

THE MEMORABLE FIRST OLYMPIC MARATHON

By Heiner Gillmeister, Peter Lovesey & Alan Marder

A FEW INCHES OF NEW INFORMATION

INTRODUCTION:

Uniting under a single cover all the available data of the outstanding event of the pristine 1896 Olympic Games is highly commendable in itself, but before attempting any such thing the editor of the *Journal of Olympic History* would have done well to announce the project to the whole community of Olympic historians. Had he done so, the collection would now feature yet another account by an eye-witness, namely that left by the Olympic lawn-tennis champion, the Irishman John Pius Boland in his unpublished diary which came to light some time before the Atlanta Games in 1994.¹

Boland describes the arrival of the competitors from the view-point of a knowledgeable spectator in the stadium. Like others, he relates the cannon shot which, he knew, would be fired as soon as the first runner reached the outskirts of the city², the crowds' going into raptures, the roar of their voices reinforced by those coming from the multitudes occupying the hills, the Greek flags suddenly produced from nowhere, and the two Greek princes who followed Louis on his last lap in the stadium³. However, Boland gives a number of details absent from all other accounts.

He informs us that, more precisely, the cannon was fired when the first runner passed the "barracks on

the Marathon road", and that this road curved near the stadium, the implication being that the spectators' view must have been obstructed. He mentions several false alarms, one of which being caused by a cyclist. This is confirmed by the anonymous writer of *The Sporting Life*⁴, and Anninos, it is true, even names the German Goedrich as the harbinger of the Greeks' alleged discomfiture⁵, but then Boland tells us that the cyclist carried with him "the chronometer" which casts an intriguing light on how the time of the race was apparently measured. It looks as if the time was first kept at the sound of the starter's pistol, and that the chronometer was then taken to the stadium by the cyclist mentioned by Boland. Like Coubertin and Doerry, Boland gives the victor's time as two hours and fifty-five minutes (as opposed to two hours and fifty-eight), and that of a trial race before the games (three hours and eighteen minutes). That Boland was very particular about times and results (he was the very man to give the correct results of the Olympic lawn-tennis event) appears from the end of his account: He seems to be the only one in Olympic history to pass down to posterity the time of the last runner, the Greek Sokratis Lagoudakis who at the time lived in Paris and therefore is variously referred to as a Greek or a Frenchman in contemporary sources. Understandably, Boland calls him a Frenchman and, after stating that he arrived at a

Cf. the present writer's *Tennis. A Cultural History*, London: Cassell/Leicester University Press, and New York: New York University Press, 1998, p. 227. He has made arrangements to have this work published under the auspices of Bonn University, since it does not only contain a graphic account of the Athens games, but also a most entertaining description of Bonn university life in the 1890's as seen by a foreigner. The edition will be richly illustrated, and among its intriguing images there will be three photographs of Boland taken in 1895 and 1896, and two of his tennis partner Friedrich Adolf Traun all of which have been discovered only recently.

2 Cf. the accounts of Andrews, Holmes, Richardson, the anonymous writer, The Field, Balck, and, most vividly, Louis himself (as related by Rudolph) in *Journal of Olympic History*, Vol. (1999), No.1, pp. 7, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17, and 23.

3 Cf. Anninos, Clark and Doerry, op.cit pp. 8, 19, 20.

4 Cf. op. cit., p. 13.

5 Ibid., p. 7.

6 Cf. Lennartz, op.cit., p. 27, note 3.

7 Even the results given in the present writer's *Olympisches Tennis. Die Geschichte der olympischen Tennisturniere (1896-1992)*, St. Augustin: Academia Verlag Richarz, 1993, are incorrect; the correct ones are again to be found in my *Tennis. A Cultural History*, op.cit., p. 229f.

8 Cf. Karl Lennartz, et al., *Die Olympischen Spiele 1896 in Athen. Erläuterungen zum Neudruck des Offiziellen Berichtes*, Kassel: Agon Sportverlag, 1996, p. 131, middle column: results of the race.

9 Ibid., p. 129, left column, No. 12 of the Greek competitors.

quarter to six, tells us about his making a beeline for the Greek king and about his rather solemn exit after “two profound bows”.

John Pius Boland, *A Bonn and Athens Diary, Unpublished Ms., pp, 106-108*

“Today (added above the line: “April 10th”) however has been the day of the Games as the great Marathon Race was decided, + to every one’s delight, won by the Greek Loues. [...]

The High Jump also went easily to America as did also the Pole Jump but before the latter was decided, various false alarms were given of the arrival of the Marathon runners which caused the entire stadium to rise at intervals/ to their feet. At length we heard the cannon, which was fired as the first man passed the barracks on the Marathon road. This was about a quarter to five + as the race had started at two, we did not expect the first man till shortly after five. From that moment the Pole Jump was abandoned + the excitement became intense. Appeals to the spectators to sit down were in vain + all eyes were turned towards the road which curved as it approached the station [sic]. The first false alarm had been caused, as I heard somebody say by the arrival of the bicyclist who brought the chronometer, but soon after the gunfire, mounted soldiers came in sight clearing the way and about 10 to five we heard cheers from the road + then an excited man at the entrance of the stadium threw up his hat. whereupon the stadium yelled like one man, for we all knew the first man must be a Greek. As Loues appeared at the entrance out came numberless Greek flags, handkerchiefs were shaken hats thrown in the air + the shouting of the 50,000 in the stadium, reinforced by the thousands on the hill + / the upper wall became louder and louder. As the victor came slowly up the course - for he seemed well nigh done the entire committee of judges followed him running and cheering him on headed by the two Princes + as he broke the tape, there was a

scene of enthusiasm that I have never seen equalled. As he made for the exit, he was literally seized + kissed as indeed were the other runners who came in. He had done the distance in the marvellous time of 2.55, the previous trial races having resulted in 3.18.

The next man, also a Greek, came in nearly 4 minutes behind + others came in at varying intervals during the next half hour. Finally after the Pole Jumping had been resumed, in came a Frenchman, at about 5.45, and making straight for the king made two profound bows + then his exit. [...]

Note by the Editor:

Of course, I knew about the diary of John P. Boland being found a couple of years ago, but I never exactly knew what the diary contained.

*Both David Young and myself never intended to write the article: **That Memorable First Olympic Marathon**, with the certainty that we knew everything about that first marathon. On the contrary, we wrote it with the intention of letting our readers know which sources the two of KS had been able to find sofar. The reactions from our readers confirmed that the article was a good choice.*

We also explicitly requested our readers in the foreword to expand on the knowledge.

Heiner Gillmeister does that, and we are most grateful for his information.

It always is up to the editor himself to decide ‘whether or not’ to use on article, and I felt the time to be ripe-for the one mentioned herefore.

THAT MEMORABLE FIRST MARATHON - Continued by Peter Lovesey:

Peter Lovesey from England submitted the following article with his letter from 6 February 1999.

Lovesey introduced the article with:

“You may like to see the enclosed account by E.L.Levy that appeared in the Birmingham Daily Post (England) and was reproduced in **The Autobiography of an Athlete**, by E. Lawrence Levy. J.G.Hammond, Birmingham, 1913). Levy

was a judge in the weightlifting. His report of the marathon is inaccurate in suggesting that Flack finished in fourth place. Levy was clearly more interested in the gymnastics.

APPENDIX VII.

The Olympic Games, Athens 1896.
(From a Correspondent.)

The event of the week was decided on Friday-viz., the race from Marathon to Athens. English hopes centred in Flack, but when at last the mighty roar of the myriads present arose--for fully 60,000 spectators crowded the Stadium and the surrounding hills--it was seen that a Greek was the first man in. More than that, the second and third men were Greeks also, and they finished as fresh as paint. The time was 2 hr. 55 sec. for the first man. It must be left to imagination what the scene was like when the huge attendance realised the victory that had been won. Later on Flack limped into the Stadium, fourth. He was thoroughly exhausted, and needed, as indeed he received, the kindest attentions, Royalty itself, in the person of Prince Nikolas, obtained brandy and eggs for him. The defeat of Flack was the more disappointing when it came, from the fact that a report, true for once in the way, had been brought on by a bicyclist that he was well leading. As a matter of fact the young Victorian led until two miles from home, when one of the Greeks passed him like a flash of lightning, and Flack's efforts to overtake him resulted in the prostration of which such painfully visible signs evidenced themselves to a sympathetic gathering. The young Frenchman collapsed altogether, and never finished. It was a glorious victory for Greece, and our Midland cross-country champions would have admired the splendid condition of the Greeks could they have seen them as they came in untired, unfatigued-smiling, bowing and laughing, after their tedious tramp of twenty-five miles.

THAT MEMORABLE FIRST MARATHON - *Continued* by Alan Marder:

On February 7th, 1999, Alan Marder wrote to both authors of the article, saying:

"As an engineer, I frequently look at old technical journals, and I discovered that *Scientific American* published a series of four articles on the first Olympics between January and May, 1896. The third article, dated May 16, features a description of the finish of the marathon, as well as an engraving credited to *The Illustrated London News* (also not in the bibliography).

Regarding the marathon, the *Scientific American* wrote:

"The two great dramatic events were the throwing of the discus and the run of 40 kilometers from Marathon. When Robert Garrett, of Princeton, threw the discus 95.6 feet, defeating the Greek champion Paraskevopoulos by 7 ½ inches, the Greeks felt keen disappointment at being beaten at their own sport. Their chagrin was allayed by the magnificent victory and wonderful record of Loues in the race from Marathon to Athens, 26.1 miles in 2 hours, 48 minutes.

When the signal gun announced the approach of the winner all rose from their seats and strained their gaze toward the entrance to the Stadium. The cavalry dashed down the street, clearing the way for the runner. He was sighted approaching the goal with weary, panting strides. In an instant there arose a mighty cry of "We win!"

"It is a Greek!" The athlete was seized by the two princes, and he passed the king making a proud salute. Hats and flowers were thrown into the arena, and it seemed as though the applause would never cease. Then followed, according to the custom of ancient Greece, the bestowal of the much coveted olive crowns, which were presented by the king with a diploma....."