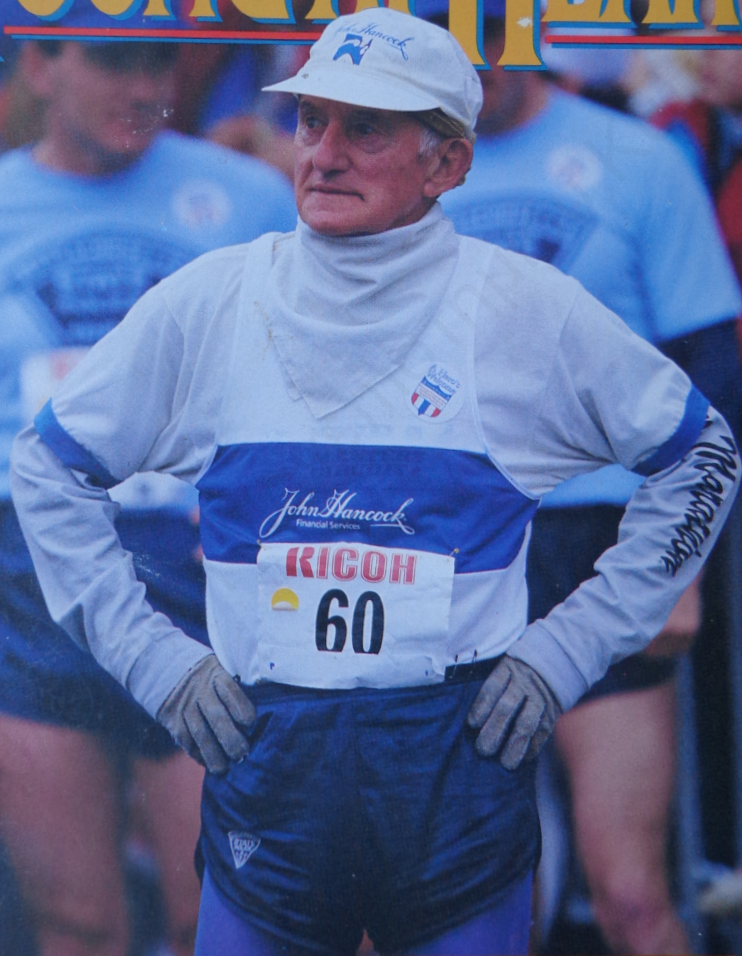


The Story of Johnny Kelley – Boston's Marathon Man

YOUNG AT HEART



◆◆◆ By Frederick Lewis & Dick Johnson ◆◆◆
Foreword By Kenneth H. Cooper, M.D.

Best Wishes to
SpHigenia Kriakides

from

"Johnny" Kelley

1993

"I'm Glad You Won, Stanley"



The 1946 Boston Marathon was the golden anniversary of the grand old race. Pre-race pundits thought sure this one would be a rematch between plucky Johnny Kelley and the suave snowshoer Gerard Cote, who had returned from duty in England. Tarzan Brown, who had not competed in the previous two Marathons or done much training over the preceding three years, was also back, courting the press, hoping to raise some eyebrows and secure a steady job. This uninhibited child of nature was living with his wife and four young children in a two-room, tar-paper shack in Charlestown, Rhode Island. A job might be in the offing, he thought, if he could run well and attract a crowd.

Another entrant actively seeking attention from the marathon scribes was Stylianos Kyriakides, a 36-year-old Greek distance champion. Kyriakides felt that by winning the Boston Marathon he could magnify the plight of his impoverished nation. During the Nazi occupation, Greece had been ravaged. Millions were starving, in urgent need of assistance. Though Kyriakides had a job as a bill collector for an Athens utility company, he wasn't much better off than those he was obliged to solicit. He had bartered everything he owned, including his home, in exchange for

rations to feed his family. There were times when all he could provide them were a few scattered peas on each plate.

But Stylianos was a runner, good enough to place eleventh in the Olympic marathon in Berlin. In '38, just before the Germans invaded, he had traveled to Boston to compete. He dropped out at 21 miles, his soles covered with blisters. But he always remembered the Boston Marathon and the thousands of excited spectators who crowded the curbstones. Kyriakides went to his employers with a plan. If he could win the Boston Marathon, he might be able to appeal to the American people for aid. The Athens-Piraeus Electricity Company supplied him with extra food rations so he could train, and paid for his 5,000-mile journey to Boston.

This was the first year the runners dressed, not at Tebeau's farm house, but at Hopkinton Town Hall. (Later they would move again, to the local school gymnasium.) The Tebeaus now had fifteen children, and race officials thought displacing that big a brood for a day wasn't very practical. Having won the '45 race by laying off the early pace, Johnny sat back again. He was thirteenth at the six-mile Framingham checkpoint, ninth at Natick. At Wellesley he moved to sixth, next to Kyriakides. Approaching the legendary hills, Johnny took over second. The malnourished Greek, knowing Johnny was the man to beat, pursued.

Heading up Brae Burn hill, Johnny wrested the lead from Lou Gregory. Kyriakides — "Stanley" to the running friends he had made since his arrival in Boston — had no trouble keeping pace with Johnny through the hills. The Boston course was plotted to simulate somewhat the grueling route from Marathon to Athens at the 1896 Olympiad. The three Newton hills were much smaller versions of the torturous gauntlet of mountains — Hymettos, Paratha and Stavros — just outside Athens which the dark-skinned, black-eyed messenger had traversed many times.

Johnny and the gaunt Athenian rushed through the hills, throwing short spurts of speed at each other, alternating the lead five or six times. Both cleared Heartbreak Hill with plenty of fight left. Johnny held a 20-yard lead at Lake Street. When he looked back it was hard for him to find Kyriakides, who was wending his way through a maze of official vehicles and seven jockeying press cars that spewed clouds of carbon monoxide everywhere. Indeed, both runners were so obscured by the blue, smoky fumes and maneuvering autos that many people lining the streets missed much of the dramatic fight. Disappointed spectators booed and catcalled at the passing convoy.

From Cleveland Circle to Coolidge Corner Johnny put on another spurt that increased his lead to about 35 yards. But this final sprint was a mistake. "I made another boo boo," Johnny says. "I ran a broken pace — you can't run a broken pace in a 26-mile race but — when I got to Cleveland Circle I felt so good I said, 'I'm gonna leave this fella,' and I sprinted ahead. In about a quarter of a mile I was dead. I couldn't move."

In Kyriakides' right hand he clutched a small piece of paper given to him by his friend, State Representative George Demeter of Boston's Greek Council. Demeter, who owned the Hotel Minerva, was the man who annually lowered the laurel wreath on the head of the winner. In Greek, Demeter had written on one side "Do or Die!" The other side read, "We Are Victorious!" which is the message the Greek warrior, Pheidippides, is said to have uttered before dropping dead after running 25 miles from the plains of Marathon to Athens, in 490 B.C.

His black eyes smoldering like two hot coals, Kyriakides, carrying a desperate dispatch from his war-torn homeland, swept past Johnny with a mile and a half to go. "He just went right by me," Johnny says. "I could kick myself. I

couldn't bide my time. If I had waited 'til I got to Kenmore Square or Massachusetts Ave., I think I could've come pretty close to getting it. I thought I could get away with it but there were four miles to go, and that's a long, long time. I've always been very, very impatient and I paid dearly for it. Somebody said to me after the race, 'I understand you let the Greek win.' I was out to win the race if I possibly could. There's too much work to hand it to somebody. He beat me."

The expected rematch between Johnny and Gerard Cote had never materialized. Cote arrived a remote third. Tarzan Brown, carrying too many extra pounds on his power-laden frame, finished 12th and was denied the soapbox he sought to try and gain a regular job, something he would never have his whole life.

"Does anyone here speak Greek?" called out one of the reporters after the race.

"I do," said Kyriakides. "But wouldn't it be easier if we all spoke English?"

"I did my best for Greece," Kyriakides declared, sporting the laurel wreath George Demeter had placed on his brow. This modern-day Pheidippides had won the platform he needed to spread the word about the starvation that crippled his brave country.

Johnny listened to the horrible accounts of devastation, and tears of sympathy began to stream down his cheeks. "I'm glad you won, Stanley," Johnny said, sobbing. "I'm glad you won."

Representative Demeter sang Johnny's praises to the press. A week before the race, Demeter revealed, he had phoned Johnny and asked him for advice on a number of things. What kind of socks should Kyriakides wear? What kind of shoes? What should he eat? When should he taper off his training? Johnny willingly supplied the answers. "Kelley is

the embodiment of American sportsmanship," Demeter exclaimed. "He doesn't get half enough credit for his unselfish spirit."

For several reasons, Jerry Nason proclaimed this race "the most significant Boston Marathon of all time." Most importantly, Kyriakides' pleas for help were answered. Americans immediately made generous donations to the relief drive. But the Greek's effort brought worldwide attention not only to his starving countrymen, but to the Boston Marathon itself. Soon, the 50-year-old footrace would grow from a largely domestic affair to an international event. Also, after seeing how congested and dangerous the Marathon route had become, B.A.A. president Walter Brown decided to limit the number of official vehicles on the course, dramatically improving conditions for the runners.

For the *seventh* time, John A. Kelley was a Marathon bridesmaid. "I've had a wonderful career and I'm not complaining, but with all due respect to the men that beat me, three of those seconds should have been firsts and the Greek is one of 'em. Walter Young is another one. People thought I was a running machine, but far too often I ran with my heart, not my head. If I only could have controlled my emotions I'd have been alright. A runner needs good sense *and* emotion. But it's water over the dam.

"All my life I've made a lot of mistakes instead of sitting down and thinking things through clearly. I should have tried to be a little more thoughtful. It's very sad but that's the way I was built. Even now I have to watch myself."

By now, younger, swifter runners like Charley Robbins, Tom Crane and Ted Vogel were beginning to give 39-year-old Johnny some serious competition, but he was still a powerful presence in New England road racing. In July, it took a freight train to stop Johnny. Literally. Pursuing from the scratch line in a ten miler in Somerville, Johnny and all

but four other runners were held up around the three and a half mile mark by a slow freight. Springfield College runner Tom Crane, with a too-generous four-minute head start, plus the whistle stop, beat Johnny by only 18 seconds.

In autumn of '46, Gerard Cote "had his tea and won *Yonkers*," pulling away from Johnny on one of the final four laps around the quicksand oval at the Empire City Race Track, today called Yonkers Raceway. The national marathon title had gotten away again.

In '47, the Boston Marathon's upper echelon was dominated by foreign entries for the first time. Stylianos Kyriakides' victory in '46 had prompted the arrival of runners from around the globe. Kyriakides himself returned with two compatriots. Sevki Koru arrived from Turkey. The European champion, Mikko Hietanen of Finland, competed, as well as a trio of Guatemalans who were separated from their interpreter at the airport and dropped off at the B.A.A. by a bewildered taxi driver. A Korean contingent, partially sponsored by American GIs stationed there, featured Sohn Kee-chung, the '36 Olympic gold medalist, and bronze winner, Nam Seung-yong. (Both had been forced to represent Japan at Berlin under Japanese names.) The third member of their party was Yun Bok Suh, a 24-year-old university student. Hopkinton Town Hall was filled with the banter of foreign tongues.

For the American runners, this race was the first of three Olympic trials. The mantle of pre-race favorite had been lifted from Johnny's shoulders, but not the pressure of needing to produce a strong performance. Gerard Cote was back, as was milkman Joe Smith, entered for the first time since his record-setting run. '37 winner Walter Young also returned. But the times were suddenly changing. Americans and Canadians could no longer call this famed footrace their own.

B.A.A. president Walter Brown, after the preceding year's problems with official cars, reduced the number of vehicles to three. Two buses were employed, one for race officials, one for the press. A truck, outfitted with a special platform, carried all the photographers.

Yun Bok Suh, the least experienced of the three Koreans, survived a stern challenge from the Finn, Mikko Hietanen, to win the race. Approaching Heartbreak Hill, the tiny runner, 5 foot 2, 115 pounds, lost contact with Hietanen when he was knocked to his knees by a fox terrier. His knee bloodied and his shoelace snapped, Bok Suh sprang to his feet, overtook the Finn on the famous upgrade, and flew home to break Joe Smith's course record, lowering the mark to 2:25:39. The Finn maintained second place. The B.A.A.'s own Ted Vogel, a 21-year-old from Watertown, attending Tufts on the GI bill, was a surprising third. Gerard Cote was fourth.

Johnny ran poorly from the outset and was not among the top ten at a single checkpoint. "I ran flat. I didn't have it," he said, after finishing thirteenth, only the second time in fourteen tries he had not placed among the top ten. Still, he was third American, and in good shape for the next leg of the Olympic trials.

At a Labor Day race in Littleton, a ten-mile handicap, Johnny was introduced to a scrawny, 16-year-old high schooler from New London, Connecticut. The boy's name was Johnny Kelley — Johnny J. Kelley. This was the polite, blond-haired youth's first road race. Amused by the appearance of a young runner with the same name, Johnny offered the lad some words of encouragement, then waited to be called to the scratch line. The schoolboy, who had traveled with his father and a high school teammate eight hours by train and bus from Connecticut, dropped out at seven miles. Johnny won yet another time prize.

At Yonkers in October, Johnny ran seventh but was fifth American, keeping himself in the Olympic hunt at the tender age of 40. Ted Vogel led during the early stages of that race, but by twenty miles he had wilted and slipped back to eighth behind Johnny. Barbara Kelley was following her husband in a car, providing him with a special mixture of tea and honey. Barbara shared some of Johnny's concoction with Vogel and it actually rejuvenated the young runner, who not only passed Johnny, but caught back up to the leaders. With a terrific chase in the last half-mile on the raceway, Vogel caught Tom Crane to win the national championship and the second leg of the trials.

The '48 B.A.A. was the third and final tryout. Because it was an Olympic year, most foreigners stayed home to participate in their own trials or focus on preparing for London. This race would be a last hurrah for the old guard. Speedster Tom Crane and rising star Ted Vogel were expected to have at it, but Crane, who had won North Medford, self-destructed. Instead Vogel found himself confronted with the cunning Gerard Cote.

The normally mild-mannered Vogel lost his temper during the race, claiming the crafty veteran was stepping on his heels and tossing water on his legs. He also charged Cote with crisscrossing in his path. Cote denied doing anything on purpose. "Vogel was getting ready to punch Gerry in the nose," says Johnny, who wisely elected to avoid any emotional front-running and maintain the steady pace he thought might clinch him a spot on the Olympic team.

Ultimately, the Canadian's ultra-distance training, some of it done in army boots, proved the difference. Vogel was doing most of his running on the track for Tufts, and was marathoning on a paltry 105 total miles of training since January. Cote left Vogel with three miles remaining, and won his fourth Boston Marathon by 44 seconds. After the

race the combatants smoothed things out between them. "I couldn't have beaten him today anyway," Vogel conceded.

Unlike the impetuous warrior he had been in past years, Johnny Kelley kept to his plan. Remembering how his joust with Tarzan Brown in '36 had almost cost him a trip to Berlin, he ran cautiously throughout. After moving into eighth by Auburndale, he emerged from the hills in fourth and held that position all the way to Exeter Street, where Pa Kelley greeted him with outstretched arms. As the third American finisher, Johnny Kelley, at 40, was once again an Olympian. Another New Englander, Aulis "Ollie" Manninen, an assembly worker at a stove factory, was the third qualifier.

Gerard Cote's victory marked the end of a golden era. With their eleven wins in sixteen years, Johnny, Cote, Les Pawson and Tarzan Brown, had raised the Boston Marathon to a new level of popularity. Their annual battles and distinct personalities had transformed the Marathon from a plodder's race into an exciting test that demanded speed and risk taking. With Les Pawson retired and Tarzan Brown prematurely so, only Cote and Kelley remained active. The free-spirited Quebecois would run his last Boston in 1955. Johnny, of course, would run on into infinity.

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Following his 1945 victory Kelley sang "Sweet Adeline" with Boston politicians (l) John F. "HoneyFitz" Fitzgerald, former Boston mayor and grandfather of President Kennedy and (r) Massachusetts Governor Maurice Tobin.
Credit: Boston Herald



The 1946 Boston Marathon was one of the most hotly contested in the history of the event. Shown here are (l-r) Kelley with Stylianos Kyriakides and Charles Robbins. Note the paper in Kyriakides' left hand, inscribed on which were the words "Do or Die" on one side and Pheidippides' famed message "We are Victorious" on the other. *Credit: Boston Herald*



Kyriakides checks his watch while crossing the finish line of the 1946 Boston Marathon where he defeated Kelley with a time of 2:29:27.
Credit: Boston Herald

Kyriakides kisses Kelley after the race. Kyriakides became an international hero as his victory focused attention on a famine that plagued his countrymen in war-torn Greece. His victory both helped his nation and established Boston as a sporting event of international consequence.
Credit: Boston Herald



Gerard Cote enjoys the moment following his 1948 triumph, his fourth classic. Always a classic, he made the victory long before Red A.
Credit: Boston Globe