

POETRY IN MOTION

By Neil Wood



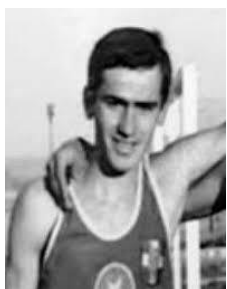
Marathon runners will know who Spiridon Louis was. A Greek, he won the first Olympic marathon race, held in Athens in 1896, which also made him the first marathon winner ever. The event had not been part of the ancient Olympic games, but had been created by Baron de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympiad, as a means of forging a link between the revived games and their origins. He took as his inspiration the poem, 'Pheidippides', by Robert Browning, written 20 years earlier, but judiciously used only the most stirring bits as the pattern for his race.

In Browning's poem, loosely based on a text written by Herotodus in the 5th century BC, Pheidippides had been sent by the Athenian commanders to seek help from Sparta to repel a Persian invasion, but the Spartans had spurned his entreaties and he had had to return empty-handed. Pheidippides joined the army at Marathon just in time to take part in the Athenian victory, after which he was instructed to carry the news back to Athens, about 40km to the south. According to Browning, he ran like fire through stubble and on arrival, announced "Rejoice, we conquer", whereupon he died. It was the run from Marathon to Athens that formed the basis of the eponymous event that has become one of the mass participation phenomena of recent times.



The marathon is usually enough for most people, many feeling much like Pheidippides by the finish, but for some the current distance of 42.195km is only a start and in this spirit, five RAF runners, with a small support party from the Milocarian Athletic Club, set out, in 1982, to run from Athens to Sparta, non-stop, to see whether Pheidippides' feat was feasible. The group worked out a historically credible route that Pheidippides might have followed, which amounted to 246km and set themselves a target of "two days and a night", as reported by Herotodus, to complete it. Their task was not helped by local restrictions on the availability of maps which meant that they had to draw up their own, before going out to Greece and the unsuitability of military emergency rations as fuel for long distance running. All that notwithstanding, three runners made it within the time and set in motion an event, The Spartathlon, that is still going and will celebrate its 38th running in September.

The first Spartathlon was run in 1983, largely organised by the local British/Hellenic Chamber of Commerce; appropriately and in attractive symmetry with the first marathon, it was won by a Greek. Yiannis Kouros had had his interest in the race sparked by meeting one of the RAF runners and the support crew as they passed



through Tripolis, his home town and he asked the runner where on earth he was going. Kouros had every reason to be curious because, by the runner's own account, he was feeling pretty wobbly after 180km and probably did not look as though he was going anywhere.

It is a measure of Kouros's ability that, although the early Spartathlons adhered closely to the RAF's original route and were run over paths, tracks and dried up stream beds, he set the four fastest times between 1983 and 1990 and established the current record in 1984, at 20 hours, 25

minutes. The next quickest runner, the American, Scott Jurek, achieved a time 23 minutes slower than Kouros's worst time, in 2008, even though the course was mainly on roads by then. At first sight, it may seem remarkable that Yiannis Kouros is not a household name because he still holds every men's outdoor record from 100 km to 1,000 miles and track distance records from 12 hours to 6 days. But when you consider that a 100km race, a mere stroll for Kouros, would take something over 6 hours and involve 250 laps of a standard 400m running track, you can see why Yiannis Kouros never achieved wide spectator appeal.

Loneliness is reckoned to be the lot of the long-distance runner, but the RAF athletes who blazed the trail for the Spartathlon have joined a select group of Britons who, with imagination and energy and time on their hands, have helped to found sporting events with lasting international renown.



Between the Statues legs is Nick from the English school.

Top Left: Norman Niblock, Milos and RAF. Top right John Currie, RAF.

Middle row: Ian, Student. Mike Morris, Milos and RAF; John McCarthy, Milos & RAF; Eric Thomas, Milos and RAF; Sam Sloan Photog. RAF.

Bottom Row: Rob and Dave Ireland, Teachers Athens; John Scholtens RAF; Ted Marsh RAF; John Foden RAF; Harry Kileen RAF.

Roy Lowhon, Physio. RAF; Phil and Andy teachers Athens.