

Marathon to Athens and Beyond

by Jack Galub

It was 1946, and Europe was a smoking pile. The Berlin airlift was yet to come. For a blessed day, that continent's problems were far away as the Boston Marathon once again was center stage.

From Greece, one of the most battered of the small countries, 36-year-old Stelios Kyriakides flew into Boston on a lumbering prop plane and went on to win the run in 2:29:27. According to *Life* magazine, he shouted, "For Greece!" as he crossed the finish line. He turned down \$20,000 to become a pro and instead devoted himself to raising funds for a shipload of food for his hungry country. He also raised money to buy equipment for Greek athletes.

To Greeks, Kyriakides became a symbol of what can be accomplished despite odds. By subscription, funds were raised among the Greek people to present him with the house in which he and his family now live.

Now 66 years old, Kyriakides no longer runs. Instead, he works with young athletes and heads the sports committee in the Philothei area of Athens where he lives.

Recently, I spent a day with Stelios, talking with him about his training philosophy while driving the length of the historic Marathon to Athens course.

The Plain of Marathon should be seen first not during a race or with a gaggle of tourists but alone or with one or two runners. In the stillness, it is easy to lose oneself in the history, legend and myth that envelops the area.

The Plain is much as it was in 490 B.C. when the outnumbered Athenians and Plataeans threw back a Persian army. It still is flanked on the south and west by a crescent of mountains. The Plain itself is flat; 5½ miles long and 1½-2½ miles wide. Gone is the great

marsh on its northeast corner along the Bay of Marathon. A number of small, ancient villages also have vanished. Now there is two-lane highway leading into the present village of Marathon. There is no industry, and few cars or buses are seen on the road.

Just beyond the southern end of the village is a marble stone on which is emblazoned in gold letters, "Starting Point of the Marathon." The first leg of the run crosses the Plain and goes past the Tymvos of Marathon—the 39-foot-high tumulus erected over the ashes of the 192 Plataeans killed in the battle—and onto the Marathon-Athens road.

During marathon races, the two-lane portion of the highway is closed to traffic until it links with the four-lane divided artery that cuts across Athens. At that point, one lane is closed off and lined by police to prevent interference with runners by spectators, vehicles and dogs. Stelios became wary of dogs after seeing a runner bitten at the finish of an international event. It is at his suggestion that police are alert to the presence of dogs. Yet this precaution may be unnecessary since a dog on a leash or roaming free is a rarity in Athens.

At the sixth mile, the road starts an undulating rise topped off at the 10th mile and then easing down for about a mile. The killing segment of the route begins at 11 miles. There the highway climbs almost steadily through the 18th mile, crests sharply at 20 miles, levels off, rises again and then starts down into Athens. Kyriakides believes it is this last extended series of hills that makes the Greek course more difficult than the one at Boston.

As the runners near the heart of the city, they peel off for the finish inside the glistening Panathinaikos Stadium. Built entirely of white marble, the spectacular landmark was completed in time for the revival of the Olympics in 1896. It is now too narrow for modern competition but is kept for the finish of the National Marathon and as a monument to the Olympics.

The National Marathon is run in April starting at two in the afternoon, an hour when the average Greek is settling down for his afternoon nap. The usual 90-degree heat makes dehydration a threat. In his training, Stelios worked on lessening his dependency on water. During a race he carried slices of lemon and lumps of sugar he placed on his tongue a mile before the finish.

Kyriakides started running in Cyprus after injuring a leg. The doctor who treated him was Reginald Cheverton, a British long-distance runner. He encouraged Stelios to start running to strengthen his legs. They trained together running 3-4 miles at night and in the early morning.

Stelios started hankering for competition and would sneak onto the local track and work out, running 30 laps at a time. He loaded his hands with pebbles, dropping one for each lap, perhaps taking a lesson from Demosthenes who loaded his cheeks with pebbles while practicing oratory. That was the beginning. Back on the mainland, he began winning regularly at six miles then moved up to the marathon.

The training program he developed for himself was designed to give him the stamina he needed yet avoid the danger of leg problems. Long, slow distance at half his racing speed was the cornerstone of his schedule. He would run 10-15 miles every day (15-20 miles before major races), often on soft ground to strengthen his leg muscles. At least twice during every season he would walk the National Marathon course at a 4-5 m.p.h. pace, again for leg strengthening but also to imprint in his mind the subtle rises and steep hills of the course. He believed in planning each of his races instead of just plunging into it.

Asked about speed work, he did not answer, leaving the impression his conditioning program gave him the trained-in stamina he needed. He supplied the inborn speed. ●



Kyriakides (left) at the start of the original course on the Plain of Marathon. (Jack Galub photo).