

1. PROUD HOMECOMING AND NEW RECORD (20 04 12)

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Proud homecoming, and new record

Cup won by marathoner Spyros Louis is purchased by Greece's Niarchos Foundation for 655,454 euros

The silver cup won by Greek runner Spyros Louis in the first-ever modern Olympic Games is making its way back home after being sold on Wednesday for a record price at a heated auction in London by Christie's to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

The cup stands just 15 centimeters tall and was inspired and designed by French philologist Michel Breal, who as part of the Olympic Committee in 1896 introduced the race in the I Olympiad.

"It is hard to believe that such a small trophy represents so much in sporting and Olympic history," Christie's said in a statement, adding that Breal's Silver Cup went for 655,454 euros compared to an estimated price of 146,000-196,000 euros.

"Since it was unveiled, it has attained universal appreciation, resulting in a total of six bidders competing for it—two on the telephone, two in the room and two on the book," Christie's said.

A national hero in Greece, Louis was a water carrier from what is now the northern Athenian suburb of Maroussi, which was then a small village, and was the only Greek athletics champion at the inaugural Olympic Games at the Panathenaic Stadium, on April 6-15, 1896.

Louis, aged 23 at the time, allegedly sipped cognac during the 40-kilometer race and gained the lead just a few kilometers from the finish line after two of the runners ahead of him collapsed from exhaustion. Only 10 runners of the original 17 finished the race.



Spyros Louis (left), winner of the first marathon, being honored later in his life. Right: A handout photo of Breal's Silver Cup.



The race was the highlight of the event, which boasted the largest international participation of any sporting event at its time, with athletes from 14 nations and a crowd of more than 80,000 spectators packed into the marble stadium.

Louis finished the race eight minutes ahead of second place in just under three hours and was awarded Breal's Silver Cup, a silver medal, an antique vase, an olive

branch and a diploma signed by King George.

The cup remained in his family for over a century and was put up for auction by his namesake and grandson, Spyros Louis Jr, a 72-year-old pensioner who lives in Athens.

"Obviously it was not an easy decision. This particular item had always been prominently displayed in our home," Spyros Louis Jr told To Vima daily in an interview

before the auction. "I grew up with it and so did my children. But I had no choice."

The cup has been described as one of the most important pieces of Olympic memorabilia, its sale smashing the record held by an Olympic torch from the 1952 Games in Helsinki that was sold in Paris for over 300,000 euros in 2011.

"The significance and value of the cup 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," history professor and distinguished Olympic historian Alexander Kitroeff said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The fact 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," Kitroeff added.

The cup was sold as London began counting down the last 100 days to its Olympic Games, a factor that also contributed to buyer interest.

"I am overwhelmed by the global admiration felt for my grandfather and his Olympic victory for Greece in 1896, and I am proud to have witnessed another historical Olympic event today as my children and I watched the auction unfold online," Spyros Louis Jr said just after Wednesday's sale.

The marathoner's cup will go on permanent public display in 2105, the Niarchos Foundation said in a statement after the sale, at a cultural park that it is currently under development on the Falirio waterfront, southern Athens.

"Breal's Silver Cup will be shared with the public and serve as a reminder of our history, heritage and resilient spirit," the co-president and board member of the Niarchos Foundation, Andreas Dracopoulos, said. "Our hope is that the cup inspires and rekindles Greek pride, just as Louis's victory did," he added.

"Deep down I hope that the cup remains in Greece, but no matter where it ends up, it will forever represent the glory of my country, and I have no doubt the new owner will treasure it as we have done," Spyros Louis Jr said after the auction, before learning that his grandfather's cup will indeed remain in Greece.

CHRISTINE STURMEY

Maroussi's bid for heirloom

Until the construction of the cultural center in Falirio is completed and Breal's Silver Cup settles in its new permanent home, the Niarchos Foundation is looking for a suitable venue in which to display it.

Strong interest has been expressed by the Municipality of Maroussi (where Spyros Louis was born), which had been trying to raise funds since the announcement that the cup will be put up for auction in early March to buy the item itself.

Maroussi has a municipal art gallery dedicated to the Olympic Games and named after Spyros Louis, where it hopes that the Niarchos Foundation will display the heirloom until 2015.

Its mayor, Giorgos Patoulis, had succeeded in raising 300,000 euros in public donations in his effort to purchase the cup from Christie's.

"Just a few minutes before the auction began, the president of [state gaming company] OPAP called me and expressed the firm's desire to contribute to the fund," Patoulis told To Vima daily yesterday. "However, it was too late as written guarantees had to be submitted in advance for our participation to be granted."

Patoulis also complained that he had approached Culture Minister Pavlos Geroulanos last month and requested that Spyros Louis's cup be designated a national treasure and taken off the auction block.

"We are very disappointed because the Municipality of Maroussi did not succeed in acquiring the cup. All of this could have been avoided if the Culture Ministry had granted our request," Patoulis told To Vima.

In another interview with the same newspaper in March, Spyros Louis Jr also expressed frustration at authorities after several attempts to find a buyer in Greece had failed.

"I approached all the official bodies, ministries and general secretariats. The only place I did not go to was the Municipality of Maroussi because they have already done so much to honor the memory of Spyros Louis that I thought it would be too much to bother them again," the athlete's grandson and former owner of the cup, said.

The Spyros Louis Olympic Art Gallery already has a sizable collection of memorabilia linked to the runner, among other acquisitions, including personal items and photographs.