

THE OLYMPIC GAMES (4)

The First Modern Olympic Games in Athens Greece April 6th- April 16th 1896

The first modern Olympic Games were held April 6th through April 16th in Athens Greece. King George I of Greece opened the Olympic Games on Easter Sunday, April the 6th of 1896 with this simple statement: "I hereby proclaim the opening of the First Games of the Modern Olympiad." Georgios Averoff, a wealthy Greek residing in Alexandria, Egypt; helped design and finance the Panathenaic Stadium with seating for fifty thousand spectators was honored by the unveiling of a white marble statue of his likeness the day before the opening. Before the Olympic Games, Athens was a crowded and dirty city. Coubertin traveled across the Mediterranean to Egypt and convinced Averoff to finance the Olympic Games. Averoff had been known previously to help finance several Greek schools. The shy Averoff did not even attend the Olympic Games of 1896. In addition to Averoff, another Olympic Games contributor and supporter was the Zappas brothers. The construction of a gymnasium for fencing and the administrative offices called the Zapeon was the Zappas contribution.



Three hundred and eleven athletes from thirteen countries entered the competition events. No women were entered in the competition. The Greeks won forty-seven medals of which ten were gold. The United States won nineteen medals overall; eleven were gold and were earned in the track and field events. The swimming events took place in the Sea of Zea with water temperatures of fifty-five degrees. The sailing and rowing events were canceled due to stormy weather conditions.

The First Modern Olympic Games Champion in History

James B. Connolly of the United States became the first modern Olympic Games champion in history when he won the triple jump (hop, step & jump) competition. This was a most remarkable feat for a number of reasons. First, Connolly had left college at Harvard without official permission to travel to the Olympics in Athens on his own. Second, Connolly was pick-pocketed in Naples, Italy and nearly missed the team train to Athens when he was delayed at the police station by the police investigation. Third, the rules for triple jump were modified from the American college standard Connolly was familiar with. Fourth, James joined the athletes from the Suffolk AC and Princeton College and arrived in Athens twelve days later than planned because the Greeks measured calendar dates by the 'Greek orthodox calendar' rather than the 'Roman calendar' used by the countries of the western world. The travel weary American athletes found that they arrived twelve days later than they had planned and would be competing the next day due to the calendar discrepancy. Connolly competed last of twelve contestants and triple jumped a distance of just under forty-five feet which was far below his normal distance; but, it was still good enough for a win and the first ever awarded "silver" Olympic medal. Gold as a medal color was considered "vulgar" until it was officially accepted for the 1904 Olympic Games in St. Louis!

Bob Garrett of Princeton was a double medal winner in the shot put and the discus throw events. Back home in America Garrett had fashioned his own discus to practice with in preparation for the Olympic Games. He knew the Greeks had a lot of pride in the discus throw event. Garrett found the

actual Olympic competition discus to be lighter and easier to handle than his own creation that he had fashioned. Garrett went on to defeat the great Greek champion Paraskevopulos in the competition.

The Marathon

Michel Breal, a Frenchman who was an expert of Greek mythology had suggested the marathon event be included in the Olympics to commemorate the Greek military victory over a Persian force at Marathon in 490 BC. From the plains of Marathon, Philippides, the Greek runner turned soldier was commanded to run to Athens, a distance of approximately 23 miles, with the news that the Greeks had defeated the invading Persian force. "Rejoice, we conquer," Philippides uttered and then he dropped dead. The marathon was the event that the Greeks really wanted to win because of this inspiring Greek history. Twelve of the sixteen runners who approached the starting line for the Olympic marathon race were Greek. The early leaders and favorites were Edwin Flack, the Australian and the American Arthur Blake. Both went out to quickly and faded leaving Spiridon Louis, the Greek shepherd in the lead. After nearly three hours the Greek crowd in the stadium shouted, "Ellen! Ellen!" (A Greek! A Greek!) The kings' sons George and Constantine ran to the stadium entry arch and accompanied the very dusty Louis around the final lap in the stadium to victory! Louis became the acclaimed Greek hero. He was promised free shaves and free meals for life by a Greek barber and a Greek restaurateur. The first Olympics had been somewhat successful; but what was in store for Baron de Coubertin and the Olympic movement for future Olympic Games!

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