

# Australia honours 1896 Olympic Marathon Champion Spyridon Louis

■ Grandson talks about the legacy of his grandfather

*Spyridon Louis won the first modern-day Olympic marathon at the 1896 Athens Olympics, thereby becoming a national hero. Many stories were written about his race from Marathon to Athens which then covered a distance of 40 kilometers. Since the 1908 Olympics in London the distance is 42,195K. This year's race, commemorating the 2500th anniversary of the Battle of Marathon, was run on a similar course, starting in Marathon and finishing in the classic Panathinaiko Stadium.*

In the last few weeks a couple of more anecdotes were added to the story of Spyridon Louis. Of course we are not talking about the Olympic champion, who died of a heart attack at the age of 67 in 1940. But Spyridon Louis is one of two grandsons of the Olympic champion. He has been given the same first name. Nikolaus is the other grandson. Additionally five great grandsons of Spyridon Louis are alive.

Today Spyridon Louis lives in Maroussi. It is the same suburb of Athens where his grandfather came from. A statue in Maroussi reminds us of the sole Greek Olympic marathon champion. The Olympic Stadium, which is just a couple of miles away from Maroussi, carries the name of the marathon winner.

The grandson could never meet his prominent grandfather in person because he was born 16 days after the death of the Olympic champion. But his father has told him all the stories about the family's national hero. "I know that he was an unselfish person with a very strong character. But he was said to be obstinate. Maybe this character has helped him to win the marathon" Spyridon Louis said.

Louis' job was to transport fresh water to Athens. So he had a sort of daily endurance training. "He was a simple person and he did not know anything about sport," his grandson explains and then gives an example: "After he had won the marathon his legs were given a massage. But when he was touched he shouted: What are you doing? It is a disgrace. Let me out of here, I just want to go back to Maroussi to celebrate with my friends."



Statue of 1896 Athens Olympic marathon champion Spyridon Louis stands in Cook Park at Brighton-Le-Sands, on the shore of Botany Bay. The sculptor was Pavlos Kougiumtzis.



Marathon race winner Spyridon Louis, with his awards at 1896 Athens Olympics.

It has often been reported that Spyridon Louis had a glass of wine during his marathon race. But this anecdote is wrong says the grandson, who had been an engineer before he retired. "His girlfriend gave him half an orange and shortly afterwards he got a glass of cognac from his future father in law. There were eye witnesses who have confirmed this number of times." That happened less than 10 kilometres from the finish.

The family never had any financial advantages in conjunction with the success of Spyridon Louis. Back in 1896 the marathon winner was granted one wish by the Greek king. But Louis did not choose a house or an estate. Instead he opted for a horse and a cart for his business. "We have never made any money with the story of my grandfather. And I would not like to do so."

No member of the family has ever run a marathon again after the Olympic race in 1896. "I had no opportunity to do sports when I was young. I was born during the war. And it was not easy in those times to settle in and build up your living," Louis says.

"But I am fascinated of athletics and especially of the marathon. If I see such a race I think about the different conditions. In contrast to former times it looks like luxury today. But I totally respect all marathon runners. If I could I would congratulate everyone personally. I have learnt that it is already an important step to just participate in such a race."

## Legendary Louis

There were 17 athletes that took part in the 1896 Athens Olympic Marathon of whom 13 were Hellenes. Among them Edwin Flack from Australia, Gyula Kellner from Hungary, Arthur Blake from the U.S.A., Albin Lermusiaux from France and Spyridon Louis from Hellas. Bolstered on his way by an orange offered to him by his girlfriend, Spyridon Louis won the race with a time of 2 hours 58 minutes and 50 seconds.

Forty years later, Louis recalled the moments after his victory: "That hour was something unimaginable and it still appears to me in my memory like a dream... Twigs and flowers were raining down on me. Everybody was calling out my name and throwing their hats in the air..."

Appropriately perhaps for a race based on a legend, Spyridon Louis, the first winner, became a legend in his own time. He won before a home crowd expecting a



1896 Olympic medal won by Greek legend Spyridon Louis on permanent display at the Marathon Run Museum.

Hellenic win in what was considered a Hellenic race. The twenty-four year old Louis, a farmer and water carrier, who lived in Maroussi, had taken part in the second trial marathon prior to the Olympics but otherwise he was untrained, and this gave his win its mystique and romanticism and helped him become a legend. The Olympic Stadium that hosts the 2004 Athens Olympics, located very close to Maroussi, is named after Louis.

There has probably never been a marathon win again of such tremendous national importance. Coubertin's biographer, Chicago University professor John MacAloon, said that Louis' dramatic victory in the marathon gave the Olympics an aura of heroism that helped them become the major sporting event in the world.

The longest race and the most gruelling track and field event, the marathon is now the highlight of each Olympics and traditionally takes place on the last day. Its instant popularity led, within months of the Athens Olympics, to the running of a marathon in Paris and, most famously, to the establishment of an annual marathon race which began the next year in Boston, Massachusetts, that is now a major event on the international athletic calendar.

Today, there are over 800 Marathons held in such exotic locales as the Great Wall of China and the North Pole in Antarctica. No destination, however, can match the historic glory of the Athens Classic Marathon. Runners who run from the heart, as most do, regard the Marathon race in Hellas as the true and ultimate competition.

## Battle of Marathon 2500th Anniversary Event:

Millennium Centre - Greek Australian Sports Hall of Fame, 1 December, 2010

Celebrations of the Battle of



Spyridon Louis running in the 1896 Olympic marathon.

Marathon's 2,500-year anniversary will culminate in Sydney with a commemorative event at the, Millennium Centre - Greek Australian Sports Hall of Fame, Brighton-Le-Sands, on 1 December, 2010.

In recognition of Spyridon Louis' marathon legacy a commemorative Pheidippides coin from the, Australian Perth Mint, was presented to his grandson by the Greek Australian Professionals' Association and the Australian Hellenic Educators' Association.

He was also the recipient of a silver coin produced by the, Royal Australian Mint, honouring Edwin Flack, Australia's first Olympic champion. Edwin Flack was the only Australian who participated in the 1896 marathon run with Spyridon Louis and became known as the 'Lion Of Athens'.

Deeply moved by the gesture, Spyridon Louis especially appreciated the images of his grandfather's statue on the shore of Brighton-Le-Sands.

The specially assembled collection of Australian marathon donations to Spyridon Louis' grandson, the Marathon Run Museum and the Municipality of Marathon, Greece, will be discussed in detail on the night.

A major highlight includes an exclusive visual presentation of Maria Polyzou's recreation of Pheidippides' legendary run from Athens to Sparta and Marathon.



Adolf Hitler receiving the Olympic olive branch from Greek athlete Spyridon Louis, at the opening ceremony of the 1936 Berlin Olympics.