

# Vets News incorporating Veteris

compiled by Jack Fitzgerald

## Vets in the News

# In the footsteps of Pheidippides

A SMALL but highly successful team visited Athens for the first Veterans Marathon on April 6th to celebrate the 90th anniversary of Louis Spiridon's famous marathon win in the first Olympic Games in 1896. Many centuries earlier an extrovert called Pheidippides is reported to have also covered the course after first running to Sparta to summon help, return to Marathon to fight in the battle, then return to Athens to beat the classified papers to the result, but as he dropped dead on arrival he was ineligible for the next Olympics.

We left Heathrow in good spirits on Friday April 4th. A bomb had exploded on an Athens bound plane the previous day, but this hardly justified our Greek fellow traveller's infatuation with his worry beads, which he rotated constantly throughout the 3 hour flight, even behind his back. The British party consisted of tour leader supreme Barbara Dunsford, Chris and Trin Woodcock of Purley and Blackheath Harriers, Frank Golding from Reigate, Bernard Elkington from Carnforth and myself. After booking in at the "Hotel Stanley" we enquired about the registration address, got a few odd looks, so decided to leave registration till the morning and settled for a meal at the hotel and an early night as we were 2 hours ahead of London time.

A short run at 6.30 a.m. the following morning confirmed our fears about Athens traffic conditions, even at that hour it was a job to cross the road but we managed to find our way to the National Park, where a strange combination of cats and ducks appeared to be co-habiting, then back through the traffic for breakfast. Every other car in Athens seems to be a yellow taxi, so with that sort of competition fares are very much cheaper than London Buses and we hired two to take us to the registration address. When we arrived we realised why we had been getting odd looks as the Greek Athletic Offices are above the "Playboy Club". We should be so lucky, but we had to take photos to prove it, they'll

never believe that back home. A cursory glance at the official programme revealed a dearth of foreign runners, but I am assured by John Psiakis, President of the Greek AAA's surprisingly known as SEGAS that both Zatopek and Mimoun have arrived.

This worries me as both are in my age group, but John who was himself an Olympic Decathlete in 1936, assures me that Emil is merely there to start the race and present the awards. We are also informed that there is a special coach laid on to take the foreign athletes over the course and that it would leave the Panathinaikos Stadium at 5 p.m. that evening. We decided to walk to the Stadium there and then, but are distracted by an open Street Market where Greek Cauliflowers make their British counterparts look like Brussel Sprouts, leeks like marrows and spring onions masquerade as leeks. A few spots of rain had fallen earlier but we had dismissed this as "pride of the morning", but now it starts falling heavier. Our English accents are suspect as most locals accuse us of bringing the rain with us, so we beat a retreat, take another two taxis back to the hotel, to start our carbohydrate loading with midday omelettes. The rain stops so we decide to walk to the Acropolis/Parthenon to sightsee like good tourists.

Barbara had pulled a hamstring two days before leaving England, but is doing well on the slopes against the wind. No doubt the warmer weather has helped it, but she rejects suggestions that she should do the marathon the following day. We hope to horn in on somebody else's guide commentary, but only the Germans and Japs can afford such luxuries, so we have to rely on Frank's much abused guide book for our information. After a brief interlude at a local Cafe, where we regale ourselves with milkless tea and baclava (the local pastry), we adjourn to the stadium. Quite a sight, but where are all the foreign competitors for the dry run over the marathon course. After about 30 minutes, we realise we are the only ones

so the six of us pile into the waiting coach and the helpful but no English speaking driver takes us over the classic route in reverse. On arrival at Marathon we pose for photos at the traditional start, where the local custodian, who certainly looks as old as Spiridon if not Pheidippides himself, presents the two ladies with flowers for their button holes. We return over the classic route the right way and look out for any possible short cuts. The ever resourceful Barbara persuades the driver to take us back to our hotel, where we resume our carbohydrate loading with Spaghetti Bolognese, Pasta etc.

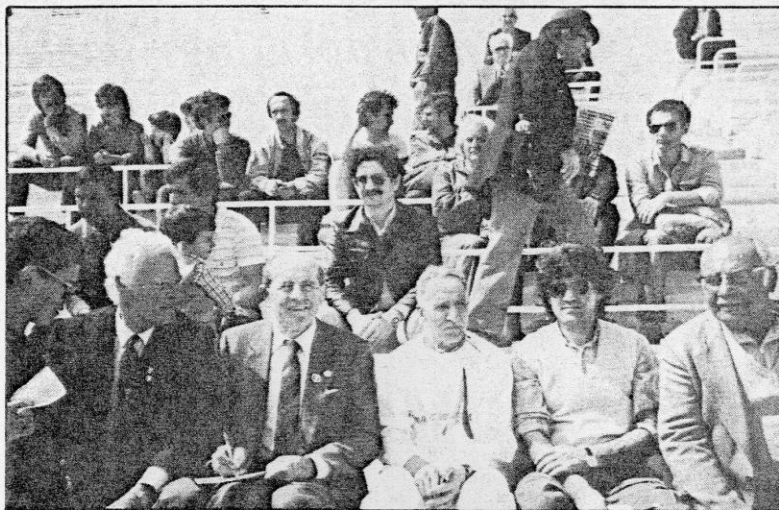
We arrange for a 6.30 call for the runners, but allow the ladies to have a lie in, as long as they get to the finish for our arrival. The four runners can squeeze into one taxi and as the coaches were leaving at a controversial time between 7.30 and 8 a.m., we arrange this to leave the hotel at 7.30. We were stuck with a taxi driver who spoke no English, but though we had got the message over to take us to the old stadium it was not until we had travelled many kilometres we realised that he was taking us to the new olympic stadium. Luckily Frank had his famous guide book with him and arrived with seconds to spare. It all helps to keep adrenalin flowing, but there is one taxi driver in Athens who has some Anglo Saxon swear words in his vocabulary now.

It was still coolish at 9 a.m. so we didn't discard our track suits until the last possible minute. At 9.30 John arrived with Emil Zatopek and what a reception the Czech wonder runner got. I have never before seen runners stripped off for the start and still trying hard to get autographs, he certainly is a legend in his own lifetime. I don't see Mimoun among the 300 starters, but expect him to appear from behind a hedge any minute. The usual initial rush at the start is quietly dominated by one man, Danny Duhamel the French winner of the World's Vets Marathon at Rome in 1985. Chris estimates that he must have run 2.18 for his first 800 metres and certainly at the first loop before 3 miles and my first sight of him, he has an enormous lead. I start steady and it was on this loop that I sussed out two young Greeks who looked to be going at my pace, so latched on to them. It is getting hotter and bang on cue the sun makes it's appearance as we reach the 5k point, so I break the habit of a lifetime and take a drink before 10 miles. I miss out the next one at 10k although I

notice that my companions stop and drink each time. I allow them to join me again and the procession moves on. We have been joined by another Greek who speaks a little English. He informs me that he is 32 and can't understand why I am running at his pace when I am obviously twice his age. He goes on to say that the pace is about right for 3.30, which I had already estimated.

Another drink at 15k followed by a sponge at 20k, then we are at the half way point. I glance at my watch and estimate that we have been running for 1 hour 45 minutes, so when they stop for another drink, I press on. The first real climb comes at about 28k, but many runners had been coming back to me with the slight inclines for the previous 5k. You could savour the atmosphere with the hills on either side of us and could imagine how it must have felt to the Greek shepherd 90 years earlier. The best part of the course for me was between 21 and 32 kilometres, where we reach the summit. From then on it was downhill, but the nearer we were to Athens, the worse the traffic became. The police were doing a marvellous job by keeping the Central reservation clear for us, but traffic from the right was cutting over to other intersections and one had to keep ones eyes open. It seemed an eternity between 35 and 40k and then the last 2 kilometres dragged on a busy straight road. Eyes were peeled for the turn to the left into the Stadium road and finally I saw the runner ahead take it. Even then the two steps up into the Stadium were like mountains but eventually I was on the hallowed cinders and over the line. Trin and Barbara had done an excellent PRO job and were firmly ensconced on the marble steps with welcoming drinks. Recovery was pretty quick while I absorbed the news that Duhamel had been escorted into the Stadium by Alain Mimoun, winner of the Melbourne Olympic marathon exactly 30 years ago, this time content to do the 385 yards only.

Daniel had won the race by some 7 minutes ahead of a 35 year old Greek Theofanus Tsimingatos with an even younger Greek Georgious Aikaterinis a further 8 minutes back. After a while the M40 presentation is made by John and on the rostrum with Duhamel is Barry Shaw (Israel/South Africa) who was 8th overall and Chris Woodcock who was 12th overall. Ahead of these two was the first M45 Panagiotis Skoulis who was 7th overall and duly mounted the dias for first in his age group. Then came the M50 presentation and another surprise for the British contingent, Frank Golding as befits an ultra man had started even steadier than I and ran through to finish 3rd M50 behind two more useful Greeks. Now I began to wonder where I have finished in the M60 division and finally found an official who could speak good English. She informed me that I had won.



**M40** 1. D. Duhamel (France) 2:25:15; 2. B. Shaw (Israel) 2:47:59; 3. C. Woodcock (GB) 2:50:10. **M45** 1. P. Skoulis (Greece) 2:46:12; 2. D. Kakargias (Greece) 3:01:06; 3. C. Dassis (Greece) 3:17:52. **M50** 1. F. Arvanitis (Greece) 2:59:39; 2. G. Fakiolas (Greece) 3:12:10; 3. F. Golding (GB) 3:14:25. **M55** 1. M. Keoaaiahe (Greece) 3:36:19. **M60** 1. J. FitzGerald (GB) 3:28:47; 2. K. Kazakoe (Greece) 3:40:39.

Eventually they decide that it was Kypiakoe Kazakoe who I had beaten by 12 minutes, but I was even more amazed to hear that I was also over 7 minutes ahead of the first M55, Ron Franklin will be livid. The first woman was an under 34 Greek (Age not bust measurement) Marina Apakqtoy in 3:47:31. I was up on the rostrum when our 4th runner finished, which was a shame as I would have like to have given him a special cheer. Bernard Elkington had no illusions of grandeur, only having run one marathon before, the easy London course. He had come out specifically to run for his favourite charity which was a special lifting machine to help mentally and physically handicapped children out of his local swimming pool. As a Bank Manager he had managed to obtain sponsorship in excess of £1000 for this and his efforts to finish were the equal of all 3 successful age contestants. We returned by taxi to the hotel to shower and sleep awhile before embarking on our victory celebration meal in an outdoor restaurant near the National Park, which needless to say was washed down by several bottles of wine.

To relax on the following day we had booked a cruise round the Greek Islands and this too came up to our expectation. With the temperature again up into the seventies, we basked in the sun on the top deck, stopping for a ramble round the Isle of Hydra, ice cream at Poris and a swim in the Aegean off the Island of Egina, before returning to Athens.



**Top:** Famous names: left to right: John Psiakis; Emil Zatopek; Alain Mimoun and Yiannis Kourous. **Above:** An unlikely setting for the headquarters of the Greek AAA!

Frank and I were out early on Tuesday to identify the photographers shop where the race pictures had been taken. We found it eventually, but on our return after breakfast found it to be closed for the day. Luckily the ladies took some at the finish. Meanwhile Barbara had made an early trip to the Playboy Club again to get the missing copies of the result sheets and to make our official goodbye. The Greek officials were very happy to see such a successful British team, but naturally hope we will return next year in greater force. The actual date is not yet certain, due to the uncertain date of the IGAL Championships in Israel, but no doubt many will want to keep posted in view of the success of our pilot tour. I was again reminded of our maiden trip to Brugge in 1974 with a similar number and how that race has grown in popularity and feel that the Athens Veterans Marathon could be just as successful. The Greeks no doubt will have a word for it.