

# The 1904 Olympic Marathon

C. ROBERT BARNETT

Marshall University

The 1904 Olympic marathon was the slowest and possibly the worst marathon in Olympic history. The event was held under adverse conditions with 90° heat and a difficult course where little water was available for the runners. During the race drugs and alcohol were openly administered to runners; dogs chased runners from the course; the apparent winner was disqualified for riding part of the way in an automobile; and a protest was lodged against the final winner. Less than half the starting field finished the race. The 1904 Olympic marathon was a circus, or more correctly, a side show at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition where fairgoers marveled at the marathon much as they did at the African pygmies, Queen Victoria's jewels, and the Indian villages.

The marathon was not a popular event in 1904. Only 31 runners entered the event despite the added inducement of a silver cup (valued at \$250) for the winner. A few of the runners were recognized marathoners who had either won or placed in the Boston marathon or had placed in previous Olympic marathons, but the majority of the field was composed of middle distance runners and assorted "oddities." Sam Mellor, Michael Spring, A.L. Newton, Thomas Hicks, and John Lordon, all experienced marathoners, were among the favorites. The leading "oddities" were Felix Carvajal, a Cuban mailman, Lentauw and Yamasani, Zulu tribesmen, and five Greeks, none of whom had ever run a marathon.

Race conditions were horrible. The weather was hot and humid, the course followed dusty rutted roads, and little water was available to the runners. John Lordon, an experienced marathoner, dropped out of the race after only two miles.

Sam Mellor, E.P. Carr, and A.L. Newton, all from New York, led through the first nine miles. At the thirteen mile mark, Thomas Hicks took the lead. Mellor and Carr, both suffering from severe physical distress, dropped out of the race as did a number of other runners. Hicks expanded his lead and had only to finish the race to win. Hicks' trainers gave him both strychnine and brandy to keep him going.

When Hicks was within a couple of miles of the finish line, Fred Lorz, who had dropped out of the race and accepted a ride in an automobile, ran past him. Lorz entered the stadium and finished the race as the apparent winner. Lorz regarded the whole affair as a joke, but the meet officials failed to appreciate his sense of humor and suspended him from competition for one year.

Hicks, the real leader, walked up and ran down the last three hills, entered the stadium, and finished in a time of 3:28.53. A protest was lodged against him on the grounds that he was paced by an automobile, but the protests were disallowed. Albert J. Cory of Chicago, finished second with a time of 3:34.16. Felix Carvajal the Cuban, placed fourth. His finish was amazing considering he frequently stopped along the way to chat with spectators, and made a detour to steal and eat peaches. In fifth place was Domitrios Velouis, the first Greek to finish. Lentauw and Yamasani, the South Africans, were ninth and twelfth, and had been chased off the course by a dog. In all, only 14 of the 31 starters were able to finish the race.

What did the 1904 Olympic marathon prove? James Sullivan, chief organizer of the Games, believed it proved the marathon should be abolished. Charles J.P. Lucas, one of Hicks' trainers, concluded that it had demonstrated "the stamina of the Caucasian Race and the superior distance running powers of the English nation." (Hicks was born in England.) Lucas apparently ignored the fact the two Africans finished better than 19 of the 29 Caucasians. He also believed that the value of drugs, carefully administered during a race, had been demonstrated.

What the race did clearly establish was the lack of knowledge about organizing and training for marathons. Race conditions could not have been worse. The late afternoon heat, poorly selected course, the mob of automobiles, and lack of water obviously took their toll of the runners. Did the runners train for the race? Apparently some did, but many had never run more than middle distance races, and some of the runners had never been in a formal race. What kind of substances were given to the runners before and during the race? We know that Hicks was given both alcohol and drugs and he won either in spite of or with their help, but a lot of other runners suffered serious difficulties as early as a half mile into the race. Did O.D. stand for something other than over distance?