

A History of the Marathon Race—
490 B.C. to 1975
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“Forty kilometers and then some—a marathon history from Pheidippides to Will Rodgers”

GREEK ANTECEDENTS

The marathon race is one of the greatest tests of individual endurance, and, in the western world, has resulted in an extraordinary history of physical prowess, courage, foolhardiness, drama and tragedy. The interesting word “marathon” may be used as a noun to describe any long distance foot race; in a twentieth-century contest, it refers to an endurance contest of twenty-six miles 385 yards. It is also a geographic location in Greece—made famous in 490 B.C. as the “Battle of Marathon.” The word “marathon” may be used as an adjective in describing any phenomenon of great length, and is commonly used in this manner. This paper will deal with the history of the marathon run—from its shrouded ancient origins to the extraordinary 1975 Boston Marathon victory of that New England free spirit—William “Will” Rodgers. The even more perplexing problem of why men and women will spend years of preparation in order to run rapidly and without stopping more than forty-two kilometers will at least be alluded to in this document.

Highly organized competitive sport was invented by the Greeks. Homer’s epic poem, the *Iliad* is a tapestry of sport training and competition. Book XIII, “The funeral rites of Petroclos, and how the games were held in his honour,” is one of literature’s most revealing insights into man’s play and competitive instincts.¹ Later in 776 B.C., the Olympic Games were established to honor the gods, to pay homage to Greek warriors, and to emphasize and formalize a way of living that was to characterize these people for a thousand years. Herodotus immortalized this Greek penchant for sport in Book VIII of his *Histories*, where Greek deserters, brought before the Persians king, were asked what their countrymen were doing at that time.

¹Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by W. H. D. Rouse (New York: A Mentor Book published by the New American Library, 1938), pp. 265-282.

The Arcadians told him that they were keeping the Olympic festival and watching athletic contests and horse-races. The questioner asked what was the prize that they were contending for; and the Arcadians told him about the crown of olive that was to be won. Then Tigranes, son of Artabanus, said a most noble thing, though the king thought him a coward for it: for when he heard that the prize was a garland and not money, he could not hold his peace, but exclaimed in the hearing of all: "alas, Mardonius, what men are these that you have brought us to fight, who hold contests not for money but for the honour of winning'."²

THE ANCIENT LEGEND OF MARATHON

Nowhere in Greek sporting literature is there any mention of a twenty-six mile marathon race. The Olympic multiple stade race probably did not exceed three miles. According to history and legend, the Persian king, Darius attacked Greece to punish Athens for sending aid to the Ionian rebels. Herodotus says that Darius was so angered by the sack of Sardis that, during the rest of his life, he had a herald cry out to him thrice each day at dinner,—“O King, remember the Athenians!” The truth is that Persia was in a full career of conquest, and invasion was inevitable. The first expedition against Greece, 492 B.C., failed; in 490 B.C. the full strength of the Persian army and navy captured the Greek city of Eretria. Then the Persians landed on the plain of Marathon in Attica, prepared to punish Athens. In uncharacteristic fashion, Miltiades and the Assembly decided to leave the city, march out and attack the Persians at once. Before they left the city, says Herodotus [ca. 484?-425 B.C.], the Athenian generals sent off a message of help to Sparta. “The messenger was an Athenian named Pheidippides, a trained runner still in the practice of his profession.”³ He reached Sparta the day after leaving Athens. “Men of Sparta,” he is reported to have said, “the Athenians ask of you to help them, and not to stand by while the most ancient city of Greece is crushed and enslaved by a foreign invader.”⁴

Apparently, Pheidippides (sometimes called Philippides) raced these 150 miles in vain—a rugged route between Athens and Sparta passing through the mountainous country of Arcadia.

²Herodotus, *The Histories of Herodotus of Halicarnosus* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 501-502.

³_____, *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey & Selincourt (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 397.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 398.

The Spartans, celebrating their festival of the Carneia, were unable to send their promised help before the full moon, which was probably six days away. Herodotus goes on to relate that during Pheidippides' return to Athens, he was stopped by the god Pan on Mount Parthenium who promised to help the Athenians. The Greeks apparently believed the courier's message and, again, according to Herodotus, sought the gods' favor with yearly sacrifices and torch races. "After the full moon," says the great Greek story-teller, "two thousand Lacedaemonians came to Athens making so great haste to reach it that they were in Attica on the third day from their leaving Sparta. Albeit they came too late for the battle."⁵ The orator-pamphleteer, Isocrates [436-338 B.C.], in delivering his *Panegyric* before a crowd assembled for the Olympic games in 380 B.C. agreed with Herodotus on the speed of the Spartans, noting that "the Lacedaemonians in three days and as many nights covered 1200 stadia in marching order."⁶

The task of disentangling marathon fact from legend and myth, of seeing through the romance of marathon literature, and of discarding fiction about Greek long-distance running feats is a formidable one. There seems little doubt that a courier was sent from Athens to Sparta . . . and that he returned with the discouraging message of delay by Spartan warriors. At this juncture—the fate of Pheidippides during and after the Battle of Marathon—is puzzling. Hammond's definitive study of the September struggle in 490 B.C. tells us little about the Athenian courier.⁷ Only the singular account of the Greek satirist, Lucian [c. 120?-200?], some six hundred years after the fact, would indicate that Pheidippides was present at the Battle of Marathon and raced to Athens with the victory message. Lucian was reminded of the marathon story, when inadvertently greeting some friends, he said, "Health to you," instead of the more correct and ancient phrase, "Joy to you." He goes on to trace the origin of the latter phrase to:

Philippides, the one who acted as courier, is said to have used it first in our sense when he brought the news of victory from Marathon and addressed the magistrates in session when they were anxious how the battle had ended ; "Joy to you, we've won," he said, and

⁵Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by A. D. Godley, Vol. 3 (London: William Heinemann, 1928), p. 275.

⁶Isocrates, trans. by George Norlin, Vol. 1 (London: William Heinemann. Ltd., 1928), pp. 171, 173.

⁷N. G. L. Hammond, "The Campaign and the Battle of Morothon," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 88 (1968), pp. 13-57.

there and then he died, breathing his last breath with that "Joy to you."⁸

This is the only mention by an ancient writer declaring that it was Pheidippides who raced from Marathon to Athens. If one accepts this story, it must also be accepted that the messenger Pheidippides, or Philippides, raced the three hundred mile round trip between Athens and Sparta, marched to Marathon, and after the struggle, ran himself to death on his return to Athens. It seems unlikely.

Aristophanes [c. 448-388 B.C.?], wrote the *Clouds* in 423 B.C., only sixty-seven years after the famous battle. The Athenian dramatist dwells at length on a certain Strepsiades and his vulgar and dissolute son, Pheidippedes. It is unlikely that Aristophanes would have taken the name of the heroic Marathon courier for such unsavory a character as his Pheidippides of the *Clouds*. Lucian had attributed both runs to Pheidippedes, but received no encouragement or confirmation in this position. Pliny the Elder [c. 23-79 A.D.], in his *Naturalis Historia*, calls Pheidippides's run from Athens to Sparta "a mighty feat."⁹ Plutarch [c. 46?-120?] is more specific. The Greek biographer, in a famous discussion of Athenian military prowess as contrasted with Athenian wisdom (called "DeGloria Atheniensium), elaborated :

Again, the news of the battle of Marathon Thersippus of Eroeadae brought back, as Heracleides Ponticus related; but most historians declare that it was Euclides who ran in full armor, hot from the battle, and, bursting in at the doors of the first men of the State, could only say, "Hail! we are victorious" and straightaway expired.¹⁰

PHEIDIPPIDES—DUBIOUS DOUBLE MARATHON RUNNER

There seems sufficient evidence to state that the Greek professional, Pheidippides, made the round trip from Athens to Sparta, but not the more famous, and shorter trial from Marathon to Greece. Harris relies heavily on Plutarch in stating that the Athenian Euclides, upon returning to Athens from abroad after the army had marched out to Marathon, "ran out

⁸Lucian, trans. by K. Kilburn, Vol. 6 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 177. Classicists identify this passage as Lucian (Prolapsu 3) or "A Slip of the tongue in greeting" by Lucian.

⁹Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. by H. Rackham, Vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943), p. 561.

¹⁰Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. by Frank Cole Bobbit, Vol. 4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 503, 505.

to take his place in the ranks, arrived just in time to fight in the battle, and then ran back to announce the victory in Athens, dying as he did so.¹¹ A “modern confusion,” says Gardiner, has resulted in the wrong man receiving credit for victory run from the plain of Marathon to Athens.¹² Ehrenberg goes further by labeling as “romantic invention” the idea that the same warrior-athlete made both runs.¹³ Herodotus makes no mention of a messenger from Marathon to Athens—a courier who shouted “nike !” (victory !) with his last breath as he fell dead in the agora. The modern historian, Swain, conjectured that “Miltiades had every reason to let the city learn of his victory at the earliest possible moment . . . yet we find no reference to [a] runner until more than six hundred years later.”¹⁴ The whole marathon race is commemorative of a legend of doubtful authenticity. Provost C. Henry Daniel of Worcester College, Oxford, concluded that “there is no mention of the presence of Pheidippides at Marathon, nor of any special messenger carrying the news of the victory to Athens.”¹⁵ Another scholar, writing in 1908, is of the opinion that Plutarch’s six hundred year-old version is correct—that a certain Thersippus brought the news of the battle, expiring after he announced the victory. Lucian, also writing long after the fact, credited Pheidippides with both memorable runs. “A casual error of memory,” on Lucian’s part, said this same early 20th century writer in a letter to *The Times* of London.¹⁶

Noted historian, W. C. Lawson, writing during the American marathon “craze” of 1909, declared the alleged death run of Pheidippides as both untrue and absurd. “Even as a teleological myth,” he says, “this is hardly a success . . . it gives no encouragement to defenders of the heart-breaking long run.”¹⁷ Three scholars answered Lawson’s accusation, but were more concerned with the accuracy of Greek translations, proper sources and spelling, rather than the central matter of a Marathon to Athens run.¹⁸ Herodotus never heard of Pheidippides, says Professor Lawson, in a reply to his three colleagues. “If, sixty years after the battle, any such tale had been current, surely the chronicler would have heard it from his Athenian

¹¹H. A. Harris, *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 76.

¹²E. Norman Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 140.

¹³Victor Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates* (London Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1968), p. 412 On.

¹⁴Joseph Ward Swain, *The Ancient World, Vol. 1* (New York, Harper and Bros., 1950), p. 379.

¹⁵“Pheidippides,” *The Times* (London), July 28, 1906.

¹⁶“Pheidippides,” *The Times* (London), July 28, 1908, p. 10.

¹⁷“The birth of a legend,” *The Nation*, 88 (May 27, 1909), 533.

¹⁸“The original marathon runner,” *The Nation*, 88 (June 3, 1909), 559.

friends, and used it to gild his rather meagre record. . . .”¹⁹
Poetic license and nineteenth century romanticism are the culprits in crediting Pheidippides with the fabulous marathon to Athens run.²⁰

THE MARATHON AS NINETEENTH CENTURY ROMANTIC IMAGERY

The European Romantic Movement began in the late eighteenth century, continuing well into the next period. The heroic struggle for independence by the Greeks, culminating in full liberation from Turkey in 1832, created a significant stir of romantic sympathy for the Greeks, and, especially, a renaissance of ancient Greek scholarship. Lord Byron [1788-1824] had participated in these early struggles and wrote in impassioned tones about the glory that was Greece. Standing amidst the Marathon battleground, he cried:

The mountains look on Marathon—
and Marathon looks on the sea ;
and musing there an hour alone,
I dream'd that Greece might still be free,
For standing on the Persian's grave,
I could not deem myself a slave.²¹

In 1823, Byron set out to join Greek insurgents, and died of fever at Missolonghi in April, 1824. Several years earlier he had finished his series of cantos, *Childe Harold*. In his youth Byron had toured Greece, and he remembered the country as a place of romance and unending beauty. Later, longing for Greek freedom, he exclaimed, “Ah ! Greece ! they love thee least who owe thee most—.” In his Second Canto, Byron is shaken by “gray marathon” :

The sun, the soil, but not the slave, the same;
Unchanged in all except its foreign lord—
Preserved alike its bounds and boundless fame
The Battle-field, where Persia's victim horde
First bowed beneath the brunt of Hellas' sword,
As on the morn to distant Glory dear
When Marathon became a magic word ;²²

Robert Browning [1812-1889], English poet, had little formal education, apart from a year studying Greek at University

¹⁹A retreat from Marathon," *The Nation*, 88 (June 17, 1909). 602.

²⁰See Francis G. Allinson, "The original 'marathon runner'," *The Classical Weekly*, 24 (March 16, 1931). 152; also his *Greek Lands and Letters* (New York, Houghton Mifflin Co. 1931), pp. 158-159.

²¹Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, T. G. Steffan and W. W. Pratt (edition), Vol. 2 (Austin University of Texas Press, 1957) p. 312.

²²_____, *Childe Harold* (London, George Bell and Sons, 1893), Second Canto, 139, p. 64.

College, London. Yet his experiments in diction and rhythm made him an important influence on twentieth-century poetry. Browning's dramatic idyll "Pheidippides" gives credit to the Athenian foot racer for both the Athens to Sparta 150 mile run, as well as the shorter "Marathon" from the battleground to Athens. The poet pays tribute to Greece and Pheidippides:

First I salute this soil of the blessed, river and rock!
 Gods of my birthplace, daemons and heroes, honor to
 all!
 Then I name thee, claim thee for our patron,
 co-equal in praise.

"Run, Pheidippides run and race, reach Sparta for aid!" implores an animated Browning. The familiar story of this "best runner of Greece"—as Miltiades called him—culminates in a blending of heroic fact and legend:

Unforeseeing one! Yes, he fought on the Marathon day:
 So, when Persia was dust, all cried "To Akropolis!
 Run, Pheidippides, one race more! the mead [prize] is
 thy due!
 'Athens is saved, thank Pan,' go shout!" He flung
 down his shield,
 Ran like fire once more: and the space 'twixt the
 Fennel-field
 And Athens was stubble again, a field which a fire
 runs through,
 Till in he broke: "Rejoice, we conquer!" Like wine
 through clay,
 Joy in his blood bursting his heart, he died—the bliss!
 So, to this day, when friend meets friend, the word of
 salute
 Is still "Rejoice!"—his word which brought rejoicing
 indeed.
 So is Pheidippides happy forever,—the noble strong
 man
 Who could race like a God, bear the face of a God,
 whom a God loved so well;
 He saw the land saved he had helped to save, and was
 suffered to tell
 Such tidings, yet never decline, but, gloriously as he
 began,
 So to end gloriously—once to shout, thereafter be mute:
 "Athens is saved!"—Pheidippides lies in the
 shout for his meed.²³

Marathon poetry of less epic proportions continued into the present century. Alice E. Hanscom's "The Mound at Mara-

²³Robert Browning, "Pheidippides," in *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, edited by Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, Vol. II [New York: George D. Sproul, 1898], pp. 117-114.

than,"²⁴ Fred Jacob's "The Marathon,"²⁵ and "The Athenian Battle-hymn at Marathon,"²⁶ by Sir Francis Doyle, are examples. A recent novel—a skillful blending of ancient history and poetic license—is *Marathon* by Alan Lloyd. The author calls Pheidippides' acknowledged run to Sparta "a feat in the best tradition of Greek athleticism."²⁷ The author conjectures that Pheidippides returned from Sparta and was in the Athenian phalanx at Marathon "wielding a burnished blade." Lloyd concludes his tale by quoting Browning's heroic version of the exhausted Pheidippides' race from Marathon to Athens, the victory cry, and death. This last and most famous story has little historic substance, but is of enormous romantic proportions. Interesting historical vignettes continue to be associated with marathon. For example, in 1895, a M. Dragoumis found in Salamis a stone which had long served as a doorstep to a peasant's cottage, and which was inscribed with the epitaph:

Batling for Greece the Athenians at Marathon leveled
the power of Persians, wearers of gold. With myriads
three hundred here once fought from Peloponnesus
thousands four.²⁸

MARATHON FEATS THROUGH THE AGES

Motivated by pride, patriotism, profit, glory, curiosity, and even by personal demons, men (and a few women) have performed fabulous trials of marathoning through the ages. Some stories are untrue—impossible, others are without substantiation, while many contains degrees of veracity from the possible to absolute fact. The ancient scribe, Pliny, tells of Alexander the Great's courier Philonides and the Spartan runner Anystis, both of whom ran the 148 miles inside the Colosseum, while it is reported that "a boy of eight ran 68 miles between noon and evening." Guillaume Depping's revealing *Wonders of Bodily Strength and Skill* tells of Turkish foot-runners traveling the 120 miles from Constantinople to Adrianople in 24 hours. He also describes the Abbe Nicquet as the swiftest traveller of the sixteenth century, "who reached Rome from

²⁴Alice E. Hanscom, "The Mound at Marathon," *Chautauquan*. 31 [September, 1900]. 625.

²⁵Fred Jacob, "The Marathon," *St. Nicholas*, 40 (November, 1912), 52-55.

²⁶Sir Francis H. Doyle in M. A. Hamilton, *Greece, A Short History* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 61.

²⁷Alan Lloyd, *Marathon* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 47.

²⁸See G. W. Botsford and E. G. Sihler (editors) *Hellenic Civilization* (New York: Octagon Books Inc., 1965), p. 200.

Paris in six days four hours, although the distance was 350 leagues.”

Modern long-distance running or pedestrianism as it was called originated in Great Britain in the seventeenth century. From *The Diary of Samuel Pepys for the Year A.D. 1663* to today's countless British cross-country, road, and marathon races, these people, favored by climate and geography, have led the way in distance running. Two English footmen, running in Windsor Park in 1700, covered 22 miles in 21/2 hours, while a few years later the teen-age Conrad Weiser ran footraces against Pennsylvania Indians. *The Secret Diary of William Byrd* reveals an early eighteenth century footrace of three hours “for a wager of two guineas.” The infamous “Pennsylvania Walking Purchase of 1737” saw the Delaware Indians cheated out of thousands of square miles as three highly trained white men raced 70 miles through dense forest in an agreed-upon eighteen-hour marathon. The legendary Foster Powell ran the 50 miles between London and Bath in seven hours the year after the 1763 Treaty of Paris. He continued running all over England for the next thirty years. At age sixty, he won a heavy wager for running the 402 mile roundtrip between London and York in five days 15 1/4 hours.

Marathon-like walks and runs punctuated the leisure hours of both English gentlemen and the working class for the entire nineteenth century. Largely responsible for the phenomena was Captain Allardyce Barclay who walked 1000 miles in 1000 hours—a continuous feat accomplished between June 1 and July 14, 1809. George Wilson, a tax collector, better known as the Blackheath Pedestrian, walked 1000 miles in 20 days in the year 1815. John Stewart [1749-1822], “The Celebrated Walking Stewart,” toured on foot Europe, North America, and the Near East. Well-educated and philosophically inclined, the tall and handsome eccentric “refused to have his life recorded because his were the travels of the mind, and his object the discovery of the polarity of moral truth.” A rash of American distance running performed on horse tracks begin in 1824. Hoboken, New Jersey and Union, Long Island, were the scenes of dozens of such affairs till the eve of war. *The American Farmer* of October 3, 1828, reported that a certain Cootes had broken Captain Barclay's record and logged 1250 miles in 1000 consecutive hours. The feat was surpassed several more times in the next half century. *The American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine*, during this antebellum period is filled with in-

teresting and extraordinary marathon feats—mostly professional affairs.

Joshua Newsam was reported to have won \$1000.00 by walking 1000 miles in 18 days in Philadelphia during November, 1830. Perhaps the most implausible adventure is that of the Norwegian sailor—Ernst Mensen—who ran from Paris to Moscow in less than 14 days [1831], and a round trip from Constantinople to Calcutta in two months [1836]. Sport magazines and New York City newspapers were filled with pedestrian feats during the 1840s and 1850s. Ten, fifteen, and twenty mile races—carefully supervised by officials and gamblers—produced nearly modern performances. Foreigners, Americans, and American Indians were lowering records and earning handsome purses. *The Diary of Philip Hone*, *Spirit of the Times*, *Bell's Life in London*, and many other publications record man's seeming endless desire to run—for whatever reasons might engender the human species to such enterprises.

For some twenty years, between 1870 and 1890, English and American sport aficionados were caught up in sixday-go-as-you-please contests. Profitable, exotic, and frequently dangerously exhausting, the names of Edward Payson Weston and Daniel O'Leary became synonymous with running 500 miles or more in six days and six nights. Hundreds of thousands of people paid from fifty cents to two dollars to see the sight. A score of "500" men emerged during the age until finally tiny George Littlewood raced 623 3/4 miles in 125 hours, 34 minutes, resting a total of 16 hours 26 minutes. It was all done in December of 1888, and on the little sawdust-tanbark track inside Madison Square Garden—an authentic Olympian marathon feat.

Both Weston and O'Leary walked on into the twentieth century, posting significant times even though well past seventy years of age. The unbelievable Weston walked the American continent during the spring of 1910. In England, 1921, George Cummings walked 420 miles from London to Edinburgh in 82 hours. The year before, 81 year-old Daniel O'Leary walked from Philadelphia to Atlantic City in 12 hours. During 1928 and 1929, entrepreneur Charles C. ("Cash and Carry") Pyle, organized cross-continent "Bunyun Derbies." The bizarre affairs—well orchestrated to catch the imagination (and monies) of thousands of Americans—culminated in an Oklahoma Indian's close victory over Joe Salo of Passaic, New Jersey. Nineteen-year-old Andy Payne staggered into New York City on June 1, 1928—90 days after leaving Los Angeles. He collected \$25,000,

Salo, \$10,000, eight others split unevenly the remaining \$9,500. "The other 45 [finishers] received only a verbal citation for their guts and staying power."

Edward Payson Weston died at 90 years in 1929—the same year that Abraham Lincoln Monteverde, 60-year-old bookbinder, walked from New York to San Francisco in 79 days. By this date, the compulsive South African runner, Arthur Newton, was setting records at ultra-marathon distances—50 miles in 6 hours and 100 miles in 14 hours, and 152 1/3 miles in 24 hours—all when past his fiftieth birthday. During the spring of 1960, two British soldiers, and a Russian medical doctor, Dr. Barbara Moore, walked across the American continent. Fifty-year-old John Sinclair walked 216 miles in 47 hours 42 minutes without stopping once; he also walked from John O'Groats to Land's End (600 miles) in 19 days 22 hours.²⁹ Two years earlier, in 1967, he walked 900 miles from Cape Town to Pretoria in 23 days. In 1964, Don Shepherd, another South African, walked and jogged alone across the United States in 73 days only to have his 1964 record broken by 8 days in 1969, by speed runner and British Olympian, Bruce Tulloh—whose 64 days, 21 hours, and 30 minutes remains the record at the present time.

Professional distance runner, Australian Bill Emmerton, has run some 150,000 miles in his eventful and bizarre career. In 1968, he ran across Death Valley, and repeated it again four months later. "Man believed sane runs through Death Valley," headlined the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*. In October of 1969, John Tarrant of South Africa, ran 400 laps on a track at Walton-on-Thames, England, in 12:31:10—a world record for 100 miles. It was promptly broken by 16 minutes in 1970 by Dave Box of South Africa. America's greatest super distance runner is Ted Corbitt, New York City physiotherapist, who has accumulated a tenth of a million miles in 35 years of running. Clarence De Mar, John A. Kelley, John J. Kelly, Nicholas Costes, Browning Ross, Lou Gregory, are other Americans that probably have run 100,000 miles or more. There must be others. One of the greatest runs occurred on November 4, 1973, when Ron Bentley of England ran 161.3 miles in 24 hours, beating Hayward's record by two miles. That same month, an Irish-born Australian, Tony Rafferty, 34, ran 3686 miles from Fremantle on the west coast of Australia to Surfers Paradise on the east coast to break the 44-year-old world record by 21 miles. He did

²⁹See Harold H. Hart, *Physical Feats That Made History* (New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 332-3.

it in 74 days, averaging nearly 50 miles a day. In 1974, incorrigible Bill Emmerton ran 21 miles down and then up to the top of the Grand Canyon in 7 hours 45 minutes. Lastly, in March of 1975, a South African Kalahari bushman easily outdistanced a champion distance runner in a ten-miler across the desert.³⁰ Tokkelos, in his job as game tracker for Stoffel le Riche, chief ranger of the Kalahari Gamepart, regularly runs eight hours nonstop, without food or water over soft desert sand and under a murderously hot sun. When tested by a physical education scientist at Stellenbosch University, the comment was made: "Staggering—his potential is simply staggering."

THE FIRST AMERICAN MARATHON, SEPTEMBER 19, 1896

The fall meeting of the Knickerbocker Athletic Club took place in New York City's Columbia Oval on September 19, 1896. Yet the most historic event of the track meet was taking place in Stamford, Connecticut, exactly 25 miles away. As early as August 27, the *Stamford Advocate* showed considerable interest in this first American "Marathon."³¹ World records were broken in the 600 yard dash and the quarter-mile hurdles, but it was the marathon finish that captured people's imagination. At 3:51 P.M. a woman screamed, "They're here! They're coming!"

The cry was taken up in the grandstand. Women who knew only that the first race of its kind ever held in this country was nearing a finish, waved their handkerchiefs and fairly screamed with excitement. . . . There was a pandemonium of joy. Judges stopped their work ; athletes found time to become spectators.³²

Pale-faced John J. McDermott of the Pastime Athletic Club had overcome fatigue and poor weather in 3 hours 25 minutes, 55 3/5 seconds, a half hour slower than the Athens Olympic victor of several months earlier. "The crowd was howling itself hoarse"—oblivious of the slow time—as the first two athletes circled the track and crossed the finish line. After all, history has been made—the first marathon race in America.

³⁰See "Track finds A Prospect In the Bush," *New York Times*, March 22, 1975, p. 6, Sports Section.

³¹Becoming Classic," *Stamford Advocate*, August 27, 1896.

³²Great Athletic Records," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1896, p. 6.

THE MODERN OLYMPIC MARATHON 1896-1972

Baron Pierre de Coubertin [1863-1937] conceived the idea of a modern version of the Olympic Games, but it was a French compatriot, Michel Breal [1832-1915], who thought of including a marathon race at the first Athens Games in April of 1896. Two years earlier, at the first meeting of the International Olympic Congress, delegate Breal "sent word to Baron de Coubertin recalling the legendary feat of Pheidippides and offering a trophy for a race to be run over the same course. . . ."³³ Coubertin's autobiography confirms that "the marathon race was the creation of an illustrious member of the Institut de France."³⁴ Breal, the brilliant semanticist and student of Greek mythology, probably had no idea how completely captivating his marathon idea would become. The world soon read of the Athens marathon victory by the Greek shepherd, Spiridion Louis; little was heard about the efforts of a certain Melpomene to enter this first Olympic marathon race. Her request was refused; accompanied by bicyclists, she allegedly covered the 40 kilometers from Marathon to Athens in 4 1/2 hours. The Greek paper, *Akropolis*, commented that "The Olympic Committee deserves to be reprimanded, because it was discourteous in refusing a lady's nomination. We can assure those concerned that none of the participants would have had any objections."³⁵

All the Olympic marathon victors and their stories are included in John Hopkins' *The Marathon*.³⁶ The marathon distance in Paris, 1900, was 40,260 meters; in 1904, 40 kilometers, and at the unofficial 1906 Games in Athens the distance of about 26 miles was, apparently, slightly longer than the first Olympic race. The most famous of all Olympic marathon runs was the London affair of 1908. Pietro Dorando collapsed time after time within yards of the finish yarn. A compassionate official helped the semiconscious Italian across the line; Johnnie Hayes was declared the winner and the western world became acutely aware of the marathon race. The distance of this race was 42.263 kilometers or 26 miles 385 yards. It seems that British officials, desirous of accommodating the King of England, started the race at Windsor Castle and finished at the Royal

³³ Bill Henry, *An Approved History of the Olympic Games* (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1948), p. 34.

³⁴ Pierre de Coubertin, *Memories Olympique* (Lausanne: Bureau international de pedagogie, sportive, 1931), p. 40.

³⁵ See Eva Foldes, "Women at the Olympics," *International Olympic Academy Proceedings 1964*, pp. 112-113.

³⁶ John Hopkins, *The Marathon* (London, Stanley Paul, 1961).

box in the Olympic Stadium—a distance of precisely 26 miles 385 yards.³⁷ The Queen of England awarded Dorando a special medal ; his courage and deportment captured the sporting public. At Charing-cross station, just before departing London, Dorando spoke to the London *Times* representative and a large crowd, pointing out the kindness of the English people, especially the Queen. “As the train left the station, the Italian national air was sung with great fervor.”³⁸

K. K. McArthur, South African policeman, won a 1912 Olympic marathon race of 24 miles, 1725 yards in 2 hours, 36 minutes, 54.8 seconds. The remarkable Finn, Hannes Kolehmainen won an elongated 26 1/2 miler in 2 hours 32 minutes 35.8 seconds at the Antwerp Olympics of 1920. Paris in 1924 witnessed the 26 mile 385 yard distance, and another Finn, 40-year-old Albin Stenroos, winning in 2 hours 41 minutes, 22.6 seconds. This marathon distance would remain standard to the present day. Olympic marathon champions, thereafter, have been : El Ouafi of Algeria in 1928 (2:32:57.0), Zabala of Argentina in 1932 (2:31 :36.0), and Kitei Son of Korea/Japan at Berlin in 2:29-19.2 seconds. The Games of the XIIth and XIIIth Olympiads were never held due to war. At London in 1948, an utterly exhausted Ettiene Gailly entered the Olympic stadium almost at a standstill, was passed by Cabrera of Argentina and Tom Richards of England—the South American winning in 2 hours 34 minutes 51.6 seconds. Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia won gold medals at 5000 and 10,000 meters, and after several days rest won the 1952 Olympic marathon in 2 hours 23 minutes 3.2 seconds. The element of speed had abruptly entered the traditional endurance event. Another Algerian, Alain Mimoun, won in 1956, running through the streets of Melbourne in 2 hours 25 minutes. Abebe Bikila, “The Lion of Ethiopia,”—the only double winner in Olympic marathon history—sailed through the 1960 Rome race in 2 hours 15 minutes 16.2 seconds and ran a magnificent 2 hours 12 minutes 11.2 seconds in Tokyo. Mexico City in 1968 was the splendid scenery for another Ethiopian—Mamo Walde—who ran 2 hours 20 minutes 26.4 seconds through the city’s thin mile-high air. The United States, after 64 years of trying, was represented by the 1921 Olympic marathon champion—Yale University’s Frank Shorter in 2 hours 12 minutes 19.7 seconds. No pattern emerges except years of hard, intelligent work, gradual adap-

³⁷See “The Marathon Race” in *The Fourth Olympiad London 1904 Official Report*, Theodore Andrea Cook (ed.) (London: The British Olympic Association, 1909), pp. 68-84.

³⁸“Dorando’s Departure,” (London) *The Times*, August 10, 1908, p. 4.

tation to a variety of external/internal stresses, and the slow apprehension by physicians and physiologists that a marathoner's greatness is all of the above plus the strong possibility of a genetically inherited talent.

THE ILLUSTRIOUS BOSTON MARATHON 1897-1975

J. J. McDermott won the first Boston Athletic Association Marathon race on April 19, 1897, in 2 hours 55 min. 10 sec. AAU chief, James E. Sullivan, recalled that the fifteen starters "were at that time considered fit candidates for an insane asylum at the idea of running twenty-five miles."³⁹ Senior sports editor of *The Boston Globe*, Jerry Nason, has documented in capsule form every winner's performance from that first year through the 1965 record run of Japan's Morio Shigematsu (2 hours 16 min. 33 sec.).⁴⁰ Famous and colorful names and events are legion in this classic. Drama and pathos, a whole range of human emotions and experiences are wrapped up in this marathon-second only to the Olympic race. For example, in 1907 the talented nineteen-year-old Onondago Indian, Tom Longboat, elected to sprint through South Farmingham—only six miles into the race. It was a wise move as he had just managed to get past a railroad grade crossing as a long freight rolled by. The rest of the field was "log-jammed for two minutes." Longboat won by 3 1/2 minutes. Clarence H. DeMar won the 1911 classic, and won it six more times. The 1923 race, won by DeMar, was the last at the short 25 mile distance. DeMar promptly won the 1924 version over a 26 mile, 209 yard course, and a 26 mile 385 yard course in 1927. Leslie Pawson in '33, '38, and '41, John A. Kelly in '35 and '45, Ellison "Tarzan" Brown in '36, and Gerard Cote in '40, '43, '44, and 1948, were several of the great pre and post war winners.

The foreign "invasion" began earnestly in 1946 with Stylianos Kyriakides, Yun Bok Suh in '47, Leanderson in '49, Koreans, many Japanese, a Guatamalan, and an army of Finns. Anti Viskari won in 1956 (2 :14 :14), his countryman, Oksanen (2:17:56) was third. Two brilliant Americans, John "The Younger" Kelley (2:14:33) and Nick Costes (2:18:01) were second and fourth. Road remeasurements found the course 1183 yards short; it was lengthened and the meteoric Kelley

³⁹James E. Sullivan, *Marathon Running* (New York: American Sports Pub. Co., 1909), p. 101.

⁴⁰Jerry Nason, *The Story of the Boston Marathon* (Boston, The Boston Globe, 1965) .

promptly won the '57 classic in 2:20:05. Mihalic of Yugoslavia took the 1958 prize in 2:25:54; Oksanen returned to win the '59, '61, and 1962 races—all in fast times. Paavo Kotila, another Finn, won a 2:20:54 race in 1960, Belgium's Vandendriessche in 1963 and 1964 (2:18:58/2:19:59). Morio Sigematsu led an awesome Japanese sweep of 1-2-3-5-6 places; his 2:16:33 was a record in 1965.

In nearly unbelievable precision, Japanese marathoners took first through fourth places in the 1966 Boston classic—Kenji Kimihara (2:17:11) only seconds ahead of the other three. In 1967, Dave McKenzie of New Zealand had to run a fast 2 :15 :45 to beat New York City's Tom Laris by a minute. This was also the year of the “mysterious entry,” “K. Switzer of Syracuse.” Kathy—the first known woman to run the race—had great difficulty with officials, made national headlines and was a portent of the direction the marathon race would take. Surprising and popular was the 1968 victory of Wesleyan senior, Ambrose J. Burfoot (2:22:17). Hiroshima's Unetani lay to rest the notion of any other country but Japan as the world's greatest marathoning specialists during the 1960s. His 2:13:49 in 1969 was a record. Significant was the “mass marathon” syndrome, as 1152 men (and a few women not officially included) chose the protracted difficulties, challenges, and satisfactions of a twenty-six miler. Ron Hill of England, 31-year-old chemist and world champion, parlayed a scientifically harsh training program with a cool, moist, wind-blown day to win the 1970 race in a breath-taking 2 hours 10 min. 30 sec.—the second person in history to average under five minutes a mile. Eamon O'Reilly of the U.S.A. flew 2:11:12 in second place. Alvero Mejia of Columbia (2:18:45) beat Pat McMahon by only five seconds in 1971, while youthful Olavi Suomalainen of Finland took the 1972 prize in 2:15:39. Jon Anderson of Eugene, Oregon, ran an intelligent and courageous 2:16:03 in 1973; another American college student, Neil Cusak of Ireland, won the '74 race in 2 :13 :39. He had to run fast to beat the very strong Tom Fleming (2 :14 :25). Marathon fever was spreading rapidly, and despite time restrictions put on the race, 1705 men and 36 women officially ran that year's Boston marathon.

Back in December of 1967, towering 6'2”, 160 pound, Irish-born Australian, Derek Clayton, became the first person to run a full 26 mile 385 yard marathon in under 130 minutes—a seemingly impossible task. He won the prestige Fukuoka Marathon in 2:09:36. A year later, “this massive muscleman”

ran to a 2 :08 :33 all-time clocking at Antwerp in May of 1969.⁴¹ Few would have thought that William “Will” Rodgers of Wesleyan University and Boston College would join this charmed circle even though he had won several major road races that spring—and in outstanding time. Cool weather and a significant 20 mph helpful breeze conspired to keep the 1975 marathon leaders from running ordinary times through the various check points. “At 10 miles I knew it was too fast. At 17 miles I was convinced of it,” said the free-spirited winner. He plunged onward, through fatigue barriers, never sure for a moment that he would finish, let alone win. “When I heard the time [2:09:55] I didn’t believe it. I still don’t. It’s a dream,” blinked the unfettered 27-year-old.⁴² Liane Winter of Wolfsburg, Germany ran 2:42:33—an incredible world’s record for women. It was a day for records; 49 women entered the race while “in excess of 2000 men,” raced, ran, jogged, and plodded from Hopkington to the Prudential Center in Copley Square, Boston. Steve Hoag ran 2 :11:54, Tom Fleming (2 :12 :05), Tom Howard (2 :13 :23), Ron Hill (2 :13 :28) and fifty more under 2 hours 25 minutes. “There’s no athletic event like it,” said Johnny Kelley, 1957 winner. His 2:34:11 was good for 167th place. Kelly, Sr. (no relation), 68 years, was in his 99th marathon, Keizo Yamada of Japan, winner of this same B.A.A. race twenty-two years earlier, raced 2 hours 34 min. 54 sec., and, nearly beyond comprehension, Bob Hall pushed a wheel-chair all the way in 2:58 !

THE PRESENT STATUS OF THE SPORT

The “Marathon Craze” of 1908-1912 that swept the Continent and North America⁴³ was confined to a handful of professional long-distance runners. This small fraternity of marathon artisans bears little resemblance to the army of running zealots, the thousands of marathon devotees in America and Europe today. “*Runner’s World* noted that in 1968 there were 38 marathons held in the U. S.; in 1974, there were 135.”⁴⁴ The nature of running 26 miles without stopping, and its mass popularity, makes the effort one fraught with hazards. As

⁴¹ “Briton shatters marathon record,” *The Boston Globe*, April 21, 1970, p. 1, also Dave Prokop, “Derek Clayton,” *Runner’s World*, 6 (January, 1971), 14-20. The Antwerp course may have been short.

⁴² “Will” Rodgers in John Ahern, “Win, record surprised Rodgers, too,” *The Boston Evening Globe*, April 22, 1975, p. 37.

⁴³ See John Lucas, “The Professional Marathon Craze In America, 1908-1909,” *U.S. Track Coaches Quarterly Review* (December, 1968). 31-36.

⁴⁴ *Track and Field News*, 28 (June, 1975). p. 43.

long ago as 1948, correspondent Willy Meisel held the view that the marathon race—"fathered by a sentimental classical scholar, and nursed by headline-hungry journalists, should never have been introduced into athletic contests."⁴⁵ There is some truth here, yet the fascination and challenge remains for increasing numbers, and with long, loving, and correct physical preparation, a surprisingly wide range of people may aspire to and succeed in running "forty kilometers and then some."

Encapsulated in this 2-5 hour run are an astonishing variety of individual experiences. The agonistic struggle, self-fulfillment, progress toward fitness, recovery from illness, and the search for beauty through both pain and pleasure are all valid reasons given by men and women. Pain is an absolutely integral part of a marathon runner's endeavor. And yet, as Francis W. Keenan, sport philosopher, says, "Even painful experience, both physical and mental, can be beautiful. When the distasteful can be perceived as a means for further development and cultivating an experience, it may be viewed as aesthetic and enjoyable."⁴⁶ Jonah J. "Bud" Greenspan, author and television producer, asked a recent Boston Marathon finisher why he had run the torturous 26 mile 385 yard distance without hope of victory. "Man," said the nineteen-year-old, "I finished!"⁴⁷ A. E. H. Winter, in his history of England's Poly Marathon race, is convinced that, for a few, it is an attempt at immortality. "And Hope is still the answer that Encouragement has given to us," he concludes. "The Hope that men will continue to come in peace, inspired only by a simple wish—to see their names engraved upon a silver statue forever."⁴⁸

A plethora of marathon races take place in most parts of the world—and this does not include the feats of informal, non-competitive wonders from East Africa, the Japanese salt-flat runner-peasants, and those tireless joggers, the Taramahua Indians. Institutionalized marathon races exist today in all parts of the world and on all continents. The rationale ranges from the ridiculous to the sublime. "Real-life Walter Mitty success stories," said one writer in attempting to evaluate the accumulated fortitude he had witnessed in a single marathon race.⁴⁹ One sports writer pointed out that most Boston runners will

⁴⁵Willy Meisel, "The Birth of the Marathon," *World Sport* (1948), 16.

⁴⁶Francis W. Keenan, "The athletic contest as a 'tragic' form of art," *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 10 (1975), 40.

⁴⁷Bud Greenspan, "The Marathon," *The Olympian*, 1 (February, 1975), 13.

⁴⁸A. E. H. Winter, *From the Legend to the Living* (n.p., 1969), p. 10.

⁴⁹Barry Stavro, "26 miles—one stop at a time." *Yankee Magazine* (April, 1973), 131.

arrive early “because this is important, because this probably is the biggest day of his entire year.”⁵⁰ George Sheehan, remarkable runner, physician, philosopher, sees the race as a form of physical, but especially spiritual endurance. The marathon is a microcosm of life, he says.

The marathoner can experience the drama of everyday existence so evident to the artist and poet. For him all emotions are heightened. . . . I believe every human must have this capacity [to endure] and could find it if he tried. And there is no better place to discover it than a marathon. For the truth is that every man in a marathon is a survivor or nothing, including the winner. . . . I do not intend to pause, or rest, or rust. Descendants of Ulysses . . . I will survive.⁵¹

Clarence DeMar, grandest old man of the sport, and marathon marvel, put it just as eloquently, no less honestly, just as accurately, when he told *Boston Herald* columnist, Bill Cunningham, that training for and running in marathons “is no cheap and passing emotion.”

It’s a supreme feeling of perfection and closeness to the Infinite I can’t express very well . . . To me it’s more than a race. It’s a very personal thing—a sense of supreme well being.⁵²

⁵⁰Leigh Montville, “They brace for longest day,” *The Boston Globe*, April 20, 1875.

⁵¹Oreo Sheehan, “The Boston Marathon: 3 hours for the race, but like a lifetime for the runners,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1975, Sport Section, p. 2.

⁵²Clarence DeMar in Bill Cunningham, “Marathon more than race to DeMar,” *Boston Herald*, June 7 (?), 1958.