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# Commentary

## Setting the Record Straight: The Photograph Portraying the Start of the 1896 Marathon

In many texts featuring pictorial treatment of the marathon event at the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, at least three well-known pictures are often presented to us as associated elements of the historic race. One photograph, of course, is that of Spiridon Louis (Loues), the eventual marathon winner and hero of all Greece, clad in colourful folk fustanella, posing somberly during the awards ceremonies marking the end of the great festival. A second illustration portrays Louis near the completion of his great victory, nearing the finish line in the great Panathenaen stadium accompanied, as we all know, by Crown Prince Constantine. A third illustration, as we are told by photograph captions in reputable Olympic history texts, portrays the start of the race in the village of Marathon. There, the marathon contestants are assembled for the start, row on row, fronted by two Greek officials, the entire scene the subject of amused stares from a small gaggle of Greek peasant children resident on the roof of a nearby shed. In the mind's eye of most Olympic historians, the images of what has been portrayed as the 1896 marathon start and finishing scenes remain indelible.



Some two decades ago, in a book that influenced me greatly as I launched myself into a serious study of the historical aspects of the Modern Olympic Movement, John MacAloon's celebrated *This Great Symbol*, I was informed that Illustration Plate 14 represented the start of the marathon eventually won by Louis.<sup>1</sup> Following MacAloon and others, in my own "This Great Symbol: Tricks of History," I made a similar pronouncement with reference to the start of the 1896 marathon and the presence of a French athlete, one "A. Lermusiaux, who toed the starting line in the front row of history's first Olympic marathon race," clad in a shirt emblazoned with the insignia of the French USFSA, two interlocked rings, quite probably the basic design inspiration for Pierre de Coubertin's eventual conceptualization of the Olympic five-ring symbol that is known far and wide in the world today.<sup>2</sup> David Young, usually impeccable in his observations, tells us in his *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Survival*, that the same Lermusiaux and his prominently displayed "two interlocked rings of Coubertin's USFSA," was among the leaders in the early stages of the race.<sup>3</sup> Otto Szy-

miczek, longtime Dean of the International Olympic Academy and erstwhile Olympic historian, when assigned the task of writing on the 1896 Games in IOC President Michael Morris's (the Lord Killanin) and John Rodda's published history of the Olympics, rendered a stirring account of the first marathon, documenting his remarks in graphic fashion by arranging the photograph under discussion in the middle of his text. The picture's caption reads: "1896. Greek children find a rooftop perch to watch the start of the marathon."<sup>4</sup> And, to top it all off, Pierre de Coubertin himself, in his *Mémoires Olympiques*, gives a first hand description of the marathon proceedings (he was a spectator at its glorious finish), embellishing his observations with the photograph under study. Beneath Coubertin's illustration are the words: "1896 – Des enfants sur les toits assistent au départ du primer marathon."<sup>5</sup> MacAloon, Barney, Young, Szymiczek, Coubertin, indeed all others who have used this picture to render a pictorial image of the start of history's first Olympic marathon, are all dead wrong. The celebrated picture is not the start of the 1896 marathon; the athlete in the first row of runners (almost front and center) is not Alben Lermusiaux; Spiridon Louis is not there. In fact, the now famous picture has nothing to do with the 1896 Games. It has, however, everything to do with an event a decade later, the marathon of the so-called Intercalary Games celebrated in Athens in 1906.

How do we know? There are two bits of evidence, one incontrovertible, and one less incontrovertible but nevertheless plausible. With regard to the "incontrovertible," when one views the photograph, an athlete can be noted in the front row at the far right attired in a white uniform, the front of his jersey embossed with the "Olympic shield" logo of the American Olympic team, in effect, the emblem of the American Olympic Committee. The birthright of the "Olympic shield emblem" dates to 1906, and no earlier. Therefore, the athlete depicted in the photograph is not Arthur Blake, the only American who participated in Olympic history's first marathon in 1896 (he never finished), is instead one of three American participants in the 1906 marathon, most probably, but not conclusively, William Frank, who finished third in 3 hours and 46+ seconds.<sup>6</sup> And, the athlete in the front row whose jersey is adorned with the two interlocking rings is not Alben Lermusiaux, but one of two Frenchmen in the 1906 marathon, most probably Joseph Roffi Farrade, who finished eighth in 3 hours, 17 minutes, and 49+ seconds.<sup>7</sup>



The "less incontrovertible but plausible" evidence focuses on the eventual winner of the 1906 marathon, Canada's Billy Sherring from Hamilton, Ontario's Shamrock Athletic Club. Most Olympic historians are familiar with the photograph of Sherring having entered the stadium in Athens near the end of his journey, being joined by Prince George for the finish of his (Sherring's) marathon odyssey. Two aspects of Sherring's dress-paraphernalia strike the observer of the photograph—the large cloverleaf logo of the Shamrock Athletic Club resplendent on the front of his jersey,<sup>8</sup> and

the fedora-like hat he wears. In viewing the photograph taken in the village of Marathon at the start of the race, one will note the athlete in the third row almost to the far left. He wears a fedora identical to that worn by Sherring as he enters the stadium. Is it Sherring? I think so!

Together, this evidence substantiates that the photograph most of us have come to know as representing the start of the 1896 marathon is instead an illustration representing the start of the 1906 marathon. Though never repudiating the falseness of the photograph from the standpoint of 1896, two sources have not repeated the time worn error that the rest of us have. One is a German publication,<sup>9</sup> which arranges the noted "start of the marathon" photograph in a section dealing with the 1906 Games. The other is an American-produced book.<sup>10</sup> Hats off to each of them!

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### Endnotes

- 1 See John J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol: Pierre de Coubertin and the Origin of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), plate number 15 in photograph section.
- 2 Robert Knight Barney, "This Great Symbol: Tricks of History," *Olympic Review* (No. 301, November 1992), pp. 628-629.
- 3 Undoubtedly, Young follows MacAloon's (mis)identification of the photograph portraying the start of the 1896 marathon when he (Young) refers to the "versatile and colorful, but luckless, Frenchman, Lermusiaux, prominently displaying the two interlocked rings of Coubertin's USFSA." See David C. Young, *The Modern Olympics: A Struggle for Survival* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 152-153.
- 4 See Otto Szymiczek, "Athens 1896," in *The Olympic Games: 80 Years of People, Events and Records* (Lord Killanin and John Rodda, eds.), Don Mills, Ontario: Collier-Macmillan Canada, Ltd., 1976), p. 28.
- 5 Pierre de Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques* (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 1989-reedition), p. 21.
- 6 The other two Americans in the race, neither of whom finished, were Robert Fowler and Arthur Spring. See Bill Mallon, *The 1906 Olympic Games: Results for All Competitors in All Events, with Commentary* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 1999), pp. 45-46.
- 7 The other French marathon participant was Émile Bonheure, See Mallon, *ibid.*, p. 46.
- 8 With no photograph identification to guide him, the celebrated Carl Diem, in noting the shamrock cloverleaf on Sherring's jersey, was led to conclude erroneously that the runner (and winner) was an Irishman, John Davis of Cork

- (representing Great Britain). Carl-Diem Institute, *Carl Diem: The Olympic Idea, Discourses and Essays* (Stuttgart: Verlag Karl Hoffmann, 1970), p. 36. In effect, though John Davis started the race, he never finished. See Mallon, 1999, p. 46.
- 9 Wolfgang Decker, Georgios Dolianitis, Karl Lennartz (eds.), *100 Jahre Olympische Spiele: Der Neugriechische Ursprung* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 1996), p. 121.
- 10 See Carl A. Posey, *The Olympic Century-III Olympiad, St.Louis 1904-Athens 1906* (Los Angeles: World Sport and Research Publications, Inc., 2000), p. 138.