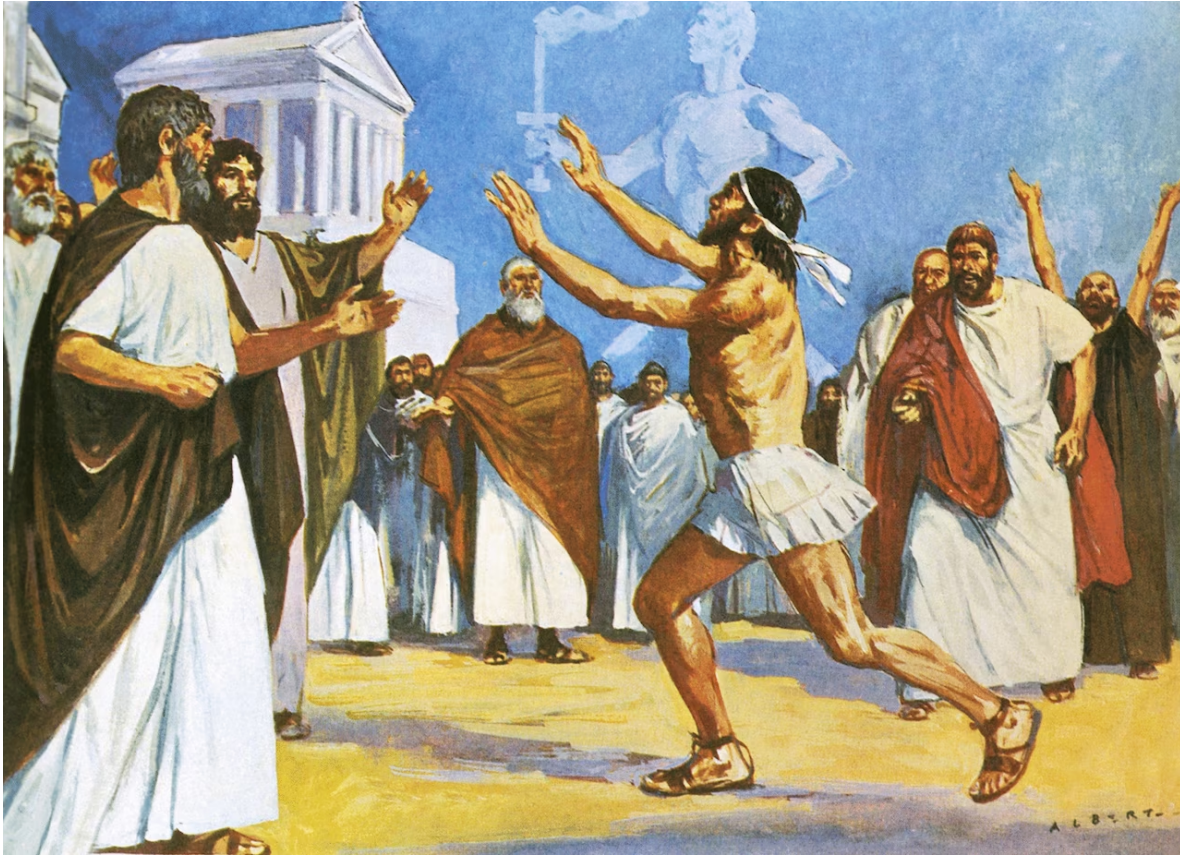




Legend has it that ancient Greek courier Pheidippides arrived in Athens in 490 B.C. bringing news of an incredible victory over the Persians—and inspiring the modern marathon. The problem with that story, as illustrated here? It never happened.

IMAGE BY SALINAS, ALBERTO VIA LOOK AND LEARN / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

HISTORY & CULTURE

Who invented the marathon? It's not as ancient as you think

Most people believe the race was inspired by an ancient Greek courier, who ran 26 miles to declare victory against the Persians. They're wrong.

By Erin Blakemore

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Ask most people about the origins of the marathon—a race covering 26.2 miles of terrain—and you will likely hear about how

Pheidippides, an ancient Greek courier, ran 26 miles from the town of Marathon to Athens to announce the Greek victory in a decisive battle over the Persians—then died on the spot. As legend would have it, the Greeks honored the herald by adding a “marathon” to the ancient Olympic Games.

But the true history is more complex and convoluted. Here’s how the race got its name—and why everything you’ve ever heard about the sport may be wrong.

Ancient origins?

First, the facts: There *was* an ancient Greek named Pheidippides, and he did work as a courier during the war against the Persians in 490 B.C. According to the ancient historian Herodotus, the courier did make an epic run. But Pheidippides was not heralding victory in the Battle of Marathon—he was attempting to round up troops to help beat back the Persians. Herodotus writes that the courier ran an incredible 153 miles back and forth between Athens and Sparta over 36 hours.

(At the Battle of Marathon, Athens’ underdog victory stunned Persia.)



Did a Greek messenger really collapse and die of exhaustion immediately after running to Athens to announce the rout of the Persian invaders in the Battle of Marathon? This statue depicts that scene but historical accounts are far less certain.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES NÈGRE VIA THE MET GILMAN COLLECTION, PURCHASE, HARRIETTE AND NOEL LEVINE GIFT, 2005

It worked and the Athenians won, beating back the Persians. But despite his incredible athletic feat, Pheidippides is not recorded as delivering news of the victory or dying afterwards. Instead, sources conflict on whether the name of a messenger who did so was Thersippos or Eukles. In A.D. 347, Plutarch recorded that “most say it was Eukles, who, running with his armor hot from the battle...could only say ‘Be happy! We have won!’ and immediately expired.”

The legend of Pheidippides announcing the Marathon victory seems to have originated more than a thousand years later in the 19th century, when Robert Browning wrote a popular poem in which the courier ran to Athens, declared “Rejoice, we conquer!” and died.

However, none of these men inspired a race at the ancient Olympics. Though those competitions did involve footraces, they covered shorter distances that were measured by the stadion, an increment determined by the length of the Athens stadium. The longest race was a mere 24-stade jaunt, or about 2.85 miles. (That doesn't mean it was easy, though: Historians point out that in at least one competition, runners were decked out in 60-pound armor.)

(What other Olympic sports do we no longer play?)

The real origins of marathons

So how did the marathon get its name and distance? Runners can thank French linguist and classicist Michel Bréal for both.

In the 1890s, Bréal participated in the founding congress of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which proposed a series of international competitions inspired by the ancient games that would rotate among countries every four years. Greece had been hosting its own revived Olympics for years, but the IOC wanted to formalize them as a competition between nations.



Footraces—depicted on this vase by artist Euphiletos Painter—were among the earliest known events in the ancient Greek Olympics. But they likely weren't quite as long as the modern marathon.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROGERS FUND, 1914 VIA THE MET

Bréal suggested that one of the events be a footrace from Marathon to Pnyx, where the ancient Athenians held their most popular assemblies—a distance of 40 kilometers, or 24.85 miles. “See if we can organize a Marathon race at the Pnyx,” he wrote. “It will have an antique flavor.”

The organizers were enthusiastic about the idea, and at the 1896 Summer Games in Athens, Greek athlete Spiridon Louis won the race. It was a victory for Greece—and for alcohol, which Louis imbibed to help him get through the grueling race, during which he collapsed at least once.

(These ultramarathoners are fueled by science, obsession—and a love of struggle.)

Only in 1908 was the race extended to 26.2 miles, in deference to the British royal family. The Olympics were held in London that year, and the mileage “arbitrarily” lengthened so King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra could easily view the finish line from the royal box.



U.S. runner and eventual gold medalist John Hayes makes his way through London in the 1908 Olympic Games. This was the first year that marathons were extended to a full 26.2 miles.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PA IMAGES ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES

The seeming winner of that lengthier marathon, Italian pastry chef Dorando Pietri, fell a reported five times from exhaustion during the race, and his victory was contested due to the assistance he got from officials on the field, who worried he might die in the presence of the royals. Instead, the second finisher, U.S. runner John Hayes, was declared the winner. The brutal finish made both men wildly popular, and the race has been 26.2 miles ever since.

Racing into modern history

Since then, marathons have only grown in popularity. The first U.S. marathon was held in Boston in 1897, and though it began nearly a century later, in 1970, the New York City Marathon is now the nation's biggest.

Women, barred from most marathons until the 1970s, now have excel in their own events, as do people with disabilities. Meanwhile, ultramarathons and other races have increased in popularity as the sport of running pounds on...and on...and on. It may not have its roots in a courier's death, but the marathon race won't lose pace any time soon.

A previous version of this story had the incorrect distance between Marathon and Pnyx. It has been corrected.

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