**From the Plains of Greece We Come**

**By Bob Schwartz**

Just say the word with me. *Marathon.* To each of us it carries with it a certain emotion. Perhaps the euphoria (or is that delirium) of completion, or the admission that once was, quite frankly more than enough. Or may the bliss of recognizing that your racking distance goes no further than a 10K and the only time you want to hit the wall is when you accidentally exit from the wrong side of the bed.

But no one can deny that the surge in popularity of the marathon race had had a dramatic impact on the number of times the most inane question is asked by the non-runner. You know, the one you’ve patiently responded to countless times with the answer, “It’ll be 26.2 miles – the same distance as the last one I ran, as your unathletic inquisitor responds, “Well what are the odds that would happen! Exact same length, huh? Go figure!”

Though many of us know what it’s like to run a marathon, not all of us know the history behind it. Perhaps you know that it has something to do with a Greek battle, but maybe for all you know it might have been Phi Kappa Delta versus Sigma Nu. Well, I’m here to change all that. I’m the history professor in the microfleece tights and the reflective pullover. Let’s begin with today’s lesson.

*Legend has it that the first famous long-distance runner (well before endorsement deals with shoe companies and guaranteed race-appearance fees) emerged from the plains of Marathon, Greece in 490 B.C.*

*After the Athenians had defeated the Persians at the Battle of Marathon (which has a better ring than, say, the Battle of Dhidimotikhonopolis – you’d be hard pressed to get that on a race t-shirt), the Greek warrior Pheidippides was chosen to bring the news of the great victory to the citizens of Athens. Problem was, the city was many, many miles off in the distance and the invention of the automobile or any form of mass transit was still a few years away.*

*So, young Pheidippides began running the approximately 26 miles from Marathon to Athens without the advantage of a big, carbo-loading pasta dinner the night before. He also ran without the benefit of aid stations, course volunteers, energy bars, bands playing music or cheering spectators yelling, “You’re looking great!” He also did not have the advantages of air-cushioned shoes, polyester shorts, or race directors at the finish line saying, “Here comes Mr. Pheidippides from Athens. Occupation is courier. Let’s give him a nice round of applause!”*

*Pheidippides also fell victim to a common training blunder of modern runners. Apparently he’d recently completed, in two days, a little jaunt of 150 miles to Sparta from Marathon in the effort to obtain some military assistance. Clearly, he’d failed to read the overtraining section from Herodotus’ Book on Running, or he was simply trying to set a PR for a weekly mileage total.*

*Fact is, because of his recent ultra-event and his ongoing day job of warrior, he didn’t allow himself sufficient rest before having to embark on his own marathon. (Of course he had a better excuse of not actually knowing someone had preregistered him for the race.) He hit the proverbial wall around the large sign that read, six miles to Athens, and, tragically, he succumbed to exhaustion on the outskirts of the city.*

*But all was not entirely lost as, in his last gasping and panting breath, he heroically uttered those final words of, “Rejoice, we conquer! Got any sport drink?*

*Tragically, it was then that the rigor of the marathon conquered him. For his tremendous effort he would become famous through the land. (Truth be known, Greek rumor has it that Pheidippides ran much farther than was necessary. Seems he got turned around slightly, and despite not having the benefit of an AAA Trip Tik, he chose to be the initiator of that time-honored male tradition – refusing to ask for directions. Then again, what challenge would a marathon be if Athens were really only 7 ½ miles away?)*

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*His legacy spawned the inclusion of the marathon race when the Olympics were inaugurated in Greece in 1896. Unfortunately, none of the 25 entrants seemed to have gained any lesson from the calamitous outcome of Pheidippides. The runners had pretty much no idea of what they were about to experience. A first-time marathoner encumbered with a healthy dose of naiveté is often not an attractive sight.*

*The participants all struggled to get to the finish line, and only nine actually completed the race. Due to their fatigue at the end, only four were even able to remember their names and three of them were delirious enough to jump into the Olympic pool, thinking that their next event was synchronized swimming. The good news was, in their derangement, they picked up a bronze medal for their impromptu pool performance.*

*As for the gold medalist in the inaugural Olympic marathon, the story is that a local Greek peasant named Spiridon Louis entered the Olympic Stadium first and slowly ran toward the finish line that was in front of the king’s throne. (However, until I see actual photographs of the finish, I still believe it was a Kenyan that won.) Allegedly, he was covered with dust and running in tattered, bedraggled, worn sandals (state-of-the-art, though). He would cross the finish line in 2 hours, 55 minutes and 10 seconds for 40K, and his dazed smile was for realizing he’d now qualified for the Boston Marathon.*

*His life would change forever. Everlasting glory was bestowed on him (once he passed the rigorous drug-screening laboratory) as the host country went ecstatic. He was given 25,000 francs (perhaps thereby becoming the first athlete to lose his amateur status), and was finally given permission by his future father-in-law to marry his longtime sweetheart (purportedly a bronze medalist in the badminton completion). Ah, the romance of running.*

*At the 1908 Olympics in London, the marathon distance was changed from 24.85 to 26 miles, to cover the ground from Windsor Castle to White City Stadium. You may then wonder, where did that lovely 385 yards get tacked on? It was added so that the race could finish in front of King Edward VII’s royal box. Thus, the present 26.2 mile distance. And many a present-day marathoner wishes Windsor castle were just a tad bit closer to the king’s box when they find themselves doing the merciless march over the last mile of a marathon.*

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With its rising popularity, marathoners all have their unique stories about their races. I’ve been known to tell the one where I had a sever calf cramp from two miles on; encountered gale force winds of 60 miles per hour in whichever direction the run was heading; struggled through the hail, snow, thunderstorms, and locusts at various times during the race; had a body temperature of 103 degrees and had just gotten over walking pneumonia; suffered bleeding feet from blisters halfway through the race; ran without aid stations, as the volunteers didn’t show; couldn’t see my split times because my contacts popped out at mile 3; had Montezuma’s Revenge requiring 22 bathroom breaks; and had to run dramatically uphill at all times. Yet, despite all these obstacles; I persevered in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversity and set my PR by six minutes. It’s my story and I’m sticking to it.

If any other runner tells you a similar, seemingly implausible story – well, you just nod your head approvingly, because you weren’t there. For no matter what level of adversity a marathoner encountered, they did indeed achieve something that will change them forever.

Of course, not in the manner of Pheidippides and how his marathon tragically altered things. Imagine if only he’d said, “Hey, you, Deiopholese, I’ve got a bunion. How’s about you running back to Athens to tell them the good news of our victory?”

But he didn’t and, as they say, the rest is history.