

Track and Field



The Marathon



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Dorando's Nightmare

The 1908 marathon in London will always be one of the most memorable events in the checkered history of the Olympic Games. The race began at Windsor Castle and ended in the White City Stadium. After 25½ miles, the South African Charles Hefferon looked an odds-on favorite for the gold medal; but he suddenly collapsed. Pietri Dorando, a short Italian sporting a moustache, a pastry-cook by trade, found himself in the lead.

When Dorando entered the stadium, he was greeted by a huge ovation... but the cowl soon fell silent: the athlete seemed to be finding his way through a thick fog. As he wandered off the cinder track, willing hands turned him in the right direction. The next minutes were a nightmare. The helpless crowd saw the leader fall to the ground, stagger up, walk on, only to crumple again. This continued to within a few yards of the tape.

Suddenly there was a great shout: another competitor, the American Johnny Hayes, was coming into the stadium. He looked pretty well "all in" too, but at least he was on his feet. Supported by sympathetic judges,

Dorando managed somehow to cover the last few yards, and once past the tape he sank again to the ground; for many hours he was to lie in a coma, hovering between life and death.

Then it was Hayes's turn to finish... and collapse.

When he came to, he lodged a protest against the winner, who he felt was given illegal assistance. The judges, the same ones who had helped Dorando over those last traumatic yards, conferred and decided to... disqualify him! Dorando was flabbergasted: he has "asked for no help" (with good reason), and he could "have finished just as well without any outside assistance". It was even suggested that Dorando should have been disqualified because he had taken drugs.

The next day, during the closing ceremony, Italian supporters pushed Dorando out on to the track. The English crowd recognized him and gave him a warm round of applause. Then Queen Alexandra called him to the royal box and presented him with a magnificent cup which he held out to the cowl during a last, slow lap of honor...

The dramatic finish of the "uncrowned winner"