

Win or Die: Stylianos Kyriakides and the 1946 Boston Marathon

The 1946 Boston Marathon was the event's golden anniversary run, and the first marathon after the World War II years. It was such a dramatic race that Boston Globe Sports Editor Jerry Nason dubbed it "the only Boston Marathon that mattered." That's because this was a run for the human race. Defending champion Johnny A. Kelley, a two-time winner, was hoping for a repeat victory but faced a friend he hadn't seen for eight years, a man who had barely escaped execution in Greece during the war.

Johnny Kelley had met Stylianos Kyriakides at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, where the two became fast friends. Kelley invited him to run Boston, and Kyriakides came over in 1938 as the champion of the Balkans. He was given the number 1 – and a new pair of running shoes that would be his undoing. Deep into the race, Kyriakides – who had finished every run he had ever started – developed bleeding blisters that forced him to drop out and take a bus and a cab to the finish line. His head bowed in shame, Kyriakides told Jerry Nason, "Somebody I will come back and win your race."

Eight years later, Kyriakides showed up at Nason's office, emaciated and unrecognizable. He sat down and told a stunned Nason how a German patrol in Athens had spared him during a roundup because they found his Berlin Olympic credentials in his pocket. He told Nason he had come back to Boston to run the marathon and to let the world know that Greeks were dying of starvation by the thousands in the aftermath of World War II and because of the ongoing civil war.

Just before the race, a Greek American legislator named George Demeter handed Kyriakides a note. On the front it had a Greek phrase that meant "Win or Die", the ancient credo uttered by Spartan mothers to their sons before battle. There was writing on the back of the note as well, but Demeter told him to wait until the end before reading it.

At Heartbreak Hill, Kyriakides and Kelley broke away from the pack. With about a mile to go, Kelley took the lead. But Kyriakides, spurred by visions of the Greek flag and his starving family, tore past his friend to win. After his victory, he turned over the note and found it carried the words of the unknown Greek runner who had rushed from the Battle of Marathon to Athens in 490 B.C. to announce, "We are victorious", signifying that the Greeks had defeated the Persians.

A month later, having made the world aware of what was happening in Greece, Kyriakides returned to Athens with boatloads of food and medicine. He was greeted by a million people.

«Σπάνια πίσω από την προσπάθεια ενός αθλητή κρύβεται μια τόσο δραματική ιστορία, και πιθανόν να μην έχει υπάρξει άλλος άνθρωπος που να έχει νιώσει τόσο έντονα το χρέος να ξεπεράσει τον εαυτό του για να πετύχει κάτι για τους άλλους.»

Μπιλ Κάνιγκχαμ, Μπόστον Χέραλντ, 1946

«Χωρίς αμφιβολία ήταν ο πιο σημαντικός Μαραθώνιος που έχει γίνει ποτέ στη Βοστώνη... Την ιστορία του πεινασμένου, πάμπτωχου Έλληνα, ο οποίος ταξίδεψε χιλιάδες μίλια για να τρέξει 12 χλμ. σ' έναν αγώνα ελέους, θα την αφηγούνται στην Ελλάδα ακόμη και έναν αιώνα αργότερα.»

Τζέσι Νέισον, αθλητικός συντάκτης της Μπόστον Γκλόουμπ, 1946

«Σήμερα όλοι στην Αθήνα γνωρίζουν ότι το ανθρώπινο πνεύμα είναι αθάνατο.»

Ντέιβ Ίγκαν, Μπόστον Αντβερτάιζερ, 1946

«Πώς μπορείς να νικήσεις έναν άνθρωπο που τρέχει για την πατρίδα του.»

Τζόνι Κέλι, 1946

«Ηξερα πως ή θα νικήσω ή θα πεθάνω.»

Στυλιανός Κυριακίδης, Βοστώνη, 1946