



The Legend of Louis

ITS journey, perhaps fittingly, has been more than a marathon in itself, but the medal won by Greek legend Spiros Louis (photo) has finally reached a resting place worthy of its symbolic importance as a beacon to Greek sporting and cultural history.

For on Monday 29 March - 114 years to the day that Louis, a Maroussi-born water carrier, completed his famous triumph - the Museum of the Marathon Run played host to a special ceremony where the Greek government handed over the historic artefact to be put on permanent display, along with Louis' traditional hat, certificate of victory and a replica of the trophy he received.

General secretary for sports Panos Bitsaxis perfectly summed up the sentiment when handing over the medal to Marathon mayor Spyros Zagaris. "The medal of Spyros Louis is returning to its natural resting place," he said. "It is a jewel for Marathon, for Athens, for Greece, and its inspiration will accompany all Greek sports missions anywhere in the world."

"It is a great honour for us to receive these precious heirlooms of Spyros Louis," added Zagaris, who has been the driving force of the museum which was officially inaugurated by the president of the Greek republic Karolos Papoulias, last November.

The placing of the medal, which has been in the possession of the state and housed in the Olympic Stadium - although not on display, could not come at a better time since in October this year the Athens Marathon will celebrate the 2,500th anniversary of Phei-

dippides' mythical run to Athens as a messenger from the Battle of Marathon.

According to Zagaris, the medal has literally not been seen by the public since 1936, the year when Louis received a personal invitation from Adolph Hitler to attend the Berlin Olympics as the guest of honour, his last public appearance.

After bearing the standard of the Greek team during the opening ceremonies, he was received by Hitler and offered him an olive branch from Olympia, the birthplace of the Olympic Games, as a symbol of peace.

The people were to get their wish

Thronged of Greeks lined the dusty, dirt roads as a total of 13 athletes from Greece and four from other nations competed. Frenchman Albin Lermusiaux, who had earlier placed third in the final of the 1500 metres, was the early leader when Louis famously made a stop in the village of Pikermi, where he inquired about those in front. After drinking a glass of while he is sad to have boldly declared: "Never mind I will overtake them and beat them all".

After 32km Lermusiaux was exhausted and abandoned the race after a collapse. The lead was taken over by Australian Edwin Flack who had already won the 800 and 1,500m. Louis slowly closed in on Flack, however, and overtook his rival to win in a time of 2:58:50.

A crowd of more than 70,000 people welcomed Louis as he entered the Panathenaic Stadium, also known as Kallimarmaro (Beautifully Marbled) and this excerpt from the official report sums up the jubilant scenes which followed: "...the Olympic Victor was received

with full honour; the King rose from his seat and congratulated him most warmly on his success. Some of the king's aides-de-camp, and several members of the committee went so far as to kiss and embrace the victor..."

Louis never ran competitively again, preferring instead to retreat to his hometown, where he lived a quiet life, working as a farmer and later as a local police officer.

Article from Athens News



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