

# THE GREEKS HAD SOME WORDS FOR IT

By John Kieran, but submitted by Patricia Henry Yeomans

Pat Henry Yeomans wrote:

**R**ecently, I was in the Bill Henry room at Occidental College to look at some documents, mainly about the 1932 Xth Olympiad, when a clipping fell out one of the books.

It was written by John Kieran, sports reporter of the *New York Times* and a colleague of my father, who worked for the *Los Angeles Times*.

The clipping carries no dateline, but I am sure Bill Henry (her father, Tony B.) and John Kieran corresponded about the Olympics around 1933, when Bill Henry was writing his *An approved history of the Olympic Games (finally published in 1948, Tony B.)*.

Both Kieran and Bill Henry are long dead and both, as Olympic historians, would probably be delighted to have this piece published over sixty years later!

The article concerns an account of the happenings at the first modern Olympic Games and it runs as follows:

**R**ummaging through a bookcase, there came to hand a paper-covered booklet of historical material. It was an account of the happenings at the first modern Olympic Games at Athens 1896, translated from the Greek. Written on the spot by an enthusiastic Greek author, it had a quaint flavor. Some excerpts will be offered for perusal. It should be explained that the official opening date of competition in the new Olympic "Stadion," as they called it, was set for as early in the year as March 25, because that is the Greek "Fourth of July," the day on which they celebrate the throwing off the yoke of Turkish dominance.

It was a Greek merchant prince, George Averoff, who gave the money that built the "stadion," so that day before the competition began King George I of Greece and other dignitaries participated in the unveiling of a statue of George Averoff at the entrance to the Olympic grounds. The weather was not favorable.

Quoting:

"At 11 A.M., after the arrival of the Royal Family, Mr. Timoleon Philemon made a speech in which he set forth in most eloquent terms the

peculiar value and significance of Mr. Averoff's gift to the nation. Unfortunately, a torrent of rain which descended on the speaker's uncovered head marred the effects of the proceedings, but it could not damp the enthusiasm of the multitude. Frantic shouts of applause greeted the concluding words of the speaker, and the music intoned a hymn, composed in honor of Mr. Averoff."

## The Boy From South Boston

The competition began in the afternoon of March 25. The morning was given over to solemn opening ceremonies and appropriate orations in the "stadion." To keep the full flavor of the translation from the Greek, it's best to give these excerpts "as is," without change of syntax, punctuation or spelling. The first order of business in actual competition was the running of heats in the 100-meter dash, the first heat being described as follows:

"First Group: The interest of the public was fully excited when the Champion entered the list. After they had ranged themselves in a straight line, ready to bounce forward, a pistol shot gave the signal for starting. Onwards they ran. Mr. Lane, an American arrived first at the goal, he had run the race in 12"  $\frac{1}{5}$ . Mr. Szokely, a Hungarian, came second, time of race 12"  $\frac{3}{4}$ ."

But the first final of the day, the event that produced the first of the modern Olympic champions, was in what we now call the hop, skip and jump. It was won by James B. Connolly, the noted writer of sea stories, who was then a black-haired young adventurer from South Boston who thought up and financed his own trip.

Of his triumph it is recorded:

"On a black tablet the exploit of the Olympian victor Connolly was duly inscribed, and in compliment to his nationality the American flag was hoisted in the center of the arena, by sailors of the Royal Navy, stationed there for that purpose. Mr. Connolly is a member of the Athletic Club of the town of Suffolk, America. All the spectators applauded enthusiastically and

their shouts mingled with the prolonged cheering of the countrymen of the victor the peculiarity of which excited much amusement.”

### **Much Further Amusement**

Probably this was the first time that Europeans ever had heard the type of cheering in which Americans indulge at athletic games. They were to be further amused as Bob Garrett, the Princeton track and field captain and the Boston A.A. group went ahead to take nine of the twelve events on the Olympic track and field program at Athens. For instance, of the high-jump event it was written:

“The Americans showed particular skill, one of them Mr. Clark after a jump of 1.81 metres high, won first prize. One can imagine the joy of the Americans, which expressed itself in their absurd shouts when the American flag waved again on high.”

Of the pole vault, or the “pole-jumping” as the Greeks put it, the account was, in part:

“This graceful sport captivated at first the attention of the public, but as the hour advanced their interest began to flag, for the runners from Marathon were expected to arrive every minute and signs of impatience showed themselves everywhere..... The superior skill and training of the two Americans was soon recognized by everybody; they had also brought with them from America 2 poles of extraordinary strength which enabled them to jump to a fabulous height..... The weather had by this, become so cold that strengthening cordials had to be taken by all the competitors who had taken part in that sport; massage was applied to their benumbed limbs.”

The “fabulous height” of the winning pole vault by W.T. Hoyt of the Boston A.A. group was 10 feet 9 ¾ inches. But apparently that was “way uptown” in those early days.

### **A Classic Struggle**

One of the events the Greeks expected to win was the discus throw. Bob Garrett, the husky Princetonian, was practically a newcomer at it. A little practice with an unofficial discus improvised in a New Jersey blacksmith shop some months earlier was all the training he had for this classic game. Of the discus event at Athens it was written:

“The day was already in its decline and the coolness of an evening in March was perceptibly felt, but still the contest excited a general interest for two Greeks, Mr. Versis and Mr. Paraskevopoulos were known to be excellent discus throwers. Mr. Versis in particular showed a harmony and a dignity in his attitudes which would not have disgraced an Ancient discus thrower.

He himself is beautiful of form like an ancient statue..... Alas, Mr. Versis, was not able to continue after a while and the contest became a duel between Mr. Garrett and Mr. Paraskevopoulos. The Greek Champion throw for the last time his discus to a distance of 28 metres 95 ½ cm. Loud acclamations resounded from all sides, for nobody could believe that such a marvellous throw could be surpassed by any one, Mr. Garrett however contrived to throw his discus to a distance of 29 metres 15; he was therefore declared victorious..... Most of the spectators were rather disappointed by this result.”

### **The Little Shepherd From the Hills**

Of course, for the natives the great event of those Olympic Games was the marathon race that was won by Spiridion Louis, a native Greek, a little shepherd from the hills. It was the one and only track or field triumph for the Greeks, but it was a great one. Of the start of the race it was written:

“Those competitors, who still clung to their purpose, to the number of 25, went the evening before the day to spend there the night. They were accompanied by a special commission. On the important day at 2 P.M. precisely they assembled on the bridge at Marathon, from which they were to start. They were placed in one line, each at a certain distance from his neighbour. After a short allocution, Colonel Papadiamantopoulos who had been chosen starter, gave the signal for starting by firing a revolver.”

The triumph of the little shepherd from the hills followed. It was a great moment for Greece. But, come to think of it, Greece has had greater and more glorious moments since. But that’s in another field.