

## **BRIEF HISTORY**

The significance and value of the silver cup awarded to the winner of the first modern Olympic marathon race in 1896, won by the Greek runner Spyros Louis and kept in his family's possession since then, is far greater than almost any other Olympic memorabilia dating from those first modern Olympics held in Athens.

The cup symbolizes the idea behind running a marathon race and including it in the Olympic program, thus creating a race whose cultural significance grew exponentially throughout the twentieth century. The person who came up with this idea was the French linguist, philologist and philhellene Michel Bréal a member of the French Institute, at a sports conference convened in 1894 by the founder of the modern Olympics, the baron Pierre de Coubertin. The conference launched the modern Olympics. Bréal proposed the race that was based on the legend of Pheidippides and his famous run from Marathon to Athens in 490BC even though the run was not part of the Ancient Olympic sports. Bréal also offered a silver trophy to whomever would win such a race. Coubertin embraced the idea of the race and the cup – even though it represented an exception because the plan was to award winners only medals and olive branch wreaths. The cup included an inscription in Greek.

The additional significance of the cup is of course that it was won by a Greek, and Coubertin and others are on record stating that Louis' victory on the final day of the Games unleashed a wave of Greek pride and helped in establishing modern Greece's embrace of the Olympics. Finally, that the family managed to preserve the cup through more than a century of tumultuous events including several wars and foreign occupation of Greece symbolizes the importance that Greeks attach to their ancient heritage and the Olympic Games.

*Alexander Kitroeff, Associate Professor of History and Academic Director of the Center for Peace & Global Citizenship, Haverford College*