

A Mile Marker from the 1908 Olympic Marathon

By Steve Ellis



at the top end of the High Street

Today, we understand that a marathon in athletics is a road race contested over a distance of 26 miles and 385 yards. It was not always the case.

When the modern Olympic Games were launched in 1896, the marathon was 24.9 miles, the distance from Marathon to the historic Panathinaiko Stadium in Athens. The event is a commemoration of the fabled run of the Greek soldier, Pheidippides, who in 490BC ran without stopping from the Battle of Marathon to Athens, to inform of the Greek victory over the Persians.

Subsequent marathon races were not this exact distance but were always in the region of 25 miles. All of this changed in 1908. The Olympic Marathon was to take the athletes from Windsor Castle to White City. The distance was to be approximately 25½ miles. Further distance was added when the distance from the stadium entrance to the finish line was added. Even more distance was added when King Edward VII expressed a wish for the race to start from under the East Terrace of Windsor Castle, to afford the Royal Family a better view of the start. The distance was now 26 miles and 385 yards.

Race day on July 24th 1908, was hot and hazy. The race started at just after 2.30pm, the hottest part of the day. Despite some of the British press confidently expecting the 11 British entrants to fill the top 11 places, the initial pace set by the British athletes was suicidal in the heat. At half way Jack Price (GBR) led by 38 seconds from Charles Hefferon (RSA). However, by 15 miles, Price had dropped out, just like many of his team mates, leaving Hefferon with a huge lead. By 18 miles, Hefferon was noticeably slowing and Dorando Pietri (ITA) in 2nd place was closing in on him. At Wormwood Scrubs (24 miles) Pietri caught and passed Hefferon and began his run for the finish.

First into the stadium, Pietri was exhausted and suffering badly – possibly as a result of the heat and the pace. However, some say his collapse was due to strychnine poisoning, or even through drinking champagne, both of which were “tonics” commonly used in endurance athletics at that time. He collapsed three times on the track and was practically unconscious. There were fears he could die under the eyes of Queen Alexandra who was witnessing the proceedings. The officials, mindful of this, and also taking pity on Pietri, practically dragged him across the finish line.

Johnny Hayes (USA), who had run a sensibly paced race, was the next finisher. Understandably, the United States lodged a protest. Pietri was disqualified and Hayes declared the winner in 2:55:18. Pietri however was awarded a gold cup for his bravery by Queen Alexandra.

This drama triggered a professional marathon running boom – a boom which lasted until just before the First World War. Always the distance was the same - 26 miles 385 yards. (As an aside, one of these events, a match race of Pietri vs. Charles Gardiner (GBR), was run over 524 laps indoors at the Royal Albert Hall. Gardiner won in 2 hours 37 minutes). Professionalism was a long way from the Olympics though, as professionals were excluded from the Olympic Games at that time.

For the amateurs, and therefore “official” athletics, the top marathon in the UK was the Polytechnic Marathon. It was always run over 26 miles 385 yards, using mainly the 1908 Olympic marathon route. It was first held in 1909 and was intended to be the most important marathon in the world with the exception of the Olympic Marathon.

As a result of this interest in marathon running, the distance of 26 miles 385 yards became recognised as the standard distance for a marathon. In 1921 it was ratified by the IAAF as such. Accordingly, in 2004 when the Olympic Games again came to Athens, the marathon was again run from Marathon to the Panathinaiko Stadium in Athens, but this time extra distance was added to the 1896 route so that the marathon was the official distance of 26 miles and 385 yards.

As for the Polytechnic Marathon, a number of World Best times were set on the course. The “Poly”, as it was affectionately called, continued until 1996, although by this time its importance had been overtaken by the London Marathon which began in 1981. The London Marathon is one of the top marathons in the world, so we can safely say the London Marathon is the successor to the “Poly”. Interestingly, the trophy awarded to the winner of the London Marathon is The Sporting Life Trophy, which from 1909-1960 was awarded to the winner of the “Poly”.

This subject holds particular interest to me, so I am delighted the only surviving mile marker from the 1908 Olympic Marathon (so far as I am aware) is to be included in the Milestone Society database, in the Fingerposts layer.

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