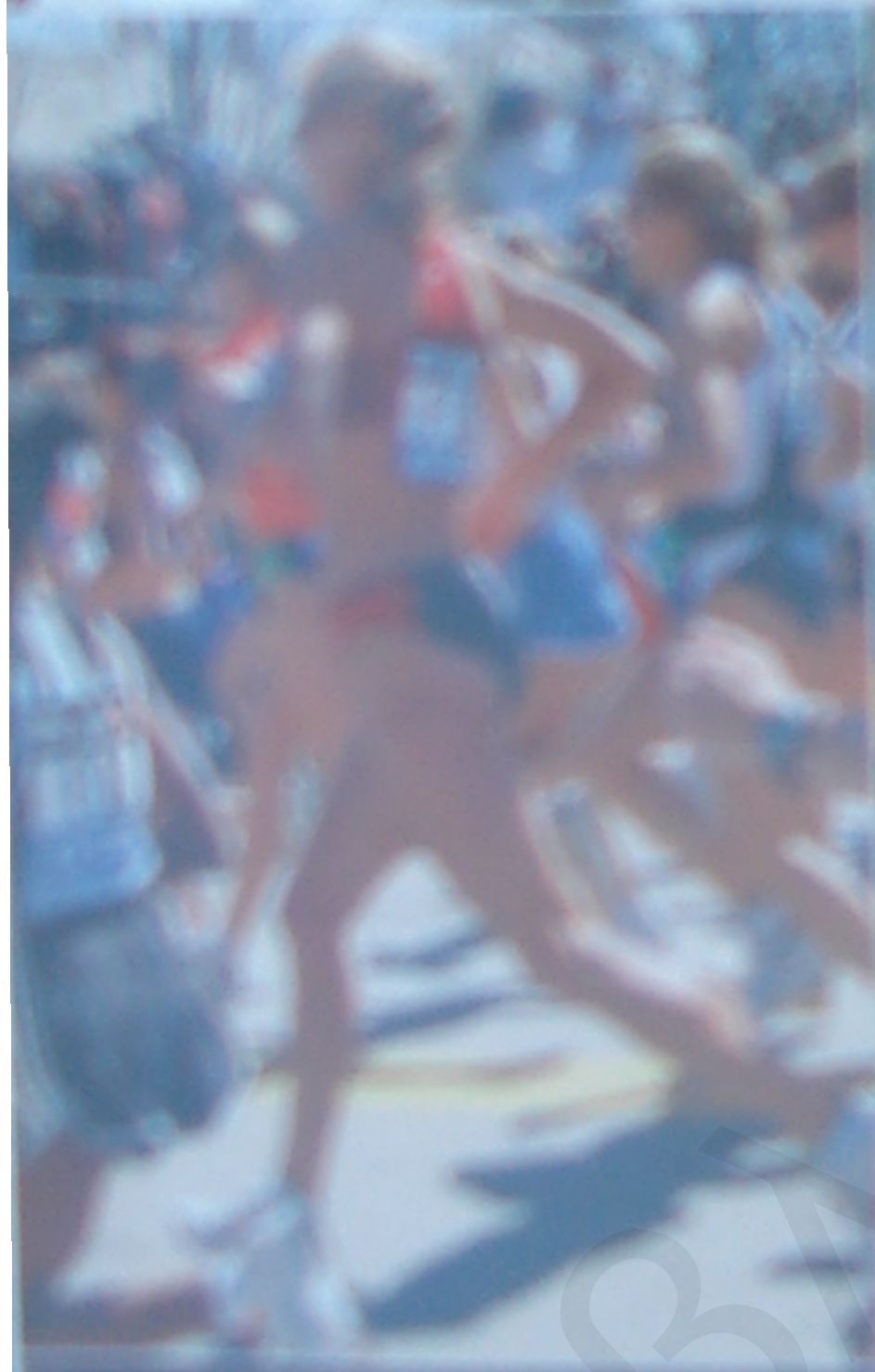


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WIN OR DIE

THE INSPIRED VICTORY AND ENDURING LEGACY OF STYLIANOS KYRIAKIDES

BY RICHARD A. JOHNSON

*"There is in the worst of fortune the best of chances for a happy change."
— Euripides*

It has been 60 years since Stylianos Kyriakides ran both the race of his life and one of the most compelling races in the storied 110-year history of the Boston Marathon. No runner ever faced greater odds to reach the starting line, much less achieve victory in America's greatest race, than the former Greek Olympian.

The story of his triumph at Boston is as dramatic as it was improbable. And though it happened on the same day that Johnny Pesky hit a game-winning home run at the home opener for the pennant-winning 1946 Red Sox, and in the same year that Boston sent both John Kennedy to Congress and the Celtics to the NBA (on the same night), Kyriakides's victory seems more like a cherished ancient myth drawn from the verses of Pindar than a mere sports tale torn from the frayed pages of a brittle scrapbook.

Prior to World War II, Kyriakides, who started running in his native Crete during the 1920s, developed his talents at local track meets and on the mainland of Greece, and was soon good enough to run for the Greek national team. In 1934, he won the marathon at the Balkan Games, and was feted and granted an audience with Greek Marathon legend and 1896 Olympic champion Spiridon Loues. He soon followed in Loues's footsteps as a member of the Greek Olympic team at the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics. It was here that he made friends with a fellow runner named Johnny Kelley and received an invitation that would change his life.

Following their disappointing performances in the marathon — in which Kyriakides placed 11th and Kelley 18th — the two shared running stories and laughed as both remarked how they hated shaking Hitler's hand at

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KYRIAKIDES RECEIVES HIS WINNERS MEDAL FOR THE 1946 BOSTON MARATHON FROM WALTER BROWN OF THE B.A.A.

COLLECTION OF THE SPORTS MUSEUM



COURTESY OF THE KYRIAKIDES FAMILY
 STYLIANOS KYRIAKIDES MAKES HIS ROUNDS AS BILL COLLECTOR FOR THE PIRAEUS ELECTRIC COMPANY IN ATHENS. DURING THE WAR KYRIAKIDES RISKED A NAZI FIRING SQUAD WHEN HE RELAYED WAR NEWS HE'D HEARD ON HIS CONTRABAND SHORTWAVE RADIO TO CUSTOMERS.

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one of the rare receptions given by the dictator. Just before embarking homeward, Kelley hugged his newfound friend and encouraged him to come to Boston and compete in the marathon.

In Greece, the Boston Marathon was held in nearly as high esteem as the Olympic race, for it was the 1896 Olympic marathon in Athens which inspired its Boston counterpart, created by officials of the Boston Athletic Association (B.A.A.) in 1897. By 1938, Kyriakides decided to accept Kelley's invitation and attempt to become only the second runner from outside North America to win the race.

As one of the top runners in the world, Kyriakides was afforded the rare privilege of being given bib numeral one by B.A.A. officials who felt, along with most of the press, that the 26-year-old Greek was the class of a field which included such notables as former and future champions Les Pawson, Ellison "Tarzan" Brown, Gerard Cote, Dave Komenen, Clarence DeMar, and Johnny Kelley. Each was a working-class hero in his own right, as the marathon at that time was almost purely the domain of a rugged breed of road runner raised in the club, and not the collegiate system of racing.

For most of the 1938 race, Kyriakides showed he deserved his glowing press clippings. However, it soon became



KYRIAKIDES CHECKS HIS WATCH AS HE CROSSES THE FINISH LINE OF THE 1946 BOSTON MARATHON IN FIRST PLACE.

the most disappointing race of his career, as he hung with the leaders for much of the race, only to drop out due to broken blisters, which stopped him on the hills near Boston College. A kindly bus driver took pity on Kyriakides and let him ride for free to Cleveland Circle, where he then took a taxi to the Minerva Hotel, where his friend and host, George Demeter, paid the driver and commiserated with his friend. Shortly before he left for home, Kyriakides promised *Boston Globe* sports editor Jerry Nason, "Someday, I come back and maybe I win your marathon."

It would be eight long years before he made good on that promise. After serving in the Greek armed forces, he suffered several blows, including the cancellation of the 1940 Olympics,

the sudden death of his first wife, and the occupation of Greece by German armed forces. For the duration of the war, Kyriakides not only didn't train, but suffered starvation, as the war extracted a horrible toll on Athens.

One evening, while making his rounds as a bill collector for the Piraeus Electric Company in Athens, Kyriakides was stopped by the Gestapo on his way home. Apparently, the long walks he'd taken as part of his job were mistaken as the treks of a possible saboteur. During his interrogation, he produced papers that included his ID card from the 1936 Olympics. In later years he said of that fateful night, "They were going to kill me." However, his chief inquisitor spied the Olympic credential and asked about Kyriakides's athletic

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KYRIAKIDES

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career and experiences in Berlin. In due time, he was the only detainee released that evening. The next morning, he learned that all the other men who'd been rounded up for questioning that night had been executed.

It was this incident which convinced Kyriakides he'd been spared by God for a higher purpose. Soon afterwards, German troops arrived at his home to steal furniture and ransack his home. Again, his Olympic credentials spared him and his family, as the soldiers ceased their work once they spotted a framed certificate from Berlin on his mantle.

By the late autumn of 1945, he decided the purpose for which he'd been spared was to win the Boston Marathon and use the victory as a platform from which he'd tell the world of the dire straits in which Greece was mired. Over a quarter-million Greeks had perished of hunger during the war, and civil war threatened to destroy the nation. It was in these circumstances

that neighbors supported his quest by giving him gifts of milk and bread.

Training in the hills outside Athens, Kyriakides often ran barefoot to toughen the soles whose blistering had cost him so dearly in 1938. In just five months, he erased the effects of a near five-year layoff, and convinced both his employer and the Greek ath-

letic authorities to sponsor his trip to Boston for the 1946 marathon. He was one of the last passengers to secure a seat aboard the first commercial TWA flight to depart Athens since the war, and arrived in Boston three weeks prior to the race.

Prior to his arrival, he'd made his

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DURING WORLD WAR II, GREECE SUFFERED UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION, AND FOLLOWING THE WAR, DESCENDED INTO CIVIL WAR. SOUP KITCHENS, SUCH AS THE ONE DEPICTED IN ATHENS, WERE COMMON THROUGHOUT GREECE.

COURTESY OF THE KYRIAKIDES FAMILY

WHAT THEY SAID ABOUT KYRIAKIDES'S VICTORY IN 1946

"The thin dark man from Greece, who had known the pangs of hunger, feasted his eyes on the laurel wreath which he had wrested from Johnny Kelley in a savage tussle on the homestretch of the Marathon race. He, the modern Pheidippides, had sped over 26 miles and 385 yards of American macadam to earn this herbiage which abounds in great profusion on the hillsides of his native Athens. 'This wreath,' said Stylianos Kyriakides, 36, a bill collector for an Athens utility company, 'this I give to my leetle kid!'"

— Jerry Nason, *Boston Globe*, April 21, 1946

"Unhappy Greece had cause for joy and celebration today for the glorious came to pass with the golden jubilee running of the B.A.A. marathon. The winner was Stylianos (Stanley) Kyriakides of Greece, 36 year old 10 year champion of Greece, Egypt, Turkey and the Balkans, the first and only Greek to win the event that was created by the Greeks back in the ancient time of Pheidippides."

— Fred Foye, *Boston Traveler*, April 20, 1946

"The Greeks had a phrase for it, 'Come back with your shield or on it,' and yesterday Stylianos Kyriakides of far-off Athens held his figurative

shield triumphantly aloft as he raced up Exeter Street to complete his stunning victory in the 50th Anniversary B.A.A. marathon.

The 36 year old champion of an afflicted nation gasped emotionally, 'For Greece' as he brushed through the red twine amid applause that echoed along the cavernous stretch to the old B.A.A. clubhouse."

— Will Cloney, *Boston Herald*, April 21, 1946

"They yanked a chapter out of 'Grimm's Fairy Tales' today and rewrote it for the finish of the fiftieth Boston A.A. Marathon. The revised script, guaranteed to make Hollywood's scenario men turn various hues of envious green has a Greek who starved all through the German occupation in Athens and flying over here two weeks before the race.

He gets a letter from his three year old daughter on the morning of the race urging him to win it. Then, to the vast mortification of assorted experts who had written him off merely as another fellow named Stylianos Kyriakides, the hero of the piece goes out and runs the field of more than 100 starters bandy legged in 2 hours 29 minutes 27 seconds, not a Boston record but a Greek national record."

— Harold Rosenthal, *New York Herald Tribune*, April 21, 1946

"A true son of Phidippides,[sic] Grecian immortal who ran the first marathon almost 2,500 years ago, courageous Stylianos Kyriakides, from war-ravaged Athens, today won the Boston A.A.'s fiftieth anniversary race of 26 miles 385 yards in one of the most capable fields in its long history.

The 36 years old Kyriakides, competing only to gain American aid for his starving countrymen, ran shoulder to shoulder with Johnny Kelley, last year's winner, for almost twenty five miles before uncorking a terrific closing drive that took him to the finish line in 2 hours 29 minutes 27 seconds."

— Associated Press, April 21, 1946

"Stylianos Kyriakides, whose name by this time is as much an American household word as that of Xenophon or George Givot, yesterday transformed from the role of a Marathoner to that of missionary. He had said that his mission in America would begin rather than end at the tape which stretched across Exeter St. on Saturday, and after three hours of sleep following his 26 mile 385 yard race to fame, he set out to prove that his words were something more than just so much double talk in two languages.

The newest champion of the road is a wise man of the world as well. His brief visit to the United States, and

his knowledge of human failings, as demonstrated in the peoples of two continents, have convinced him that his claim to headlines and large type will be a fleeting thing. He knows that after this morning he will slip to the small corners of the sports pages until he returns for another marathon race. And he aims to monopolize as much of this full-scale advertising as possible — not for Kyriakides, but, in the phrase that has become his byword, for Greece."

— Joe McKenney, *Boston Post*, April 22, 1946

"These days when Greek meets Greek-they talk of Stylianos John Kyriakides. They compare him with the fabulous heroes of Greek mythology. They draw a parallel in Kyriakides perseverance with that of Demosthenes. They glow with the flush of benevolence when they dream of a \$250,000 fund they hope to pyramid in the next month or so with Stylianos John Kyriakides (Ed. Note - it would be Stanley Jack Sunday, Americanized) as the central figure."

— *Boston Daily Record*, April 22, 1946

"How can you beat a guy like that? He wasn't running for himself, he was doing it for his country."

— Johnny Kelley, April 21, 1946, immediately following the race



KYRIAKIDES AND JOHNNY KELLEY SHARE A LIGHT MOMENT FOLLOWING THE RACE. LOOKING OVER KELLEY'S SHOULDER IS BOSTON HOTELIER GEORGE DEMETER, KYRIAKIDES'S CLOSE FRIEND.

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intentions known to his host, George Demeter, and was treated in Boston as a returning hero. His training routine now included meals featuring the steaks he'd only imagined since before the war. In three weeks, he gained five pounds and ran well in the 10-mile Cathedral road race, a traditional marathon tune-up. Leaving nothing to chance, Demeter requested that the B.A.A. give his friend the race numeral 77, due to the fact that 7 is a lucky number for the Greeks, and 77 would surely count for twice the luck.

Kyriakides's luck nearly disappeared before he'd even reached the starting line, as physicians for the B.A.A. initially rejected him at a pre-race physical, claiming his frail condition could prove fatal under the strain of the race. It was only after some clever oratory from Demeter, a former Massachusetts state senator, that Kyriakides was allowed to start the race — on the supposition that the nation of Greece and Demeter would assume complete responsibility if things went wrong.

Many of Kyriakides's old friends,

including Kelley and Nason, barely recognized the haggard figure that arrived in Hopkinton. Soon, many runners, including the notoriously reticent DeMar, came to greet him and wish him well. Just as Walter Brown called the runners to the starting line, Demeter handed his friend a piece of paper and told him to read one side before the race and the other afterwards. On the front he'd written, "e tan e epi tas," the words spoken by Spartan mothers to their sons as they handed them their shields as they marched to war. Translated, it meant "With it or on it."

Few athletes, save for jockeys or race-car drivers, face the prospect of death as part of their task. However, on this day, Kyriakides had prepared himself for such a fate, as he steeled himself for nothing less than a total effort and a perfectly-run race. His strength came from his rigorous training on the hills of Athens, and the inspiring memory of both his family and the countless friends and teammates who'd died during the war. Only victory would properly memorialize

their suffering and bring hope and aid to his people.

His race strategy was perfectly executed, as he laid back until the Newton hills and gradually made his way to the lead, where he caught Johnny Kelley just before Kenmore Square. It was here that an elderly gentleman bellowed in Greek to him, "For Greece! For your children!" For the remainder of the race, he surged as crowds yelled, "The Greek... here comes the Greek," as he pulled away from his friend.

When he finally breasted the finish tape at the corner of Boylston and Exeter streets, he cried out, "For Greece!" and reached in his pocket for the paper Demeter had given him. On the reverse was written, "nenikikamen," the words shouted by Pheidippides as he completed his legendary run from Marathon to Athens. "We are victorious."

For the next month, Kyriakides made good on his word and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for Greece, as well as securing the donation of everything from shoes to cattle. Nearly two years before President Truman presented the European Recovery Act (also known as the Marshall Plan) to Congress, Kyriakides had undertaken the same task as a one-man army for his nation.

His return to Greece, a month following his victory, prompted a victory parade witnessed by over a million Athenians. Among the headlines that greeted his return was one that read, "Kyriakides, Our One and Only Source of Good News." It only seemed appropriate that the Parthenon was illuminated that night for the first time since the German occupation. It remains lit to this day.

More than a generation after his triumph, it is no surprise that the heroic nature of Kyriakides's singular achievement prompted a series of similarly-inspired tributes. The first was a superb biography entitled *Running With Pheidippides*, written by Boston schoolteacher Nick Tsiotis and former *Boston Globe* writer Andy Dabilis. The publication of their book mirrored the accomplishment of their hero, as it faced long odds to ever see print, but succeeded famously in both Greece and the U.S. In turn, it inspired other tributes.

In the fall of 2001, an exhibition entitled "Kyriakides, Running for the

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Human Race" was mounted by The Sports Museum in Boston, and later was displayed in Greece. The exhibition was created with the support of Kyriakides's children, Eleni, Dimitri, and Marie, and included all of Kyriakides's trophies, as well as his singlet, shoes, and medal from the 1946 Boston Marathon.

On the final night of the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics, NBC broadcast an unprecedented documentary within their coverage of the closing ceremonies of the games. The documentary, hosted by Bob Costas, was entitled "Journey of a Warrior," and told the story of Kyriakides to millions of viewers. Included in the program was rare footage of the 1936 Olympic marathon, newsreel footage from the 1946 Boston Marathon, home movies of the philanthropic champion, and excerpts from a series of interviews conducted for Greek television.

Just three weeks prior to NBC's screening, Kyriakides received his biggest and perhaps most lasting tribute

in the form of a monumental 12-foot, 2000-pound bronze sculpture entitled "The Spirit of the Marathon," by American artist Mico Kaufman. The sculpture, which depicts Kyriakides in full stride alongside 1896 Olympic champion Spiridon Loues, is set on a base that includes the bronze figure of the Greek god Pan, who was thought to have caused the panic that drove out invaders in Greece's early history.

The sculpture came about as the brainchild of Tsiotis and Dabilis, and was executed only through the heroic effort of their agent, attorney Susan Julian Gates.

It was Gates who enlisted the help of former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, who helped contact Jim Davis of New Balance and help make a successful pitch for sponsorship. After a frantic schedule that included the sculpture being completed and cast in a record time of 10 months, it faced several logistical hurdles, and almost didn't arrive in Greece in time for its unveiling two days prior to the start of the Olympics.

With the support of the city of Marathon's deputy mayor, Spyros Zagaris, the unveiling ceremony was a gala affair with fireworks, music and food. Today, hundreds of schoolchildren view the piece on a weekly basis, staring up at the two runners pointed towards Athens, frozen in time and memory.

Shortly after the events in Marathon, it was decided by Davis that he would donate an additional sculpture to Marathon's sister "city" of Hopkinton. Like its Greek twin, it too is pointed towards the finish line, this time in Boston, and will greet runners this year for the first time just a mile or so from the starting line.

Like the runner it honors, the sculpture evokes both the glory of ancient Greece and the heroism of one man who dared death to help save his country. He was, and remains, a national hero in Greece, and will forever be remembered as one of international sport's true humanitarians.

E tan e epi tas, nenikamen.
For Greece.

WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT KYRIAKIDES'S LEGACY

"For those of us who were young and Greek-American his victory in the 1946 Boston Marathon and the response of so many Americans to his pleas for help for his people was one of the most searing experiences of our young lives."

— Governor Michael Dukakis, as quoted in *Running With Pheidippides*, by Nick Tsiotis and Andy Dabilis

"Kyriakides' victory is timeless in that his accomplishment against great odds offers inspiration to all generations. His story is about the strength of the heart and the will of the spirit, and the history of running would be incomplete without his remarkable race. New Balance is proud to be able to commission this statue in our own backyard where we can celebrate the "Spirit of the Marathon" with our company associates and Boston Marathon runners for years to come."

— Jim Davis, Chairman of New Balance

"I think we celebrate Kyriakides' accomplishment because it is the quintessential story of an individual in an individual sport trying to do something for an entire nation, taking on a situation that was seemingly so much larger than one

man. I wish more people outside the marathon world were aware of this celebration.

"Kyriakides' victory should be so much better known and appreciated. Of course more people outside the world of distance running should know the story, but, frankly, relatively few people in the world of distance running know about this important moment. As a Boston Marathon historian of sorts, I am disappointed how few people who love the sport do not embrace its history. They know almost nothing about both the Marathon's legacy and Kyriakides' singular triumph."

— Frederick Lewis, Emmy award-winning creator of *That Golden Distance*, *The Boston Marathon in the 30's and 40's* and co-author of *Young at Heart*, *The Story of Johnny Kelley*

"We owe a great debt to the country of Greece and Loues [Spiridon, the winner of the marathon in the first modern Olympics in 1896], because without them we wouldn't have any Boston Marathon. The race is one of the greatest in the world and they come from all over the world now... all because we must thank Loues and Greece for this. The Greeks are

the cause of all the happy times we runners are having all over the world because of the foundation and their contribution. I give my thanks to them and their countryman Stelios Kyriakides."

— Johnny Kelley from his foreword to the book, *Running with Pheidippides*, by Nick Tsiotis and Andy Dabilis

"The Sports Museum was proud to present the exhibition, 'Stylianios Kyriakides, Running for the Human Race.' No athlete better embodies the true spirit of marathoning and the friendship between Athens and Boston than this heroic Greek. The museum is committed to using sports to teach the values of leadership, respect, and cooperation. Our exhibit was a tribute to an athlete who was one of the finest examples of these values. He was Greek, but his story is also part of the international heritage of marathoners everywhere. It was our hope that by keeping alive the story of this great athlete, champion and humanitarian that The Sports Museum has forged further links between Greece, America, and the world marathoning community."

— William P. Galatis, Executive Director, The Sports Museum (2001-2004)

Richard A. Johnson serves as curator of The Sports Museum at Boston's TD BankNorth Garden. He curated the exhibition entitled "Kyriakides, Running for the Human Race," and is the author of 15 books. His personal best of 2:57:20 came at the 1974 Boston Marathon.



THE SPIRIT OF THE MARATHON