

## **Alexander Kitroeff's remarks**

The cup that Michel Bréal offered and Spyros Louis won with his victory at the first modern Olympic Games may be small in size but it is big in its symbolic value for the modern history of world sports and the institution of the Olympic Games, but also for the history of Greece.

First of all, of course, we have to underscore that the inspiration of the French philologist and philhellene Bréal to create this new sporting event, the marathon race, represents, along with baron de Coubertin's idea of the revival of the Olympic Games the power that Ancient Greek heritage and civilization exercised over French intellectual life in the late nineteenth century. Bréal's marathon and Coubertin's Olympics represent creative applications of the Ancient Greek spirit at a time when France, the great loser of the Franco-Prussian war, was trying to find expressions of fraternity and cooperation among nations during a time of sharpened conflicts. Next to them, contributing equally to those worthwhile efforts was the thinker and man of letters Dimitrios Vikelas.

The contribution of Bréal's vision to the history of world sports is confirmed by the huge popularity the marathon race enjoys in the present era. The course from the battlefield of Marathon to the Athenian Pnyx, which many sources mention as the course that Pheidippides covered, is repeated by thousands of runners in the more than 500 official marathon races held annually around the world. The participants are men and, beginning with the Boston marathon of 1972, women as well. It is the

most popular running sport and the only sporting event that took its name from an actual historical event – a battle that contributed, as many classicists note, to the victory of democratic Athens over the authoritarian regime of Ancient Persia.

Yet on the eve of the Olympic Games of Athens no one could imagine that the idea of including a marathon race in the program of the Games would be so successful. That is why Bréal thought he should also offer this cup. Coubertin, who was planning Games that would reflect as much as possible those of Ancient Olympia had proposed that the winners in each sport receive a silver medal and an olive branch, while those who came second receive a bronze medal and a laurel branch – diplomas were also presented. But Coubertin endorsed the award of the cup to the winner of the marathon because he was concerned also whether or not the new sport would have many entrants. Later there was another prize for the winner offered by Professor Spyros Lambros.

We should, at this point, recognize the contribution of the Greek public and the Greek athletes in making Bréal's proposal a reality. The French intellectual knew of the battle of Marathon and of the athletic games that took place there in ancient times, having a silver cup (a *phiale*) as a prize, only from historical sources. In other words, he did not know how far away Marathon was from Athens – about 42 kilometers, a distance far greater than that of any other road races at that time. In the track and field events of the 1896 games, the longest race was 1,500 meters while the 10,000 meter race, which is presently the longest running event other

than the marathon race, was included for the first time in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics. However, the race, due to its connection to such an important event in Greek history, was considered as the par excellence Greek sport event and many began to train for it, hoping to be able to participate in the first Olympic marathon race representing Greece.

The first official marathon race took place in Athens in early March of 1896 as part of the Panhellenic Games, during which Greek athletes were selected to participate in the Olympics. A second trial marathon was held because of the great number of Greek runners wishing to qualify. Indeed, 85 runners registered for that race, an impressive number, although only 38 runners ended up running the actual race, still a significant number. In that race, someone unknown, a certain Spyros Louis, finished fifth, and along with others was selected as a member of the Greek team that would take part in the marathon race in the Olympics.

Greek expectations were heightened by the day of the marathon – it was the last chance Greece had to win first place in a track and field event. It was scheduled on the last day of all sports events. The runners set off just before 2pm from the ancient burial mound at Marathon. It was Friday March 29<sup>th</sup> according to the old Julian calendar (April 10<sup>th</sup> according to Gregorian one) and it was cloudy and relatively cool for that time of the year. In the first half of the race, the Greeks, who knew the course somewhat better, ran a controlled race but after Pikermi and especially after Harvati where the upward incline begins they reached the frontrunners. At the 34<sup>th</sup>

kilometer, Louis overtook the Australian Edwin Flack and took the lead, followed by Harilaos Vasilakos, who would ultimately finish second.

Louis maintained his lead position and as he recounted later, he sung the national anthem in order to give rhythm to his strides. His entrance into the Panathenaic Stadium created an uncontrollable wave of enthusiasm and amid the crowd's cheers the two princes leapt out of their seats in the royal dais in order to run by Louis's side as he crossed the finish line, and to escort him to the King, who greeted Louis by telling him that his victory had honored the nation. The next day, at a special awards ceremony for the winners at the stadium, Louis received his medal and the cup Bréal had offered.

Witnessing those scenes was Coubertin – Bréal had not been able to travel to Athens. A few years later, the man who revived the Olympics noted in his memoirs that the scenes surrounding Louis's finish were a unique experience he would never forget.

Indeed, Louis's victory was not only a big moment for the Greek colors. According to Chicago University professor John MacAloon, the finish of the marathon, precisely those scenes that Coubertin would never forget, was the defining moment of a common collective experience with Louis in the role of the hero we all admire. This gave the 1896 Olympics an epic and metaphysical dimension which lay the

foundations which allowed the Modern Games to acquire the popularity and the meaning that made them the most important sports event in modern world history.

In closing, I would like to refer to another important dimension of the symbolism of the cup Spyros Louis won. With the passage of time, the Cup was forgotten by everybody aside Louis's descendants. They preserved it over many decades, during which Greece experienced wars, foreign occupation and great social upheaval. In doing so, they managed to keep and protect a cup, which symbolizes the connection between modern Greece and its Classical civilization, as well as the significance of the spirit of ancient sports for the present era. In preserving the cup, Louis's family demonstrated how much the Greeks honor the values it represents. We thank them, and we salute the initiative of the Niarchos Foundation to take over the responsibility of protecting and exhibiting a cup that is part of our national heritage.