The Olympic Marathon

The history and drama of sport's most challenging event

By David E. Martin and Roger W.H. Gynn

This is not the first time that Olympic marathons have been described in book format. In an earlier text marathon historical expert David Martin and statistical expert Roger Gynn chronicled the history of the marathon as an event, and a brief summary of each Olympic Games marathon was an integral part of that effort (The marathon footrace, Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1979).

Twenty years later these two authors teamed up again to focus their attention just on the Olympic marathons. The result is a definitive resource that goes beyond statistics to offer readers a vivid and multifaceted chronicle of the athletes and their memorable marathon performances.

Although during the build up toward the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games several other books appeared with titles that suggest a discussion of 100 years of Olympic marathon races, all were brief in their presentation, and none covered the Atlanta Olympic marathons, as the books appeared prior to those Games. Still another book emerged following the Atlanta Olympic Games (C. Lovett: Olympic Marathon: A centennial history of the Games' most storied race, Westport: Conn.: Praeger, 1997), but its coverage of the event was again limited.

If the book by Martin and Gynn has a thesis, it is that during the course of more than a century, the marathon and the Olympic movement have endured together. The Olympic movement has survived, and although many Olympic events have come and gone, the marathon has also survived, being contested at every Olympic Games.

The format of the book by Martin and Gynn is simple: Each Olympic Games has its own chapter. All chapters briefly summarize the geographical setting and contemporary political climate of the Olympic movement, as these often influenced the dynamics of the marathon preparation and competition. A course sketch and, where known, detailed street information is supplied for each Olympic marathon route. Then a general overview of how athlete selection proceeded for each Olympic marathon race is provided, and some of the significant competitors are identified.

Following a narrative of the race itself, a brief biographical profile of the top three finishers is given. Also, a career marathon summary for the winners is provided. Each chapter concludes with a “Looking Ahead” section that summarizes major marathon highlights during the years leading up to the next Olympic marathon. Accompanying photos – often rare and never before published – provide a pictorial glimpse into the contemporary atmosphere and dynamics of each race. Complete results are presented in the appendixes.

Especially appendixes D and E will be a delight to track and field record keepers, as...
they contain all of the Olympic marathon performances by men and women in chronological order. The authors have used Lyberg’s 1993 documentation of Olympic competitors (The athletes of the Games of the Olympiad, 1896-1992, Vol. 1-4, The 73,000 participants), as well as the marathon databases of Borre Lilloe and Arild Gjerde, to verify initial completeness, and they have added new information since those compilations. The result is the most complete and accurate compilation of Olympic marathon results to date.

The book is full of fascinating facts and stories concerning Olympic marathon history, and readers will certainly enjoy learning them. A few anecdotal remarks may serve to whet some appetites:

◆ Although the number of runners who did not finish for most Olympic events has been minimal, for the marathoners this is different. Over the span of the 24 Olympic men’s marathons held between 1896 and 1996, only 73.5 percent of the starters actually finished their race, and one of the men even died trying!

◆ Although three United State marathoners have earned gold medals, none had the honour of entering the stadium first.

◆ One of the marathons had a false start!

◆ For one medallist, the Olympic marathon was the only race at that distance that he ever ran.

◆ One gold medallist ran the entire course barefoot.

◆ Considering the current concern about illegal use of performance-enhancing drugs, in one of the early marathons, the use of such was publicly stated and admitted as providing performance benefit.

◆ Three gold medallists won the Olympic marathon on their first attempts at covering the distance. Three marathoners who won the Olympic marathon qualified to compete in the following Olympic marathon but had to drop out.

In explaining these and many more such factoids, this book can be called a definitive reference that describes the exploits of this special group of athletes who can call themselves Olympic marathoners. It will most certainly inform and entertain Olympics enthusiasts, sports historians, marathoners and other runners, and those interested in sports statistics.

David E. Martin and Roger W.H. Gynn
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