

A Short History of “The Marathon”

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It's that time of year when thousands of runners are training to run marathons. If you are one of those runners, and you want to impress your training pals with your knowledge of marathon history, read on. If you are one of those readers who is looking for the regular article on “The Science of Running,” then consider this an apology for a short history lesson amidst the regular science curriculum.

In 490 B.C., the Persian army sought to invade the Greek city-state of Athens. Persian ships arrived at the eastern coastal plains of Marathon, ready to march on Athens, some 40 kilometers distant (roughly 25 miles).

The Athenian army prepared to march to the town of Marathon to meet the Persians, while an Athenian *hemerodromo* (runner-messenger) was sent to enlist the support of the Spartans, about 140-150 miles away. The runner was Philippides (or Pheidippides or Phidippides or any other of the common variant spellings). The Spartans were not always so friendly to the Athenians, but they shared a common hatred for all things Persian.

According to various histories, Phil (let's call him) ran to Sparta in two days. That is like running from Austin to Houston, roughly. The Spartans agreed to help defend Athens, but would not march until the next full moon, in accordance with religious laws. “Thanks for your support, Spartans, but that'll be too late,” Phil probably thought, and promptly turned around for home.

Phil ran back to Athens with the “good news, bad news”: Sparta will help, but will be fashionably late. The Athenians then decided to destroy Athens if the Persians prevailed at Marathon. Kind of a weird, stalker mentality (“If I can't have you, dear Athens, no one will”), but one certainly can relate.

Our hero Phil headed off to Marathon with the Athenian army to fight the Persians, despite his 300-mile-or-so journey over the recent days. Phil would have been great in The Badwater Ultramarathon (see below).

The Athenians, although vastly outnumbered (supposedly), defeated the Persians. Later historians, like Plutarch, suggested that the battle history as told by Herotodus was a bit exaggerated: 6,400 dead Persians to only 192 dead Athenians...sounds like a victor's bodycount to me. And who was counting, anyway?

So, back to Phil. He ran back to Athens to announce the victory so that the folks back home would not destroy Athens. He arrived in Athens, announced “Rejoice! We conquer!” and promptly fell dead. Supposedly. Maybe he said “Oy, my feet! Some Gatorade, please!” but who knows.

Some say the Greek victory at Marathon was a decisive event in world history because it kept the

Eastern power (Persia) from conquering Europe. Some historians go so far as to suggest that Western civilization, from modern America and Western Europe, traces its growth straight back through a series of events all the way to Marathon and that famous final score of Athens 6,400 vs. Persia 192.

At the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896, the first “marathon” was held. It was a 40 kilometer run from the plains of Marathon to downtown Athens, and the winner was a Greek shepherd named Spiridon Loues.

An American fellow named John Graham, manager of the Boston Athletic Association’s team at the 1896 Olympics, was impressed with the 40k race. He brought it back home to Boston, and the next year organized the very first Boston Athletic Association Marathon (1897). A mere 15 runners competed.

The 25-mile distance remained a “marathon” distance in the 1900 (Paris) and 1904 (St. Louis) Olympic Games. In 1908 (London), the course was laid out from Windsor Castle to the Olympic Stadium. The course ended a wee bit long, at just over 26 miles. When somebody had the smashing idea of putting the finish line right smack dab in front of King Edward VII’s Royal Box, the end result was the quirky distance of 42.2 kilometers, or 26 miles 385 yards.

The 1924 Olympics (again in Paris) was the first time the “official” marathon distance was established at 26.2 miles.

Lessons:

- (1) Royalty made us have to run an additional 1.2 miles;
- (2) Good thing the Athenians won, or else we’d not have cool finisher’s t-shirts and have valid reasons to close our streets for Sunday footraces.

By the way, if anyone doubts Phil’s ability to run 140 or so miles in two days, consider that in July of 2006, 32-year-old American Scott Jurek won the Badwater Ultramarathon (his second consecutive victory there), which is a 135-mile race from Badwater (Death Valley, 280 feet below sea level) to Mt. Whitney (elev. 8,360), finishing in a time of 25 hours, 41 minutes, 18 seconds. Congratulations, Scott. Now turn around, run back and go fight some Persians, and THEN we’ll be impressed.