

The Olympic Marathon: The History and Drama of Sport's Most Challenging Event by David E. Martin and Roger W. H. Gynn (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2000), 511 pp. Reviewed by Fred Mason, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

The foreword to *The Olympic Marathon*, written by prominent Olympic statistician Bill Mallon, sets the bar high for the work. Mallon suggests that the book is “the definitive history” of the event, and that “we can ask for no more than this book on the Olympic Marathon” (p. ix). In their preface, the authors themselves indicate that they were aiming for “a definitive reference that describes the exploits of these athletes” (p. x). In some ways, Martin and Gynn have accomplished what they set out to do, and in others ways, they have not.

In *The Olympic Marathon*, one chapter is devoted to each Olympic Games that has been held (including the Intercalated Games of 1906) with a central focus on the respective marathon races. The chapters follow a logical, consistent structure that becomes familiar for the reader as the book progresses. To begin, brief sketches of the political climate of the time and events within the Olympic movement are described. These usually include a discussion of host city selection and the preparation of the marathon courses. The ensuing sections summarize the selection process for key competitors in the races. The narratives of race(s) then follow, and brief career biographies of the top three finishers. Chapters then conclude with “Looking Ahead” sections, where major competitors and competitions in the period between the Olympic festivals are traced. Each chapter also includes a sketch of the course map, and most have a “Marathon Miscellany” box that provides interesting or unusual bits of information. The book finishes with six appendices, which provide highly detailed statistical information on competitors and their times.

The audience for this book is less the Olympic or sports scholar than it is the Olympic enthusiast, the sport statistician, the runner, and fan of distance running. The major problem that sport historians will have with this book is that the majority of sources, for both the writing and the statistics, are not adequately referenced. Much of the information provided in the book cannot be verified, and so must be taken at face value. The problem arises partly from the choice of APA format, leading to references that are less specific and more difficult to trace. Another factor in this assessment is that the references that do appear are sparse and largely gleaned from secondary sources. Because of the referencing, *The Olympic Marathon* loses its value as “a definitive source” for historians, and is really only useful as a quick reference on statistics, athletes, and stadiums. This is particularly unfortunate, as the authors’ vast network of connections with archivists and statisticians the world over, as indicated in the acknowledgements section of the book, suggests that perhaps more primary sources were consulted than were referenced.

The statistical treatment of the subject is the strongest point of the book, if one is willing to accept it at face value. A complete listing of all competitors and their times is provided in the appendices. In several cases, Martin and Gynn set the record straight on competitors’ names or times that have until now been reported inaccurately, or not at all, in the official records. In addition to the appendices, convenient tables within each chapter list the top ten finishers, their times, and important course

conditions. Because of these elements, *The Olympic Marathon* will likely stand as a definitive resource on the topic for statisticians with an interest in the sport.

For enthusiasts of distance running, this book contains the most detailed set of race narratives to date. The quality of the narrative on each race is generally good, but certain chapters are written better than others. For example, the narratives on the 1952, 1960, and 1976 races are both exciting and literary, but some of the others pale by comparison. One problem with the race narratives is that they are constantly interrupted by details on split times and race paces, in the body of the text. While such details are important to statisticians and race fans, and their presence is understandable given that the authors are primarily statisticians themselves, they still tend to interrupt the flow of the narratives, and will aggravate some readers.

Readers will appreciate the inclusion of discussions on the political climates surrounding the individual Games, even though they were necessarily brief. In some cases, the political discussions were quite fair and comprehensive. The boycotts and economic turmoil of the Montreal Olympics were dealt with particularly well. For one. However, in many cases the discussion is overly simplistic. For example, the boycotts of the 1980 and 1984 Games were dealt with in a simple "us versus them" style that missed much of the political nuances of the time. As well, the authors' own biases slip into the writing on occasion. For instance, in the discussion of the 1996 Atlanta Games, their advocacy for the commercialization of the Games and their pro-United States bias is apparent. They suggest that Juan Antonio Samaranch's criticism of the "capitalistic spirit" surrounding the Games "seemed a bit narrow-minded" (p. 408). As well, the logistical nightmares of Atlanta go largely unmentioned, even though problems at earlier Games had been discussed in prior chapters.

One thing largely missing from the work is a critical viewpoint on the Olympic movement itself. The tone of the work is exceedingly celebratory, not surprising considering the popular audience that the book tries to capture. The knowledgeable reader will find that this leads to the exclusion or "glossing over" of some contentious points, and uncritical acclaim of the athletes' accomplishments. For instance, it is common knowledge in distance running circles that 1976 and 1980 Olympic marathon champion Waldemar Cierpinski has been implicated in the East German doping rings, yet this is not mentioned at all in the two chapters of the book that deals with those races, and only receives a brief mention in the last chapter of the book, in a small section dealing with drug use in sport.

Despite the weaknesses, there are a number of positive things about the book that deserve mention. The "Marathon Miscellany" sections in *The Olympic Marathon* are a good complement to the rest of the book. They are effectively used to discuss topics that are tangentially related to the main materials of the chapters, providing information that is necessary for the record to be complete. However, issue might be taken with the placement of "The Politics of Inclusion – A Women's Olympic Marathon" (p. 334) in one of these sections. While the actual content on the topic is quite good, the choice of placing it in the same type of section as things like Gregorian calendar dates and name corrections, could be seen as trivializing women's accomplishments somewhat.

One notable accomplishment with this book is that for the first time, a complete set of sketches of all Olympic marathon routes appears in a single work. Unfortunately, the sketches are simple, and do not provide any detail beyond the roads on

which the races occurred, meaning that the relationship of the marathon route to local landmarks and other Olympic venues is missing. On the other hand, these sections are specifically aimed at readers who may want to visit the site and follow what remains of the routes, so the reductionism is appropriate. As well, the style is the same as appears in most current road race brochures and course maps, and so would be familiar to the runner and statistician.

One aspect of the book that may recoup some of its value for academics is its collection of information on Olympic stadia. Each Olympic stadium that has been used for athletics is described in detail, including the size, layout and orientation. Scholars interested in athletic facility design and layout should find the descriptions of the stadia a useful starting point for a departure into historical research in the area. As well, for those interested in the sport of distance running, the later chapters have some fascinating reading on the intricacies and science of course measurement, information that will be difficult to find elsewhere.

In *The Olympic Marathon*, Martin and Gynn set out to write a definitive work on a topic with a long history and an international scope. Is this a definitive history? That will depend on the reader. Olympic historians will find that the work is largely undocumented and thus suspect, but is at least useful as a quick reference guide to the event. The extensive statistics on the Olympic marathon will probably make the book a definitive resource for track and field or distance running statisticians.

