



The 1904 Olympic Marathon, an unfinished story?

Nationalism at any price: from the media construction to the practical realisation and 'cheating' in St Louis

by Clément Genty

Résumé

The 1904 Olympic marathon in St Louis is now regarded as one of the strangest by the International Olympic Committee. What is less known is that sports nationalism prompted organisers of the race to cheat in order to favour a United States national. At the time it was considered that Americans occupied the first three places in the race.



Introduction

The Marathon organized during the third Olympiad in 1904 was subject to a particularly documented case of institutional assistance. The organizers noted in their report that physical and food assistance had been given to the athlete who won. They had been keen for a home competitor to win the event, as had been the case, it was thought, in the two previous Games. Thus, during the first, 1896, and second Olympiad, 1900, three events were brought together: an Olympiad where all the national hopes were focused on the nationality of the winner of the Marathon, intensive

coverage of the event by the press and a notable presence of political authorities of the country concerned. St Louis was to repeat this triptych.

The origin of the Marathon

The revival of the ancient Olympic Games, became a reality with the first Olympiad of the modern era organized in Greece.

The marathon had been introduced as a new long distance foot race. Suggested in a letter to Coubertin by Michel Bréal (1832–1915) on September 15, 1894, the event was based on the feat of arms of a Greek warrior during the battle of Marathon¹:

“Since you are going to Athens, see if we can’t organize a Marathon race at the Pnyx. It will have an ancient flavour. If we knew how long the Greek warrior took, we could set the record. I would claim for myself the honour of offering the ‘Marathon Cup’.”

First Olympiad – Athens

The race was organized on April 10, 1896 over a distance of 40 kilometres from the city of Marathon to the stadium of Athens.



The stadium of Athens⁴

The American press presented this race, which concluded the athletics events, as the star of all². Each runner was accompanied by mounted police³. Spyridon Louis of Greece won the race. The French press described the Greek expectations at the end:

“The Greeks had seen foreigners triumphing without envy in other competitions; but all desired ardently for a son of Greece to take the honours of the Marathon. The anguish was terrible. The race was run, and it was a Greek winemaker, the young Loys, (Louis) who appeared the first in the Stadium, supported by the princes Constantine and George until the throne of the king. One hundred and twenty thousand Greek chests acclaimed the worthy son of the motherland. Ah, patriotism was at stake!”

One of the few articles about the event to appear in the American press was headline “The Long Run from Marathon Won by a Native”. “Crown Prince Constantine and Prince Michaelovich accompanied the winner along the length of the stadium, applauding him.”

More than a century later in 1997, American author Charles Lovett suggested that victory by a Greek was vital to the success of the new Olympic movement and that it would not have been considered so had a French or American won.

Second Olympiad – Paris

Four years later, the Olympiad was run in conjunction with the Universal Exhibition of Paris which was held at the same time. The race was a tour of Paris, by its ramparts, hence the nickname of the event, the *race of the fortifications*, to which was added three kilometres on the ground of the Racing Club de France, then a well-known athletics club in Paris, so that the total distance was 40 kilometres. It was won by Michel Théato, then believed to be French. That Théato was a Frenchman was never in doubt according to the press in Paris, which even specified that he was from Paris:

“The victory went to a young Frenchman, Michel Théato, member of an athletic society of Saint-Mandé, who with his legs alone, managed to do these 40 kilometers of hard course in 2h. 39m. (...) Théato is thin; he has the pale complexion and the drawling accent of the purebred parigot; in any case, he is the only one, among our athletes, who has raised the old reputation of French strength and endurance, because he is the only French winner of the multiple athletic events which will take place on the occasion of the Exhibition.”



Thomas Hicks of the United States, winner of the 1904 Olympic marathon

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Thomas Hicks with his trophy after winning the marathon at the 1904 Olympics

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Later research revealed that Théato was in fact from Luxembourg.

Finally, we note the presence of Alexandre Millerand, Minister of Commerce, who chaired the sports meeting⁵.



Arrival of Michel Theato at the end of the Marathon race⁶

Third Olympiad – Saint Louis (USA)

The third modern Olympiad was held in St. Louis, Missouri. They had been moved from Chicago which had originally been awarded the Games. When St. Louis threatened to organise a sporting event to rival the Olympics, Chicago agreed to their relocation.

As in 1900, the Games of 1904 were organised in conjunction with an exhibition.

The *Louisiana Purchase Exposition*, commemorated the centenary of the acquisition of Louisiana by the United States from France. In fact the anniversary was a year late as the purchase had taken place in 1803.

France was conspicuous by its absence from the Games. No Frenchman made the trip, distance, the lack of prizes and over-representation in athletic competitions. One Frenchman was present. Albert Corey (1878–1926) had settled in the United States and participated in two athletic events, including the marathon. Eight days before the event, the American press reported that he had recorded a time similar to that which was eventually to win the 1904 Marathon. The Canadian press reported that local runner Will Sherring was injured and would be unable to represent his country in the Marathon. The course consisted of five laps of the track, a course through St. Louis, before returning to the "World's Fair Stadium".

The American press talked about the race before-

hand, highlighting the prospects of an American victory, either because of the number of nationals taking part⁷, or because of the intense selection of runners from the different states. The regulations were strict, as shown by this extract from a local newspaper, the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, two days before the race⁸:

"Pacing must be eliminated, and any runner seen accepting pace will be promptly disqualified. Checkers will be placed along the road, and as each runner passes he will be checked up. No one, not even the officials, will know where these checkers are located."

In addition, red flags marked the race route⁹. It was planned that inspectors would be placed on the route to record the passage of the runners. It was also planned that each athlete be followed by an official on a bicycle "so that there can be no dispute as to the race being fairly run"¹⁰. Doctors also accompanied the runners to provide medical support if necessary¹¹.

Finally, Dr. Luther H Gulick, "honorary referee", accompanied by Charles P Senter¹², "chairman of the Marathon race committee", was to be on board the lead vehicle that opened the race¹³.

On the day of the race, the President David R Francis reminded participants of the rules by mentioning that no help was to be accepted and that inspectors were placed throughout the course. This point of the rules was specified in two newspapers:

- The *St. Louis Republic*¹⁴;
- The *Boston Daily Globe*¹⁵.

The departure was set for 3:03pm¹⁶.

Before the race started, Cuban Felix Carvajal had been regarded as the favourite but after only two laps of the stadium, the American Thomas Hicks, the eventual champion, was leading the race. However, his physical condition was weakening and he was described as running mechanically¹⁷. Carvajal would finish fourth but deserved the victory according to the *Courier Journal*¹⁸.

Albert Corey, who came second in the race, was in good shape and sprinted into the stadium. He was considered fresher than Hicks¹⁹. His post-race interview testified to his vitality: "The distance was too short for me. I would have preferred to run ten miles longer". This statement was corroborated by his medical examination after the race, judging his physical condition: "perfect"²⁰.

Finally, the press drew their conclusions on the American victory through the weekly fireworks,



Sponging the Winner, 1904

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planned within the framework of the adjoining world exhibition²¹:

"Long after night, had fallen other runners straggled in, amid the glare of the weekly fireworks being displayed at the stadium, a fitting finale for the American victory of the Olympic Marathon race."

Protests

Everett C Brown, a future member of the executive committee of the American Olympic Committee²², was a member of the executive committee of the Chicago Athletic Association, the club for whom Albert Corey ran.

Brown protested against Hicks' victory, arguing that he had been clocked by the officials' cars. James Sullivan, the director, refuted this protest. However, as we have seen, the argument was valid if we rely on journalistic sources. An article in the *St. Louis Republic* even mentions that there were several protests about this fact, mentioning in particular the minimum distance of 100 yards between the runners and the cars that was imposed²³.

In 1912, a column on the Marathon in the French newspaper *L'Aéro* mentioned Corey's "[...] glorious second place, despite multiple disadvantages"²⁴. The athlete was by then a journalist and it can be assumed that he narrated his race to an anonymous columnist who wrote the article, proof if any were needed that the French athlete knew that everything had not gone well.

Albert Corey's nationality

As we have seen, Corey ran for an American club, which was common at the time. However, his record was credited to the United States when the IOC decided to use the nationality of sports clubs rather than the nationalities of the athletes. A part of the popular memory considered thereafter that he was "American" and this was even evident as late as 1950 in the French-speaking *Le Petit Marocain*²⁵.

In December 2021, contact was made with the IOC to clarify the distinction between the country of the athlete and the country of the medal.

The 1905 report

The International Olympic Committee which did not have members on site, considers two reports as official: "Spalding's Official Athletic Almanac for 1905 – Special Olympic Number" from James E Sullivan and "The Olympic Games – 1904" under the editorship of Charles JP Lucas. Both were published in 1905 and the content of the second one is particularly truculent: it detailed the physical and physiological help received by the winner of the marathon, Thomas Hicks, and given by the organization team of which the author was a part²⁶:

"Hicks was far from being the best man physically in the race, for there were three men who should have defeated him. Ten miles from the finish, Hicks began to show positive signs of collapse. When he asked for a drink of water, it was refused him, and his mouth was sponged out with distilled water. He managed to keep up well, until seven miles from the

Stadium, and then the author was forced to administer one-sixtieth grain of sulphate of strychnine, by the mouth, besides the white of one egg. [...] After he had partaken of two more eggs, again bathed, and given some brandy, Hicks walked up the first of the last two hills, and then jogged down on the incline.”

A photograph accompanies the narrative of the race and the illustration is as follows:

“Sponging The Winner – Hicks at 23 miles. Referee’s auto and that of the author in the rear. H. C. McGrath and Charles J. P. Lucas with Hicks.”

This photograph, presented in poor quality, was taken by Jessie Tarbox Beals (1870–1942). We asked the Missouri Historical Society to share it with us, which they did²⁷. The image reveals a clear infringement of the rules²⁸.

Conclusion

As we have seen, many actions that did not comply with the rules have been detected and reported in the American press and in the final report where the author boasted about them. A request for rectification was communicated to the International Olympic Committee. The following response came from the IOC legal department on 16th of February, 2023:

“However, we regret to inform you that the IOC is neither competent to make or review decisions made in the competition area, nor is it empowered to review the classification of the sports event requested, not to mention that this event was held almost 120 years ago.”

If this request is one day accepted, not only would the ranking change, but the trophy for the best American club would go to the *Chicago Athletic Association*, instead of the current holder, the *New York Athletic Club*, with 61 points against 59.

What happens next? As the author is a city councillor of the athlete’s home town, he has the power to bring the case before the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Another method, more diplomatic, would be for the French Olympic Committee to play the 2024 card to request a reclassification. A petition campaign will be launched : albertcorey.fr

In the 1908 marathon, Italian Dorando Pietri was first across the line but he was later disqualified after American protests because he received assistance from officials.

It was an incident which brought into sharp relief the events of 1904 and may even have induced a wry smile from those affected by what happened in St Louis.

1 Marc Décimo and Pierre Fiala, “Michel Bréal, le marathon, l’olympisme et la paix”, *Mots. Les langages du politique* [Online], 76 | 2004, put online the 21st of april 2008, consulted the 4th of january 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/mots/3743>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/mots.3743>. In French: “Puisque vous allez à Athènes, voyez donc si l’on ne peut organiser une course de Marathon au Pnyx. Cela aura une saveur antique. Si nous savions le temps qu’a mis le guerrier grec, nous pourrions établir le record. Je réclamerais pour ma part l’honneur d’offrir « la Coupe de Marathon ».”

2 DAVIS, Walter J, “THE ATHLETES AT ATHENS. – America Meets Other Nations on Classic Ground” in “Idaho Daily Statesman, 5th April 1896, pp3.

3 GRAHAM, John, “Blake’s hard run – Ran Second for 18 Miles Toward Athens. – Better Condition Might Have Given Him the Race. – Road from Marathon Rough and Hilly. – Broad Jumpers Handicapped by Judges. – Hoyt’s Great Exhibition Vault for Prince George.” In “The Boston Globe”, 27th April 1896, pp5.

4 DAVIS, Walter J, “THE ATHLETES AT ATHENS. – America Meets Other Nations on Classic Ground” in “Idaho Daily Statesman, 5th april 1896, pp3.

5 MEYLAND, G, « LA REVUE DES SPORTS – Théato gagne la course de Marathon (amateurs) » in *Le Radical* Vol. 20 n°202, 21th july 1900, p. 4.

6 BEAU, Jules, Picture #221 in “Photographie sportive – reportage photographique”, Vol. 1900 n°5 – Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie, 4-KG-37 (13), 1900.

7 “FLEETEST RUNNERS OF ALL NATION START IN GREAT MARATHON RACE” in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Vol. 57 n°7, 28th august 1904, p. 27.

8 “Marathon Race Occurs Tuesday” in *St. Louis Globe Democrat* Vol. 30 n°101, 28th august 1904, p. 14.

9 “OLYMPIC MARATHON RACE” in *Sioux City Journal*, 31st august 1904, p. 3.

10 “MARATHON RUN” in *The Boston Globe* Vol. 66 n°51, 20th august 1904, p. 4.

11 “FOR THE OLYMPIC MARATHON – COURSE FOR RACE AT ST. LOUIS SELECTED” in *Boston Evening Standard* Vol. 75, 20th august 1904, p. 12.

12 “COURSE LAID OUT FOR TWENTY-FOUR-MILE MARATHON RACE AT THE FAIR” in *The St. Louis Republic* Vol. 97, 14th august 1904, p. 12.

13 “FOR THE OLYMPIC MARATHON – COURSE FOR RACE AT ST. LOUIS SELECTED” in *Boston Evening Standard* Vol. 75, 20th august 1904, p. 12.

14 “NEW ENGLANDER WINS MARATHON RACE AT THE FAIR” in *The St. Louis Republic* Vol. 97, 31st august 1904, p. 1.

15 “CAMBRIDGE BOY WON MARATHON” in *The Boston Daily Globe* Vol. 66 n°62, 31st august 1904, p. 1–14.

16 “HICKS WON THE MARATHON” in *The Kansas City Times* Vol. 67 n°209, 31st august 1904, p. 5.

17 One runner, Fred Lorz, did cut the finish line tape earlier than Hicks, at 6:03 PM, but he was disqualified after being accused by several witnesses of resting in a car. [“MELLOR BEATEN IN THE MARATHON RACE” in *The Yonkers Herald* Vol. 24 n°2141, 31st august 1904, p. 1.]

18 “STOPS TO EAT PEACHE; LOSES MARATHON RACE” in *The Courier-Journal* Vol. 103 n°13029, 2nd September 1904, p. 6.

19 “MELLOR BEATEN IN THE MARATHON RACE” in *The Yonkers Herald* Vol. 24 n°2141, 31st august 1904, p. 1.

20 “HICKS WINS IN MARATHON RACE” in *Chicago Tribune* Vol. 63 n°209, 31st august 1904, p. 6.

21 “OLYMPIC GAMES” in *Lexington Herald-Leader* Vol. 17, 31st august 1904, p. 4.

22 “EVERETT C BROWN, A CHICAGO LEADER” in *The New York Times* Vol. 86 n°28933, 12th april 1937, p. 17.

23 “NEW ENGLANDER WINS MARATHON RACE AT THE FAIR” in *The St. Louis Republic* Vol. 97, 31st august 1904, p. 1.

24 “Les Jeux Olympiques de Stockholm – LE MARATHON ” in *L’Aéro* Vol. 4 n°528, 14th july 1912, p. 1. In French: “[...] glorieux second, malgré de multiples désavantages”

25 “UNE RUDE EPREUVE ATHLETIQUE – LE MARATHON” in *Le Petit Marocain* Vol. 38 n°10354, 30th august 1950, p. 6.

26 LUCAS, Charles JP, “The Olympic Games – 1904”, p. 52.

27 Thanks to Lauren Sallwasser, Associate Archivist.

28 TARBOX BEALS, Jessie (1904). “Sponging the Winner” – Missouri Historical Society – N20693 – <https://mohistory.org/collections/item/N20693>