

Bob Phillips

26 Miles

385
Yards

How Britain Made
the Marathon



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1.

The introduction. 26 miles 385 yards. The
making of the marathon ... and other
tales of the torrid tarmac

THE FIRST Olympic marathon, of 1896, was won in just under three hours over a course which was said to be 40 kilometres. Now the two-hour marathon for the standard distance of 42.195 kilometres (26 miles 385 yards) is a reality. A century and longer ago, marathon races were for a few grizzled veterans. Now, post-Covid, more than a quarter of a million people of all ages apply each year to run the London Marathon. Kenyans, Ugandans and Ethiopians habitually win the gold medals at major international Games and Championships, but the marathon race has never been more popular in Britain than it is now. In each recent normal year, more than 2,000 British men have run the distance in three hours ten minutes or faster, and more than 2,000 British women have done so in three hours 30 minutes or faster – the mark of respectability at which anyone who completes

the classic distance can truly describe themselves as a real runner, rather than just a jogger.

Despite the recent history of African supremacy, the standardisation of the marathon, contested universally for almost a century, was very largely a British invention, and two of the earliest Olympic champions at the beginning of the 20th century had been born in Britain. The British have continued to produce marathon runners of world class, though far fewer now than in the frequent past. This book is not a history of the marathon in Britain or anywhere else, nor a catalogue of wins and losses and a mass of statistics marking every sliver of progress over more than 120 years. It's not an encyclopedia, though there are plenty of hopefully fascinating facts and figures to be found. It's not a training manual, teaching you in easy stages how to run the marathon – in truth, there are NO easy stages in marathon running at those sub-3:10 or sub-3:30 levels.

Instead, it tells the story in anecdotal manner of the origins of the marathon in Britain and elsewhere and its formative years – largely, but by no means exclusively, from the British perspective. There aren't too many detailed descriptions of races because, frankly, the identity of whoever was in the leading group at, say, 15 kilometres in the Olympic marathon of 1924 is really only of interest to the most zealous of statisticians. Much more rewarding – at least in my view, and I hope yours – is to learn who the runners were in the distant past, whether winners or losers, what they did for a living, how they trained,

even how they travelled across the globe in the era of steam-ships rather than jet airliners. It was also, even more significantly, not until the 1980s that marathon running became a professional occupation for the elite.

The making of the marathon into an event of universal appeal and of a status comparable to the track distances contested at the Olympic Games and other major championships – 5,000 metres and 10,000 metres for both men and women – seems to me to have been between 1952 and 1960. These, you will notice, are Olympic years and the marathon winners were, successively, Emil Zátopek, Alain Mimoun and Bikila Abebe. Between them, they hustled the marathon out of the age of those grizzled veteran ‘plodders’ into an era of ever-increasing speed. Though not the speed with which we are familiar in the 2020s: Zátopek, flat out, ran 1,500 metres in three minutes 52.8 seconds, which is worth about four minutes 11 seconds for the mile. Eliud Kipchoge, the first sub-two-hour marathon runner, has run the mile in three minutes 50.40 seconds, and such basic speed has served to reduce the fastest-ever marathon time by 20 minutes or so in the last 70 years. And that’s where the book more or less ends, though I take the liberty of delving every now and then a little further on into the 1960s, where relevant. You will find a certain amount of repetition, and I justify that on the grounds that each chapter is an entertainment in itself, even if its context spreads much wider through marathon-running history ... and sometimes folklore and fantasy!

You will find mention, and occasionally more than just a mention, of names that will be unfamiliar to you. Len Hurst, George Crossland, Charlie Gardiner, Tom Longboat, Sir Harry Barclay, Violet Piercy, Whitey Michelsen, Jesse Van Zant – all of these characters figure in what I am presenting as a series of hopefully entertaining episodes. It's the story of a vanished era, when even the very best of marathon men and women ran purely for the pleasure of it, and very, very few made any material gain from doing so. It places emphasis on the beginning of that modern era, which I take to be the victory at the 1952 Olympics of Zátópek in his debut at the distance, having set world records and won titles galore on the track, including the Olympic 5,000 and 10,000 metres a few days before his marathon triumph. I saw Zátópek and Mimoun run when they came to London in the mid-1950s, and I wonderingly watched, when I was still a youthful fan on an economy package tour to the 1960 Olympics, the first exceptional African marathon runner, Bikila Abebe, of Ethiopia, who came padding barefoot out of the dark shadows of nighttime along Rome's Appian Way and under the torch-lit arches of the Colosseum to win the gold medal.

I've been following the sport of athletics, first as a teenage enthusiast and then as a journalist and broadcaster, for more than 60 years, and I've met and interviewed many of Britain's greatest marathon runners. I've also had the firsthand experience of having run a dozen marathons myself, including London twice, and so can identify in

practical terms with the champions, though I readily admit that my pace was rather more modest. Actually, a lot more modest.

To be frank, I don't find the 'Big City' marathons – London, New York, Chicago, Boston – particularly exciting to watch any more. They are too predictable. There's too much stage management. An elite dozen or so, men and women, run the first half at a pre-determined pace, decided, I suppose, by the organisers or maybe by the managers of one or more among that elite. Then, gradually, the bunch thins out. There can still be a surprising winner, but the manner of the victory is over-familiar. The times are invariably fast, but competition counts for more, and thankfully there are still marathons at the Olympic Games, World Championships, and, at a lower level, European Championships and Commonwealth Games, where medals rather than money are the prize. Marathons are different now to what they were 60 years or more ago. Not better, not worse, but much larger, more accessible, and that's the story that I am telling.

The following books relevant to the timescale that I am considering are just some among the ones I have read and can recommend. I should add the proviso that economics in the 21st century dictate that some of these are self-published and will not be easy to find, or may be out of print or not reproduced on the internet. An immensely useful internet source is www.athlos.co.uk, which is dedicated to preserving athletics literature

and has some 50 books, published from 1807 onwards, available online, including the first in the list below.

Shearman, Montague, *Athletics and Football*.

Longman's, Green & Co, 1887.

Butler, Guy, *Modern Athletics*. Cambridge University Press, 1929.

Webster, F.A.M., *The Science of Athletics*. Nicholas Kaye, 1936.

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Loader, W.R., *Staying the Distance*. Jonathan Cape, 1960.

Lovesey, Peter, *The Kings of Distance*. Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1968.

Lovesey, Peter, *The Official Centenary History of the Amateur Athletic Association*. Guinness Superlatives, 1980.

Hill, Ron, *The Long Hard Road*. Ron Hill Sports, 1981 and 1982.

Gynn, Roger, *The Guinness Book of the Marathon*. Guinness Superlatives, 1984.

Williston, Floyd, *Johnny Miles; Nova Scotia's Marathon King*. Nimbus Publishing Ltd, 1990.

Derderian, Tom, *Boston Marathon: The First Century of the World's Premier Running Event*. Human Kinetics, 1995.

Cooper, Pamela, *The American Marathon*. Syracuse University Press, 1998.

Martin, David E. & Gynn, Roger W.H., *The Olympic*

- Marathon: The History and Drama of Sport's Most Challenging Event.* Human Kinetics, 2000.
- Sears, Edward S. *Running Through The Ages.* McFarland & Co, 2001.
- Hill, Ron & Shuttleworth, Neil, *Manchester Marathons 1908-2002.* Ron Hill Running Enterprises, 2003.
- Gotaas, Thor, *Running.* Reaktion Books, 2008.
- Hewson, Ray, *'Dalton's Marathon Man: From Iron Ore to Gold.* M. Hewson, 2010.
- Macgregor, Donald, *Running My Life.* Pinetree Press, 2010.
- Hadgraft, Rob, *Plimsolls On, Eyeballs Out: The Rise and Horrendous Fall of Marathon Legend Jim Peters.* Desert Island Books, 2011.
- Harris, Norman, *At Last He Comes: The Greatest Race in History.* Authorhouse, 2013.
- Whitaker, Michael, *Running For Their Lives; The Extraordinary Story of Britain's Greatest Ever Distance Runners.* Yellow Jersey Press, 2013.
- Herington, Steve, *Bob Cole The Runner: The Strange Life of a Forgotten Champion* S.E. Herington, 2016.
- Butcher, Pat *Quicksilver – The Mercurial Emil Zátopek.* Globerunner Productions, 2016.
- A Difference In Times: David Thurlow's Interviews with British International Athletes – from the 1920s to the 1970s.* National Union of Track Statisticians, 2017.
- Wilson, Alex, *Len Hurst Champion Belter: The Story of Len Hurst, Britain's First Marathon Champion.* DB Publishing, 2019.