

Track and Field

The Olympic Marathon



On 23 June 1894, the Congress assembled at the Sorbonne by Pierre de Coubertin voted for the reintroduction of the Olympic Games and decided that the first of these new games should take place in 1896 in Athens. Soon afterwards, a distinguished French philologist and member of the French Institute, M. Michel Bréal, wrote to the young Baron de Coubertin to congratulate him. Filled

with enthusiasm at the decision to resurrect the games, and hoping to strengthen the link between antiquity and the modern world, Bréal offered a cup to the winner of a race to be run between Marathon and Athens.

It was at Marathon, a town situated some 40 kilometers from the city of Pericles, that the Greeks led by Miltiades confronted the Persians in the year 490 B.C., and, com-

In a little over two hours, a new hero will be acclaimed by a packed stadium





Photo Photothèque Perrin

pensating for their vastly inferior numbers with skill and greater knowledge of the terrain, inflicted a heavy defeat on Darius's men. Legend has it that a messenger called Philippides ran to Athens, bearing news of the victory. Exhausted by the effort and the heat, he is said to have announced the good news with his last breath, before collapsing.

Legend or not, M. Bréal nonetheless sent in his silver cup and the first modern marathon took place during the 1896 Games. The event aroused intense pride and emotion throughout Greece, particularly as it was won by a shy Greek, Spiridon Louis, in the face of considerable opposition from athletes such as the Frenchman Lermusiaux, the Australian Flack, the Hungarian Kellner and the American Black. This event is extraordinary in all senses of the word, and over the various Olympics, it has seen its fair share of drama, even tragedy. Philippides has had latter-day imitators, such as the unfortunate Portuguese Francisco Lazaro in 1912 in Stockholm. Thanks to the kind of systematic, not to say scientific, training undergone by modern athletes, such spectacular collapses are far rarer nowadays, and even when they do occur they are less likely to be followed by

McArthur, utterly exhausted, winning the 1912 marathon in Stockholm

death. But the effects of too much violent effort over too long a period used to be severe in the extreme. As it happened, chance had it that London was the place where the marathon produced its first anti-heroes. It was here that the distance for the race was officially fixed at 42.195 km, that being the exact mileage between the start at Windsor Castle and the finish in White City Stadium. So, in 1908, the Italian Dorando Pietri, a baker by trade, arrived at the threshold of glory in a state of advanced exhaustion. Semi-conscious, he started off round the track in the

wrong direction, but the judges managed to get him going the right way. Looking like a robot with a screw loose, Pietri was walking rather than running, tottering like a drunkard, and fell less than a hundred metres from the finishing line.

Spurred on by some kind of preservation instinct, Pietri struggled to his feet before collapsing again some ten metres from the tape. Bystanders rushed forward, among them Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—the creator of Sherlock Holmes—and helped the Italian to his shaky feet so that he could

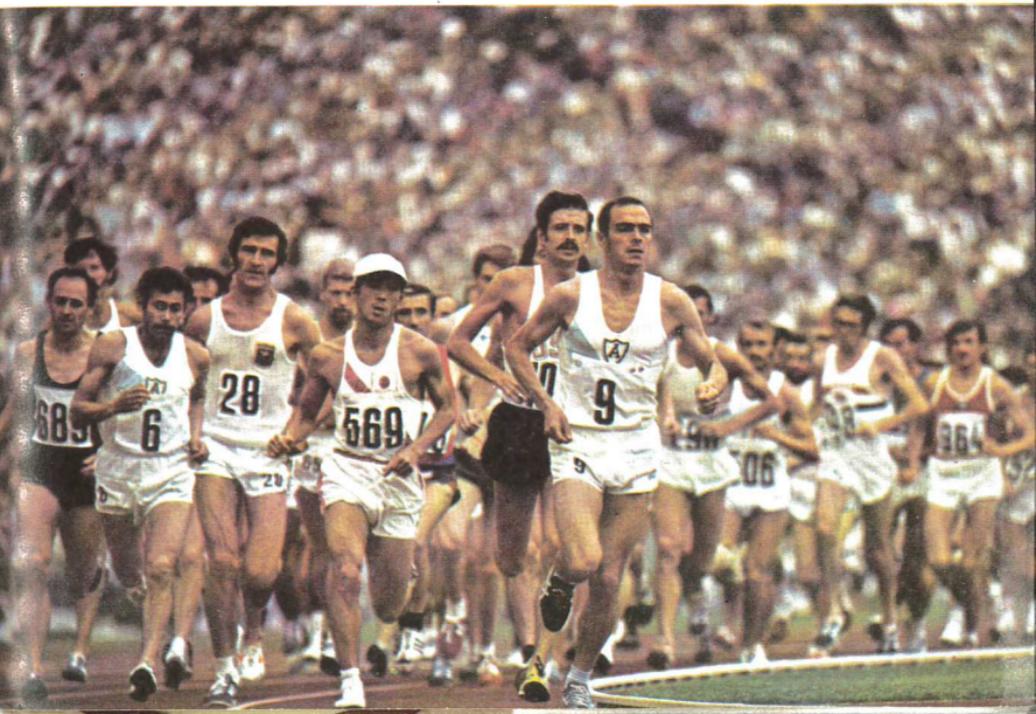
1952, Helsinki. Emil Zatopek entering the Olympic Stadium



finish the race. Some hours later, the jury announced its verdict: Pietri was disqualified for having received assistance, although he had not asked for it. However, the following day the defeated winner was presented with a gold cup by Queen Alexandra herself. Forty years later—in Wembley Stadium this time—the Belgian Richard Gailly hardly noticed the Argentinian Delfo Cabrera passing him two hundred metres from the end but, as the officials had not been so imprudent as to offer him assistance, he finished third and was awarded the bronze medal.

Other olympic marathon winners made history too. There was the French-Algerian Mohamed El Ouafi, who won in Amsterdam in 1928 before being accused of being a professional and disappearing into oblivion. Then there was the Czech Emil Zatopek, who won the marathon, 5,000 m and 10,000 m events at the 1952 Helsinki Games, a unique feat which was nearly equalled in 1976 by the Finn Lasse Viren who, after winning the 5 km and 10 km, finished 5th in the marathon. There was also Abebe Bikila, a soldier with the Ethiopian Imperial Guard, who

Munich 1972: Frank Shorter (with moustache) led the pack from the start until his arrival in the arena... behind a hoaxer



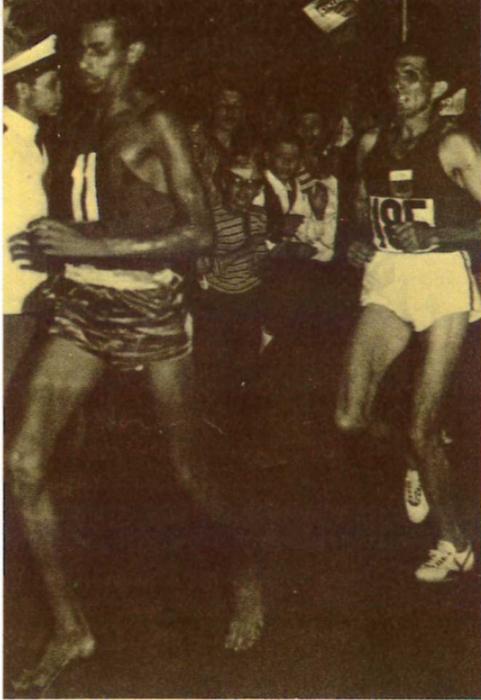


Photo Keystone

The legendary barefoot hero Abebe Bikila, winner in 1960 and 1964

London, 1908: Dorando Pietri collapses a few yards from the finish



Photo Photothèque Perrin

shot from anonymity in Rome in 1960 when he ran barefoot to be the first through the Arch of Constantine, only yards away from the Colosseum where, thirty years earlier, Mussolini had harangued the troops about to conquer Ethiopia. Four years later, Bikila wore shoes when he won again, this time in Tokyo, thus becoming the only man in history to win the marathon twice.

Among the numerous anecdotes connected with this event, many will remember the unexpected arrival of a young German gatecrasher in 1972 in Munich, while some 70,000 spectators and 800 million television viewers were expecting the American Frank Shorter. This hoax in doubtful taste was discovered a lot more quickly than the one which permitted the American Fred Lorz to be hailed as Olympic winner in 1904 in St. Louis, when he was later discovered to have covered several miles hidden in a car. He was even posing for photographs with Theodore Roosevelt's daughter when the real winner entered the arena. Against this tale of a medal being prematurely awarded must be set the experience of the Frenchman Michel Théato, who had to wait until 1912 before receiving the gold medal he had won in Paris in 1900: it took that long to decide that the marathon really was a valid Olympic event!

Table of Olympic Marathon winners

1896	Athens	Spiridon Louis	GRE	2 h 55:45
1900	Paris	Michel Théato	FRA	2 h 59:45
1904	St. Louis	Thomas Hicks	USA	3 h 28:35
1908	London	John Hayes	USA	2 h 55:18.4
1912	Stockholm	Kenneth McArthur	SAF	2 h 36:54.8
1920	Antwerp	Hannes Kolehmainen	FIN	2 h 32:35.8
1924	Paris	Albin Stenroos	FIN	2 h 41:22.6
1928	Amsterdam	Mohamed El Ouafi	FRA	2 h 32:57
1932	Los Angeles	Juan Zabala	ARG	2 h 31:36
1936	Berlin	Kitei Son	JAP	2 h 29:19.2
1948	London	Delfo Cabrera	ARG	2 h 34:51
1952	Helsinki	Emil Zatopek	CZE	2 h 23:3.2
1956	Melbourne	Alain Mimoun	FRA	2 h 25:00
1960	Rome	Abebe Bikila	ETH	2 h 15:16.2
1964	Tokyo	Abebe Bikila	ETH	2 h 12:11.2
1968	Mexico	Mamo Wolde	ETH	2 h 20:26.4
1972	Munich	Frank Shorter	USA	2 h 12:19.7
1976	Montreal	Waldemar Cierpinski	EGE	2 h 9:55

Montreal, 1976 : Waldemar Cierpinski's triumphant arrival

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