

***Olympic Marathon: A Centennial History of the Games' Most Storied Race*** by Charlie Lovett (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1997). Reviewed by Scott G. Martyn, International Centre for Olympic Studies, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada.

As those of us who have struggled to jog but a few consecutive miles can affirm, the marathon race is one of the greatest tests of an individual's endurance that can be found in the Modern Olympic Games. Its history has resulted in an extraordinary legacy of physical prowess, courage, foolhardiness, drama, and in some cases tragedy.<sup>1</sup> Charlie Lovett's *Olympic Marathon: A Centennial History of the Games' Most Storied Race* is a book that claims to chronicle this legacy by offering a complete history and analysis of arguably the most famous racing event in the modern Olympic Games, the marathon. Despite claims to the contrary, Lovett's book is but an extension of the Olympic marathon victors and their stories found in John Hopkins' *The Marathon*, and David Wallechinsky's *The Complete Book of the Olympics*. Beginning with an overview of the "legends" of ancient Greece, Lovett's book briefly traces the process of reviving the Olympic Movement, including the establishment of the marathon. The book's treatment of these facets of Olympic history demonstrate Lovett's general lack of in-depth knowledge of the scholarly literature that undergirds our understanding of them. Following the exploits of such heroes as Spiridon Louis, Emil Zátopek, Abebe Bikila, Frank Shorter, and Joan Benoit, the book recounts an account of every Olympic marathon since the first one in 1896, as well as tales from the lives of the runners.



The commencement of Olympic marathon history -- Marathon, Greece 1896

In itself, the challenge of producing a "complete history" of any modern Olympic sport is formidable. Such "historical" productions, though they serve as a resource for those interested in the numerous athletic achievements at the Olympic Games, are often without analysis or reflection, and thus provide little in helping to understand the phenomenon that exists as the ultimate goal of what are arguably the world's best

endurance athletes. In most cases such histories are a direct reflection of the expertise of the author, who, to a greater or lesser extent, exhibits one or all of the following characteristics: (1) the author is male, (2) the author generally lacks the in-depth research scholarship background necessary to accomplish the task, (3) the author's narratives have been based largely on journalistic reporting, (4) the author's description and analysis (where it exists) has reflected the Olympic experience of the country with which he plainly identifies, and (5) the author's impetus for production of such a history has been underscored by a profit motive, that is to say, the author's work has been written for an audience less concerned with the veracity of information than with entertainment value. Is Lovett's "Olympic marathon history" any different than those I have described above? In some ways, yes, and in others, no!



Spiridon Louis -- Olympic marathon history's first champion

In trying to address some of the characteristics I have identified above, one need only look to the prologue which Lovett has appropriately entitled, "Prologue: The Legend." Beginning with the "legends of ancient Greece," Lovett attempts to summarise in five brief pages the history of the ancient Olympic Games, detail the legend of Pheidippides, explain the early Greek attempts at reviving the ancient Olympic festival including its eventual revival in 1896, and outline the events that led to the inclusion of the marathon in the program of the Games of the first Olympiad in Athens,

Greece. Given the importance of such historical facts to those of us involved in the serious study of the Olympic Movement, it seems to this reviewer that Lovett has come up short in examining the history preceding the first modern Olympic Games.



Czechoslovakia's Emil Zátopek, winner of the 1952 Olympic marathon in Helsinki

Stemming from the author's obvious summary treatment, I find it important to highlight and expand on some of the historical facts which he mentions only briefly. First, nowhere in ancient Greek sporting literature is there mention of a twenty-six mile 385 yard (42.2 kilometres) marathon race. According to ancient scholars, the closest footrace was the dolichos, a long-distance race of uncertain length, but a race which probably did not exceed three miles. Even so, Lovett correctly points out that the idea for a marathon race was inspired by the legend of Pheidippides, a trained Athenian messenger who "allegedly" carried the news of the Greek victory over the Persians on the plain of Marathon, the 25 or so miles to Athens. At Marathon the Athenians and their allies, the Plataeans, defeated the army of King Darius of Persia in 490 B.C. Unfortunately, the context of this saga is altogether absent.

Darius controlled Asia Minor, which included various Greek cities in Ionia (western Asia Minor). The Ionians revolted against the Persian king in 499 B.C., and the other Greeks came to their aid. Darius decided to punish the Greeks for sending aid to the Ionians. He gathered a powerful army and a great fleet and sent them to

Greece under two generals, Datis and Artaphernes. The Persians captured the island of Euboea and set up a base of operations there. From this point the Persian army landed on the mainland of Greece. The Persian fleet anchored offshore. After a few days, part of the Persian force, including the cavalry, set sail for the Bay of Phalerum. This force planned to attack Athens from the southwest. The main Persian force of about 20,000 men remained in place, facing the Greeks on the plain of Marathon.

The Greeks had a force of 10,000 Athenians and 1,000 Plataeans. Apparently, they sent Pheidippides, their swiftest runner, to bring help from Sparta, a distance of about 150 miles (240 kilometres). But the Spartan army was delayed because of religious observances celebrating their festival of the Carneia, and did not arrive until after the battle. The Athenian general, Miltiades, in uncharacteristic fashion attacked the Persians with a running charge. The Persian bowmen fired a great shower of arrows, but the speed and heavy armour of the Greeks enabled them to reach the Persians with small losses. When the two armies came to grips, the superior weapons and bodily strength of the Greeks were decisive. The Persians lost 6,400 men, but the Athenians lost only 192. The Greek dead were buried under a mound of earth which may still be seen on the battlefield at Marathon.

As the fleet sailed away, Miltiades feared that the retreating ships would attack Athens by sea and that the city might surrender without knowing of their victory at Marathon. According to legend, he sent Pheidippides to carry news of the victory to Athens. Pheidippides, weary from his arduous journey to Sparta and back, ran the twenty-five miles (40 kilometres) to Athens. According to the only written account by the Greek satirist Lucian, some six hundred years after the fact, Pheidippides, upon reaching the city, gasped out, "Joy to you, we've won," then fell to the ground, dead. Despite the romantic tale, Lovett points out that it is highly unlikely that the Athenian messenger, Pheidippides, made the now legendary run to Athens. Thus, one can conclude that the modern marathon race is commemorative of a legend of doubtful authenticity. Yet, as the author notes, its inclusion in the Modern Olympic Games rested squarely on this legendary tale.

In 1892, amidst the celebratory atmosphere of what was supposedly the fifth anniversary of the Union français des Sports Athlétiques, Pierre de Coubertin in sensational fashion announced his resolution to bring about a revival of the Olympic Games. The initial response from the French and foreign dignitaries in attendance was applause, however, Lovett points out that Coubertin's suggestion was later met with a mixture of apathy and derision. In his memoirs, Coubertin recalled that it was a period that lacked total comprehension of what was about to start, citing an American lady who, after congratulating him on his achievement said "I have already watched Olympic Games." "Really!" responded Coubertin. He asked where they had held such Games. "In San Francisco," she smiled, and continued, "They were very beautiful. Caesar was there."<sup>2</sup>

In 1894, as the day of the Sorbonne conference approached, Coubertin worried about the problems facing his planned revival of the Olympic Games. However, on 16 June 1894, in the inspiring main amphitheatre of the Sorbonne, Coubertin began to create the desired atmosphere that would ensure its success. Delegates sat mesmerized by what unfolded before them. The walls of the amphitheatre had been "graced" with Puvis de Chavannes' "Sacred copse," and the ancient "Hymn to Apollo," discovered in the ruins of Delphi, set to music by Gabriel Fauré echoed forth. It was here

that Coubertin knew no one retained the will to vote against a revival of the Olympic Games. Coubertin was indeed right. On 23 June 1894 during the last session, the delegates voted unanimously to support his idea to revive of the Olympic Games. But, as the author suggests, it was his French compatriot, Michel Bréal, a linguist and student of Greek mythology, who thought of including a marathon race at the first Olympic Games. Bréal offered a silver “Marathon Cup” to whomever would win such a race.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Lovett concludes his prologue by acknowledging that through the fabled accomplishments of an ancient Athenian messenger, corrupted by time, and the efforts of two Frenchmen working in concert, the modern Olympic marathon was born.

The body of Lovett’s *Olympic Marathon* . . . is composed of twenty-nine short chapters (on average 5-7 pages), sub-divided into two major parts, **Part I - The Men’s Race** and **Part II - The Women’s Race**. The 164 pages of material is organized chronologically, and traces the evolution of the modern Olympic marathon from its origins in 1896 to its most recent unfolding in Atlanta, at the Games of the Twenty-Sixth Olympiad. The author typically discusses the particular site of each Games, including any special circumstances that might impact on the individual Games or, more specifically, the staging of the marathon (temperature, altitude, boycott, etc.). For the reader who is unfamiliar with the locations of the individual Games and the events surrounding them, this approach is beneficial. Generally, the discussion shifts from the problems that precede each of the Games, to some of the noteworthy athletes involved in the Olympic marathon, before finally reporting the highlights of the marathon itself and the post-event occurrences.



Shortly after the start of the 1908 Olympic marathon on the Windsor Castle grounds

Of all the Olympic episodes described by Lovett, he argues that those surrounding the 1908 Games in London had the greatest impact on the modern marathon, and as such, deserves special mention. The British organizers had elected to begin the marathon on the grounds of Windsor Castle, twenty-six miles from the newly erected 70,000 seat stadium at Shepherd’s Bush. As a favour to the royal family, the starting point was selected so that the children of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra could watch the official start. In his description, Lovett also notes that this event was

coordinated with a birthday celebration at Windsor Castle for one of the children. The course passed through quaint villages and along the banks of the Thames toward the Olympic stadium. Once inside the stadium, the runners ran an additional 385 yards around the track. This enabled the finish line to be directly in front of the royal box of Queen Alexandra. This random distance of twenty-six miles 385 yards (42.2 kilometres) became the standardized length for all marathon races.

Despite my general applause for Lovett's historical narrative surrounding the Olympic marathon and the sequence of events within each race, there are some shortcomings, errors, and highly debatable statements that need correction if the book is to progress to a second edition. For instance, those of us who have journeyed to the ancient site of Olympia, would be amazed to learn the stadium included seating for 60,000 people (p. ix). Most scholars of ancient history would be disappointed to learn that Lovett is yet another author that propagates the Modern Olympic Movement's myth that in ancient times wars were suspended during the period of Olympic competition in order that the Olympic Games could be staged (p. x and p. 51). Some classical scholars and more than a few modern Olympic scholars, would be nettled by the fact that Robert Dover's Cotswold "Olympick Games" of 1612, the "Hampton Court Olympics" of 1679, the "Olympic Games" in Ramlösa in 1834 and again in 1836, the Montreal "Olympic Games" in 1844, and Dr. W. P. Brookes' "Olympic Games" near the village of Much Wenlock in 1850, to name but a few, were altogether omitted in favour of singular reference to the first Zappeion Games in 1859 as an example of early attempts to revive the Games (p. xi). The Arab world, in general, would not be happy to learn it was linked universally with the Black September Palestinian terrorist group responsible for the tragic events at the 1972 Summer Olympic Games in Munich, West Germany, as Lovett has suggested (p. 84). Finally, the tax-paying residents of Montreal would be aghast to read that their city went into debt that will last until well into the next millennium simply to ensure that the Games of 1976 would brighten the tarnished image of the Olympics resulting from Munich 1972 (p. 91). These errors, among others, keep Lovett in the realm of the mortal and do not alter the overall concept of the book. Clearly, Lovett's material is strongest when he examines the events and actors surrounding the Olympic marathon. Conversely, he is at his weakest when he attempts to comment on the context of ancient Games and the Modern Olympic Movement.

In addition to the major material detailing the men's and women's Olympic marathon, the book includes an excellent appendix detailing the top ten finishers and their times for the Olympic marathons from 1896 through 1996. Lovett has also provided the reader with a selected bibliography from which to gather additional material on the Modern Olympic Games and the marathon. The real strength of Lovett's book is in its recounting of each Olympic marathon, rather than in the depth of contextual Olympic history. As a reference book for those interested in who participated, who won which marathon, when, where, and in what fashion, this book should be very useful. To paraphrase Sargent Joe Friday from the early American television police drama *Dragnet*, "just the facts, sir, just the facts." That, in brief, is exactly what Lovett gives the reader, just the facts.

## **Endnotes**

1. See John A. Lucas, "A History of the Marathon Race - 490 B.C. to 1975," *Journal of Sport History* 3 (Summer 1976), pp. 120-138.
2. See Pierre de Coubertin, *Olympic Memoirs*, trans. Geoffroy de Navacelle (Lausanne: Comité International Olympique, 1989), p. 6.
3. See International Olympic Committee General Session Minutes (Volume I, 1894-1919), Paris (1894), p. 2 (translation by Wolf Lyberg), International Centre for Olympic Studies, The University of Western Ontario.