

opened on the academy grounds, inside which Giorgios Dolianitis held his exhibition "100 Years IOC D. Vikelas. First IOC President". This exhibition was particularly valued by the experts. It contained many originals concerning the national Olympic Games in Greece before 1896 and personal information about Dimitrios Vikelas, which up to then were not or hardly known. The originals are in possession of the sport association Panhellenios in Athens and of Dolianitis himself. Most of the exhibits are pictured in the catalogue accompanied by brief explanations.

The author of this essay was fascinated by one exhibit in particular. A letter dated 9th January, 1896, from Michel Bréal to IOC president Vikelas. Bréal mentioned his idea of a marathon and the inscription of the donated trophy. It appears that Bréal not only corresponded with Coubertin, the general secretary of the IOC, but also with the president. Bréal had written:

Dear Sir,

I do not know whether there is a meeting today. I am waiting for a friend who has not yet arrived. The moment in time is approaching when it will be necessary to take the marathon trophy in consideration, I would beg you to translate the following in modern Greek, in epigraphic style as best as possible:

Olympic Games, marathon trophy, donated by Michel Bréal.

I am capable of translating it into ancient Greek fairly enough but I also want to be understood by the youth.

Yours sincerely,  
Michel Bréal,

To conclude matters, a few biographical remarks Bréal<sup>3</sup>: Michel Jules Alfred Bréal was born in Landau (at that time part of Bavaria, nowadays Rheinland Pfalz) on 26th March, 1832. His parents were Jews of French descent. German was the language used within the family. The family moved to Wissenbourg in the French Alsatian region after the father died in 1837. There Bréal attended a school (as he did later in Metz and Paris) at which French was spoken. In Paris he was a pupil at the grammar school Louis-le-Grand and student at the Collège Sainte Barbe. Afterwards, he studied to be teacher at the Ecole Normale, In 1857 he graduated as teacher after two years of probation in Strasbourg. Subsequently,

he was a student of the famous teachers Franz Bopp and Albrecht Weber in Berlin. Bréal translated Bopp's comparative grammar ("Vergleichende Grammatik") into French (1866). Weber taught him Sanskrit and comparative philology ("Vergleichende Sprachwissenschaft"). Bréal returned to Paris and took his doctor's degree reading mythological and linguistic topics and obtained his habilitation on comparative grammar ("Vergleichende Grammatik") at the Collège de France, a place of study with university ranking for all scientific disciplines (1866). In 1879 he was proclaimed as the head representative for the Higher French educational system. His interest in ancient mythology, his responsible position in the French educational system and his travels to Greece in the name of research, explain his engagement for the Olympic congress of 1894 and also his suggestion to stage a marathon to Athens at the first Olympic Games in 1896. Shortly afterwards, Bréal became a member of the French Olympic Committee. Last but not least, due to his chief work, the: "Essay de sémantique" (1897) he is considered to be the founder of the histories semantics and also Nestor of the French philology. Bréal died in 1915.

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THE TROPHY HAD  
COLLECTED PATINA  
AND WAS SLIGHTLY  
DAMAGED. IT IS ABOUT  
25 CENTIMETRES HIGH.  
AN INSCRIPTION  
COULD CLEARLY BE READ:  
"OLYMPIC GAMES 1896,  
/MARATHON, DONATED  
BY MICHEL BRÉAL".

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Notes:

1. Compare: Lennartz, Karl, "Bréal Marathonbrief entdeckt", in *Condition 19* (1988) 9, p. 25-26;

Lennartz, Karl, "Ein wahrhaft olympisches Marathonwochenende", in: *Spiridon 16* (1989) 7, p. 56-57;

Lennartz, Karl, "Der Marathonlauf - 1896, die Königsdisziplin", in: Lennartz, Karl (ed.). *Die Olympischen Spiele 1896 in Athen. Erläuterungen zum Neudruck des Offiziellen Berichtes*, Kassel 1996, p. 126-132.

2. Coubertin, Pierre de, *Olympische Erinnerungen*, Frankfurt 1959, p. 48. See also Coubertin, Pierre de, *Einundzwanzig Jahre Sportkampagne*, Ratingen 1974, p. 79.

3. Compare: Gillmeister, Heiner, "Michel Bréal", in Lennartz: (ed). *Erhäuterungen zum Neudruck des Offiziellen Berichtes*, p. 149.

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