

The Marathon Makers

The year 2008 marked the centennial of one of the most famous of all marathons: the 1908 London Olympic marathon, which became famous for establishing the official length of the marathon at 26 miles, 385 yards, and for creating one of the most famous of all finish-line photos, that of Dorando Pietri staggering over the finish line after having fallen to the track several times and then being assisted to his feet by officials.

The struggling Pietri would, of course, be disqualified when the American team protested his assisted “victory,” and Johnny Hayes of the U.S. would be declared the winner, the last time an American would win the Olympic marathon until Frank Shorter came along in Munich in 1972 to claim the title.

The 100th anniversary of that notable event was marked by the publication of John Bryant's *The Marathon Makers* (John Blake Publishing, London, 331 pages, \$26.95, available in the U.S. through Trafalgar Square Publishing). The book follows the lives of the doughty Italian Dorando Pietri, the Irish-American stalwart Johnny Hayes, and Scottish sprinter Wyndham Halswelle.

What does a sprinter have to do with two eccentric marathoners battling it out for the gold in London in 1908? Halswelle is symbolic of the British ideal of fair play in both sport and war that was endemic at the start of the 20th century and that was knocked all to hell with the coming of World War I, where Halswelle lost his life to a German sniper.

The British aristocracy of that period believed that sport should be a civilized manifestation of the superiority of the upper class. Athletes should compete and win easily and without any show of effort, relying instead on their marvelous upper-crusty genes and their breeding.

Hard training, at least in public, was disapproved of, and anything approaching a strained effort was looked down upon as plebian and crude.

And to have a coach to supervise your training? Crude, vile, disgusting, unheard of. (Think Harold Abrahams in *Chariots of Fire* and Lord Peter Thurleigh in *Flanagan's Run* benefiting from hard training and employing a professional coach.)

The book weaves together the three lives as they intersect directly or indirectly on the roads and tracks. And it attempts to capture the tension of the era between

Britain and the U.S., which spilled over almost to excess in the 1908 Games, which the Brits ruled with an iron hand.

The now-classic Dorando Pietri/Johnny Hayes duel is also notable as the launch pad for what became several years of obsession with the marathon not as a sporting event but as a cultural extravaganza, where the possibility of one runner or the other dying in the process always hung over the contest. Numerous rematches were arranged between Pietri and Hayes in the several years that followed, and other world-class long-distance runners, both “amateur” and “pro,” were thrown into the mix. The runners saw this obsession as an opportunity to make some quick money, to the point that poor Pietri, spurred on by his brother’s greed, raced marathons as close together as two weeks.

John Bryant does a very competent job of bringing the various life stories together, but he is, in the process, after a Larger Truth, the impracticality of the British forcing upon an unwilling world their own vision of Fair Play.

The 1908 Games undermined their vaunted “ideals” to some extent, and with the coming of World War I, virtually all of the precepts of their philosophy of forced fair play were blasted to smithereens when the War to End All Wars turned extremely ugly, with civilians being shelled and killed, mustard gas used to decimate enemy soldiers, and radical new machinery (tanks, planes) used to inflict staggering numbers of casualties.

The book captures well the England of the early century. It doesn’t do as well in covering the aftermath of the Pietri/Hayes battle: the escalation of arranged duels for great pots of gold for the next several years. A more lyrical and complete history of that aspect was carried in these pages in the second part (*M&B*, May/June 2007, pp. 41-62) of Roger Robinson’s “The Fascinating Struggle,” which details the marathon craze that infected the world of sports in the wake of the Pietri/Hayes episode at the Games.

Although Halswelle is inserted as a device to underline the British Fair Play aspect of that era in history, his story is a refreshing (and tragic) interlude to the too-well-known Pietri/Hayes epic. —*Rich Benyo*