

AFRICA'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN 1904

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NEW FACTS SURROUNDING AFRICA'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN 1904

South Africa's official participation in the Olympic Games spans a period from 1908 until 1960, and again from 1992. The early history of South Africa's participation in the Olympic Movement was documented by Van der Merwe (1978).

This research, however, did not disclose the participation of a "Boer team" in the Olympic tug-of-war event, nor did it study the true facts behind the "Zulus" presence at these Olympic Games. The two "Zulus" were in fact the first Blacks from Africa to take part in the Olympic Games and yet virtually nothing was known regarding their being in the United States at the time of the third Olympiad. According to the Official Report of the Games by Charles J.P. Lucas, the three marathon runners were "Lentauw" and "Yamasani" from Zululand and Harris from the Transvaal. After nearly a century concern was for the first time shown for more information on these people.

Research in South African libraries and State Archives did not reveal any primary information. A visit to the Missouri Historical Society Library and Archive in St. Louis was necessary to get the background as to the reasons for them being in St. Louis in 1904. Contemporary newspapers were also consulted in the Thomas Jefferson Library of the University of Missouri in St. Louis. This research revealed that they were all part of the Boer War Spectacle at the World's Fair.

Certain indistinctiveness was clarified with this research. For the first time South African sport history is a step closer to the identity of the three marathon runners. Robert (Bob) Harris, for instance, was from Aliwal North in the Cape and not from the Transvaal. The two black runners were not Zulus

from Zululand as stated by the Official Report of Charles Lucas, but more likely Tswanas from the Western Transvaal. As for their names, the spelling that was accepted up till now is the phonetically spelling as publicized in the American newspapers of the day. Their correct names appear to be Len Tau and Jan Mashiani. An official program of the marathon race, obtained from the U.S. Olympic Committee, reveals furthermore that the names of the two runners on the only official photo in possession of the Missouri Historical Society has been switched. Len Tau must be the taller of the two, the barefooted one, with the number 35 on his chest!

Research experience has shown that historical information on sport in Africa is very limited. This research will enhance the historiography of Africans participating in world class sport and will throw more light on Sub-Saharan Africans participating in the modern Olympic Games. In the light of South Africa's new dispensation, and the dearth of information on the sport achievements of deprived groups, this research intends to contribute towards expanding existing knowledge about these sporting greats who to date have been omitted from our sporting history books for nearly a century. This research expands and hopefully complete the earlier documentation of South Africa's participation in the Olympic Movement. It also clears the mystery surrounding the participation of the "South Africans" in the 1904 Olympic Games. With the historiography of Black sport in South Africa still in its infancy, this research will make an important contribution to the body of knowledge in this particular field of study and hopefully inspire further contributions.

Key words: Anglo-Boer War; Boers; South Africa; St. Louis; World's Fair; Louisiana Purchase Exposition; 1904 Olympic Games; Marathon; Tug-of-war.

INTRODUCTION

After the Americans had dominated the first two Olympiads, the International Olympic Committee decided that Chicago should host the third Olympiad in 1904. St. Louis planned a World's Fair for the same year to commemorate the purchase from France a century before, of the two million square kilometer Louisiana territory. This was to be the biggest Fair the world had ever seen and Chicago eventually agreed that it would be a better proposition if St. Louis organised the Games too. Unfortunately this meant that the Olympic Games, as in Paris in 1900, became a side-show of the fair.

While plans for the exposition were eagerly made in St. Louis, circumstances in South Africa were very bleak. The long, gruelling war with the British Empire had come to an end in 1902, but in order to end the war, the British military forces had burnt the agricultural lands of the two Boer republics. The concentration camps they had created for the white women and children as well as for blacks, had resulted in thousands of deaths and the weakening of families. The famine and hardship that resulted from the depression after the war affected white and black alike. The black population especially was disillusioned as the majority were even worse off after the war. In order to alleviate hardships, the British administration strongly encouraged everybody to find whatever work they could get.

In these circumstances the following offer in a Witwatersrand daily newspaper was very attractive: "Boer War Exhibition, A chance for the unemployed! £4 per month and deductions". Anyone interested was to contact the South African Boer War Exhibition Company at a given address in Pretoria. This company was the brainchild of Captain Arthur Waldo Lewis from St. Louis, who had fought in the war on the side of the Rhodesians. Soon after the advertisement, more than 600 white men, women and children, as well as a contingent of blacks (the number is uncertain) joined the company. The aim of this company was to reconstruct at the World's Fair two well-known Anglo-Boer war battles (one representing each side) as well as Gen. De Wet's escape. They left Cape Town on 12 March 1904. It can be speculated with a certain amount of certainty that none of them had any vision of participating in the Olympic Games nor maybe even knew of its existence

When the history of South Africa's involvement in the Olympic movement was documented in the mid-1970's, only the official participation was dealt with. This covered the period from 1908 until 1960. Reference, however, was made to the unofficial involvement in the 1904 Olympic marathon, but not of the fact that a Boer team took part in the Olympic tug-of-war event. All that was known until recently, was that "two Zulus" and a "Transvaler" took part in that marathon. In all Olympic history circles these three are known by the names of "Lentaauw", "Yamasani" and "Harris" and nobody in South Africa was even sure of how they came to be in St. Louis at this time. The doyen of South African sport journalists, Arrie Joubert, claimed that the two blacks were porters at the World's Fair with nobody disputing this rather wild guess.

With South Africa's re-admittance to the Olympic family in 1992, a need arose to know more of these very first Olympians from Africa, namely: who they exactly were; how they came to be there; what they were doing there; and in which events they had taken part

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Olympic Games, 1904

From the various local newspapers it appears that the Boer War Spectacle ran from 17 June until 1 December 1904, while the Olympic Games lasted from 1 July to 23 November 1904. During this time, on 8 August to be exact, it was first reported that R.W. Harris from "Aliwal South, Aliwal, Cape Town" was a well-known middle-distance runner and that he was in daily training for the Olympic marathon. Aliwal South does not in fact exist. This must be a reference to Aliwal North on the old Cape Colony border with the Orange Free State - nowhere near Cape Town. That Harris was a "well-known middle-distance runner" or even "the best long-distance runner of the country from which he hails", could not be verified.

While entries for the marathon were piling up, “athletic events for savages” were planned for 11 and 12 August.

“The unique spectacle of men deliberately throwing stones at one another will be one of the features at the athletic meet to be held at the Stadium, Thursday and Friday, in which all of the savage tribes now at the World’s Fair will compete”.

Besides the stone-throwing battle, there were javelin-throwing for accuracy, tree-climbing, throwing the baseball and track and field sports. Two black members of the Boer War Show, who had been messengers for the Boers during the war, participated in the one mile event. From the start “Letorew (sic) set a killing pace for the first lap, running like an old-time professional” followed by his countryman. Despite his lead of 20 yards, he kept looking back and lost

valuable ground in the process. In the stretch he was finally passed by a Syrian and an Indian. The latter won, with “Letouw” (sic) third.

By 14 August it was reported that entries for the marathon had been received from, amongst others, Zululand - “Zululand will have two men to carry the colors of the South African nation, both being Kaffirs”. This report is confusing as Zulus and

Kaffirs are not the same race. The latter belongs to the Xhosa race of the Eastern Cape, while the former lived in Natal. The Boer leaders at St. Louis were mainly from the Transvaal, therefore it is somewhat unlikely that they would have recruited Zulus and Xhosas for the venture.

The report furthermore states that they had been used by the Boers to carry messages during the war and that they could move at a fast pace all day. These

were the same persons who had taken part in the mile event at the Intertribal Games. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was even more confused when it reported that “Leetouw” and “Yamasaria” were dispatch runners for the English army during the war with the Boers.

The daily, official programme dealing with the marathon race, shows “B.W.” Harris in number one, and “Lentauw, Kaffir, mail carrier” and “Yamasani, Kaffir,

mail carrier” in numbers 35 and 36 respectively of 38 competitors (of which only 32 actually took part). As Harris had already been entered for the marathon by 8 August, and the two blacks not later than 13 August it is quite possible that he had persuaded them to take part. The fact that “a great deal of attention was directed to the running abilities and stamina” of these two, could have encouraged them even further.



Jan Mashiani (36) and Len Tau (35) before the start of the 1904 Olympic marathon courtesy Missouri historical Society (LPE 942)

The marathon over 40 kilometers (or 24.85 miles) which started on Tuesday 30 August, was run in very hot (32°C/90°F) and in extremely dusty conditions. It was such a gruelling race, due to the dust generated by automobiles which were using the same road simultaneously, that afterwards there was “a growing sentiment in favor of abolishing the man-killing run from the program of Olympic events”. The runners started in two rows, Harris being in the front row and the two blacks in the back row.

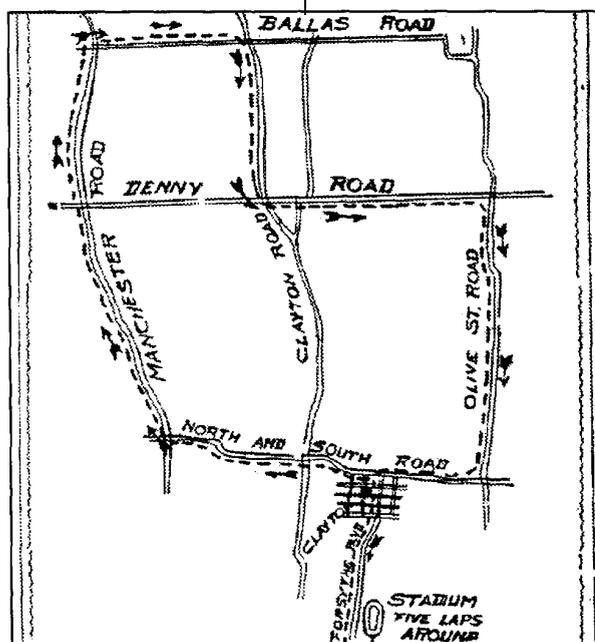
Harris dropped out of the race before having covered 15 miles, whilst “the Kaffirs had done no distance work, yet they finished”. “Lentauw” finished ninth and “Yamasani” twelfth. One of them could have done even better had he not been chased off course by a dog while running along a deserted part of a country road which made up part of the course. According to the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* it was “Lentauw” who cavorting..

“... wildly across a stubblefield, after the manner of the original African cakewalker, with a plain yellow cur of an American watchdog running a close second, with prospects of a speedy union between the cavernous display of canine molars and the rearmost portion of the ‘lion’s’ garments.”

It is possible that the *Globe-Democrat* confused the runners or their numbers and that it had been “Yamasani” who was chased and not his team-mate. This hypothesis is based on positions held during the race as published by Bill Mallon. According to him “Lentauw” was 12th at five miles, 16th at 10 miles, 14th at 15 miles and 13th at 20 miles. He was rather consistent, but if one looks at “Yamasani’s” placings, he seems the more likely candidate to have been chased by a dog. At 5 miles he was 14th, at 10 miles

he was 23rd, just to be 15th again at 15 miles and to tie in 14th place at 20 miles. The incident with the dog could have occurred between the 10 and 15 mile mark.

According to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* both runners ran barefooted, but the official photo taken prior to the race, shows only “Lentau” to be barefooted (this, of course, does not exclude the possibility that “Yamasani” got rid of his shoes along the way). On this unique photo, it was found that the names of the two runners had been switched. “Lentauw” is the taller one without shoes and with the number 35 on his chest and not the other way around, as has been claimed up to now,



Route of the marathon course (*St Louis Post Dispatch*, 30 Aug 1904)

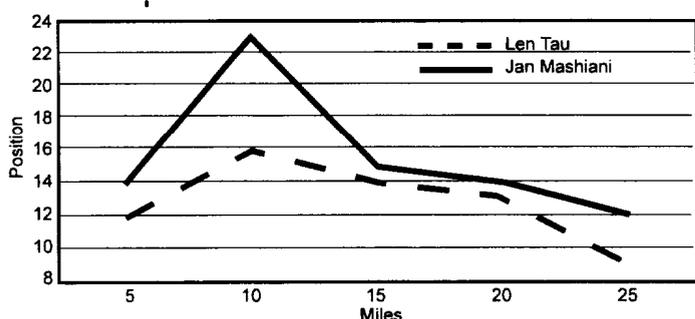
This research revealed that their names were misspelt. The report in the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* that mentioned “Lentauw” as having been chased by a dog, also states that “Lentauw’s name, when translated into English, signifies ‘Lion’, supposed to have been bestowed upon him because of his lion-like courage”. For the first time South African sport history is a step closer to the identity of the

three marathon runners. If “Lentauw’s” name signified “lion”, then his real name must have been Tau, which means lion in, for instance, Tswana. The Tswana is one of the predominant ethnic groups in the Transvaal (now Gauteng) with Tau having been a well-known name for a very long time. This is yet another proof that he was not a Zulu as stated by Lucas and the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*. The Boers could have called him Len Tau. If “Yamasani” was from the same clan, his name was most probably Mashiani. The Boers could have called him Jan Mashiani.

As these blacks were illiterate, the American journalists had to spell their names phonetically, this probably being the reason for the misspellings such as

“Leentonro”, “Letorew” or “Letouw”, “Leentouw”, and “Leetouw” which occurred in the daily newspapers of St. Louis. Phonetic spelling may also have resulted in variations such as “Yamasina”, “Yamasani”, “Yamasaria”, and “Yamasini”. Evidence exists that Charles J.P. Lucas got the information for his “official report” from the St. Louis newspapers and in doing so, laid the foundation for the misinterpretation of the two names ever since the report’s first publication in 1905.

A further reason for believing the two runners to be Tswana, is that Gen. Piet Cronjé was from Tswana country. After his surrender at the Battle of Paardeberg, his wife and some of his black servants accompanied him into exile on St. Helena island. Judging from the loyalty of his black workers, they most probably followed him to St. Louis as well. With



them could have been their family and friends including Len Tau and Jan Mashiani. It is even possible that these two had indeed been his personal messengers during the war.

Lucas also erred regarding the third South African in the marathon. Harris, as seen, was not from Transvaal, but the Cape Colony. His initials were given R.W. or B.W. Bill Mallon suggests that his name was Robert. That explains the initial “B”, as Robert often becomes “Bob”.

When the history of South Africa’s participation in the Olympic Games from 1908 until 1960 was documented, no mention was made of any participation in the Olympic tug-of-war event. A Boer team, however, tied in fifth place with the Pan-Hellenic Athletic Club, but this information is not new, therefore it will not be discussed here in full.

CONCLUSION

Research experience has shown that historical information on sport in Africa is very limited. It is hoped that this research will enhance the

historiography of Africans participating in world class sport and will throw more light on Sub-Saharan Africans participating in the modern Olympic Games.

In the light of South Africa’s new dispensation, and the dearth of information on the sporting achievements of its deprived groups, this research intends to contribute towards expanding existing knowledge about these sporting greats who, to date, have been omitted from our sporting history books for nearly a century. It is quite clear from this research that these athletes’ participation in the Olympic Games went unnoticed in their homeland. No mention was ever made in the South African media of their feat, let alone of their participation. Many factors could have contributed to this phenomenon, namely, that their participation was unofficial as the South African Olympic Committee was only formed in January 1908; that the British who controlled sport in the colonies, could have regarded these athletes (colonial born and black) as subordinates; and that the marathon was at that stage an unfamiliar event in South Africa, the first ever being run in Cape Town in August 1907.

This research furthermore expands and hopefully completes, the earlier documentation of South Africa’s participation in the Olympic Movement. It also clarifies the mystery surrounding the participation of the “South Africans” in the 1904 Olympic Games. With the historiography of Black sport in South Africa still in its infancy, this research will make an important contribution to the body of knowledge in this particular field of study and hopefully inspire further contributions.

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