

Edwin Flack: 'The Lion of Athens'

■ Australia honours first Olympic Champion (1896)

Edwin Flack was a trailblazer - the first Australian to compete at the Athens 1896 Olympic Games, and first to win. He was a student at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School where he studied Hellenic history. When he left Melbourne in 1895 to study accountancy in London, he was the Australian mile champion. In 1896 he resolved to attend the Athens Games, the first of the modern Olympics; he took leave from his job, travelled across Europe by boat and train, and became the only Australian participant.

By the end of the Athens Games he possessed heroic status, and was followed in the streets by crowds who dubbed him, 'The Lion of Athens'.

Australia had no national Olympic committee then, and Flack was entered as a member of the London Athletic Club - but he chose to run in the colours of his Australian club, the Old Melbourne Athletic Club. He won both the 800 and 1500 metres championships, breaking a pattern of US domination in track and field. On the day after his 800m final, he competed with Spyridon Louis in the Olympic marathon, over a distance he had never run before. He led before collapsing at the 34km mark.

Flack epitomised the Australian have-a-go spirit; although no more than a social tennis player, he entered

both the Olympic singles and doubles. He didn't win a match, but a draw enabled him (with English partner George Robertson) to be accorded bronze-medal status in the men's doubles.

It was Flack's private decision to go to Athens in 1896 and he was the first link in a chain that has seen Australia represented at every modern Olympic Games.

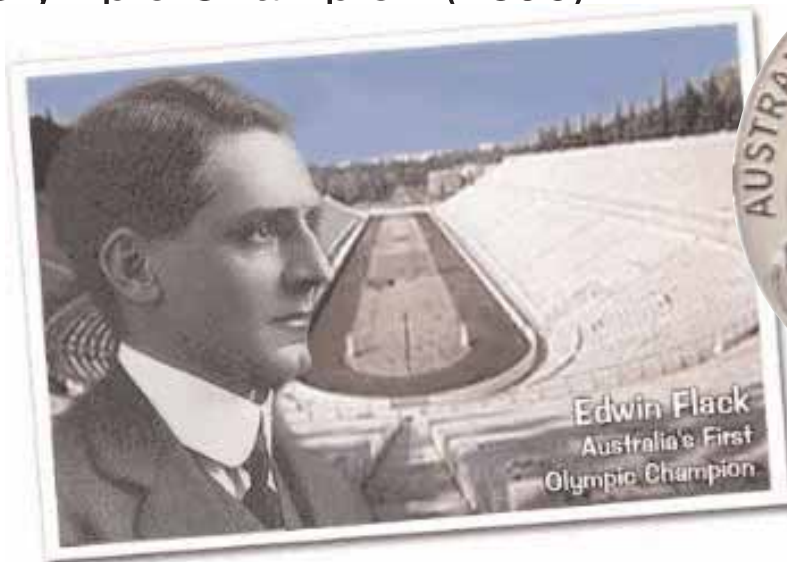
Edwin Flack was awarded two crowns of olive wreaths for each of his Olympic victories and these are on permanent display at the Australian Gallery of Sport and Olympic Museum in Melbourne.

He owned and operated a dairy farm in Berwick, Victoria and has been laid to rest in the Berwick Cemetery. A statue commemorating Flack and his athletic achievements stands in the median strip of High Street, Berwick.

The Australian Olympic Committee has recognised Flack's importance in Australian Olympic history and has adopted the name, Edwin Flack Avenue, to one of the streets adjacent to the Olympic Stadium in Homebush Bay, venue of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Flack has also been inducted into the Australian Sports and Athletics Hall of Fame

1896 Olympic Marathon - Flack & Louis

For Hellenes in particular, the marathon was a special



Edwin Flack - Olympic champion 1896



Olympic silver coin -Edwin Flack (Australian Royal Mint) Donated to the Marathon Run Museum & Spyridon Louis' grandson

event. The Hellenic people of 1896 had observed with great interest the restoration of the Panathenaic stadium in preparation of the return of an ancient Hellenic legacy, the Olympic Games. The new marathon race was considered the highlight of the first revived Olympics.

The marathon, which was run on April 10, 1896, was a close and dramatic race. There was no television coverage in those days, so news of the race was carried back to the stadium by bicycle or horseback. With six miles to go, word arrived that Edwin Flack, an Australian who had already won gold medals in the 800 and 1,500-meter races, was well in the lead. The mostly Hellenic crowd was disheartened by the news.

Cheered on by supporters from his home village, Spyridon Louis accelerated away from his compatriot. He was now the leading Hellenic. He was now second, and gaining on Flack. Louis later reported: "For the first time I was full of ambition. A foreigner should not come first in this race! I made my strides as long as possible. I kept coming closer to the Australian but he was a damned tough guy." Flack was now suffering from the terrible early pace. "I then began to feel rather done in myself and I had the feeling that I should not be able to finish," he later wrote.

The last thing Flack needed now, five miles from the finish, was Louis at his shoulder, but that is what he got. And more than that it was a Louis looking, in Flack's words, "very fresh and running well". Louis later said: "I don't know whether it was 100m, 200m or 500m that the Australian and I were fighting each other side by side. I looked at him perpetually out of the corner of an eye. And I didn't let him gain one metre's ground on me. When he wanted to take the lead and shake me off I stayed with him and in the end he carried on breathlessly falling further and further behind." Flack was now finished. "I staggered on for an-

other 100 yards... then stopped as I should have fallen if I had gone any further." He was soon in the ambulance cart, where he promptly passed out. There was now just 5km to go and a Hellenic was in the lead.

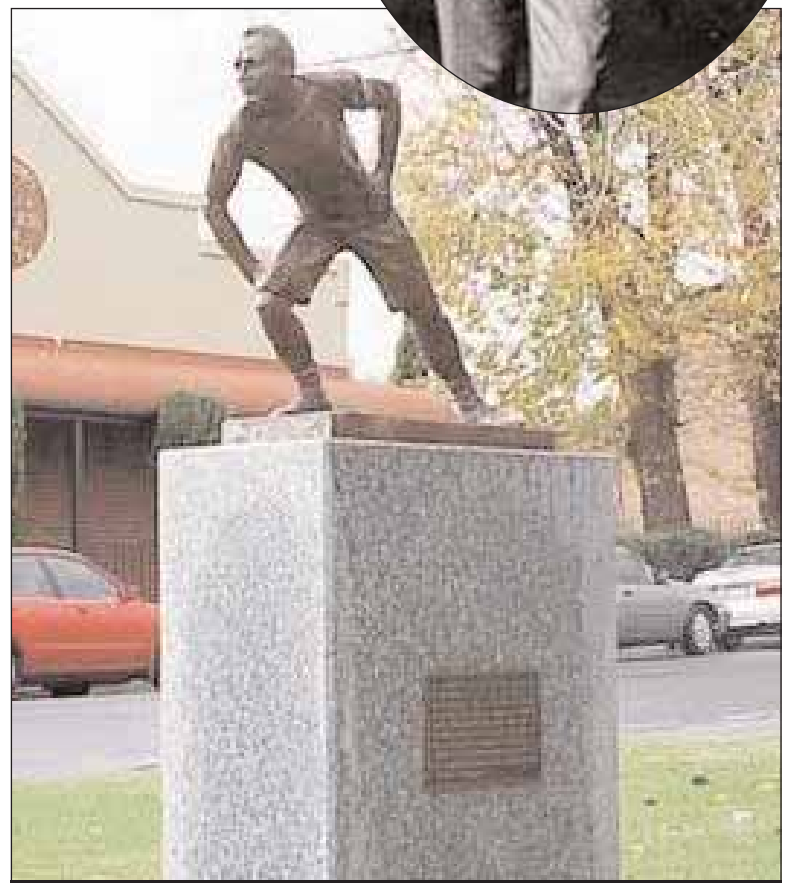
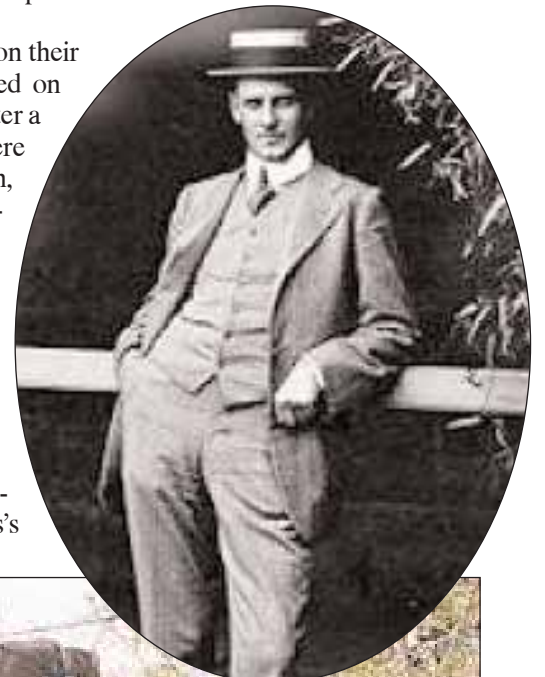
In the stadium, the atmosphere was tense. As the word spread that it was Louis that led the race, the cry "Hellenic, Hellenic!" was taken up by thousands of rapturous spectators.

The whole stadium was on their feet now, every eye trained on the entrance. And then, after a momentary pause there came into the arena a lean, sweat-stained, dust-covered figure in the blue and white of Hellas.

As Louis entered the stadium, two Greek princes - Crown Prince Constantine and Prince George - rushed to meet him and accompanied him on his final lap for a finishing time of 2:58:50. Louis's

victory set off wild celebrations and he became the first Hellenic athletics champion in 1,500 years.

Louis was an instant national hero. The Hellenes were ecstatic. Not only had their ancient Olympic Games been revived in their capital city, but a fellow countryman had won the most glorious of events, the Hellenic-born marathon race.



Edwin Flack has been honoured with a Statue in High Street Berwick, Victoria

Battle of Marathon 2500th Anniversary Event:

Millennium Centre -

Greek Australian Sports Hall of Fame, 1 December, 2010

Celebrations of the Battle of 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 Edwin Flack's 1896 Olympic legacy a commemorative silver coin from the Australian Perth Mint, was presented to Spyridon Louis' grandson by the Greek Australian Professionals' Association and the Australian Hellenic Educators' Association. This symbolic gesture is in honour of his grandfather, Spyridon Louis, who participated in the 1896 Athens Olympic marathon run with Australia's Edwin Flack.

The coin will be on permanent display at the Marathon Run Museum as part of the Australian sports collection as well as Peter Sweeney's book, 'Edwin Flack- The Lion of Athens'.

The specially assembled collection of Australian marathon donations to Spyridon Louis' grandson, the Marathon Run Museum and the Municipality of Marathon 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.