

THE "NOMADIC" INFLUENCE ON THE OLYMPIC MARATHON

BY BOB PHILLIPS

A curious trend emerges if a study is made of the origins of the winners of the men's Olympic marathon gold medals.

Remarkably, seven of the 24 champions were born in countries other than those they represented in the Games, as follows:

Michel Theato (France), born in Luxembourg;
Tom Hicks (USA), born in England;
Ken McArthur (South Africa), born in Northern Ireland;
Boughera El Ouafi (France), born in Algeria;
Kee Chung Son/Kitei Son (Japan), born in Korea;

Alain Mimoun (France), born in Algeria;
Frank Shorter (USA), born in Germany.

There may be an addition to that list because there is some evidence that John Hayes, who won the 1908 marathon in London, for the USA, was born in Ireland. Whether he was or not may never be known for sure, though he was certainly of Irish parentage and made claims to an Irish birthplace.

Whether the total of non-native marathon winners is seven or eight, this is a very high proportion and would presumably be regarded by mathematicians as being of considerable significance. Furthermore, it would seem that there are no more than 19 gold-medallists in all of the other events currently contested by men or women on the Olympic programme who were not born in the countries for which they competed.

By events, they are as follows:

MEN

100 metres
1992

Linford Christie (GB), born in Jamaica;
Donovan Bailey (Canada), born in Jamaica.

200 metres

Bobby Kerr (Canada), born in Ireland.

400 metres

Eric Liddell (GB), born in China.

3000 metres steeplechase

Chris Brasher (GB), born in British Guiana (Guyana).

110 metres hurdles

Mark McKoy (Canada), born in British Guiana (Guyana).

Shot Put

Martin Sheridan (USA), born in Ireland.

Discus

Martin Sheridan, (USA), born in Ireland.

Hammer

John Flanagan (USA), born in Ireland;
Patrick Ryan (USA), born in Ireland.

50 kilometres walk

Norman Read (NZ), born in England.

4x100 metres relay

Robert Esmie (Canada), born in Jamaica;
Glenroy Gilbert (Canada), born in Jamaica;
Bruny Surin (Canada), born in Haiti;
Donovan Bailey (Canada), born in Jamaica.

4x400 metres relay

Fred Wolff (GB), born in Hong Kong;
Godfrey Brown (GB), born in India.

WOMEN

200 metres

1968

Irena Kirszenstein-Szewinska (Poland), born in Russia;
Marie-JosÈ Pèrec-Hontas (France), born in Guadeloupe.

400 metres

Irena Kirszenstein-Szewinska (Poland), born in Russia;
Marie-Josè Pèrec-Hontas (France), born in Guadeloupe.

100 metres hurdles

1996 Ludmila Enquist-Navrashilenko (Sweden), born in Russia.

Javelin

Tessa Anderson (GB), born in Jamaica.

4x100 metres relay

Irena Kirszenstein-Szewinska (Poland), born in Russia.

As can be seen the only other individual events to produce more than one non-native winner are the menís 100 metres and hammer, and the womenís 200 and 400 metres.

Could there, then, be some sort of influence at work whereby immigrants are attracted towards marathon-running because they have moved long distances from the countries of their birth at some time in their lives? It seems altogether fanciful, and yet four other marathon medallists were also non-natives-Albert Corey (USA), 2nd in 1904, born in France; Charles Hefferon (South Africa), 2nd in 1908, born in England; Sung Yong Nam/ I Shoryu Nan (Japan), 3rd in 1936, born in Korea; and Mike Ryan (NZ), 3rd in 1968, born in Scotland.

Intriguingly, the man who devised the idea of the Olympic marathon was a Frenchman, Michel Bréal, who was born in Bavaria!
