

Roger Robinson

RUNNING Throughout Time

THE GREATEST RUNNING STORIES EVER TOLD



MEYER & MEYER SPORT

Running Throughout Time

For Kathrine Switzer

*“Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.”*

-Andrew Marvell

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Chapter 1 Atalanta: The Founding Myth for Women's Running and the First Runners' Love Story

Chapter 2 Pheidippides and the Battle of Marathon FAQ

Chapter 3 The Messengers

Chapter 4 Hell and Fury Sykes

Chapter 5 Sam Runs With the Hounds and Three Great Sports Begin: An Experiment in Biography

Chapter 6 Spyridon Louis and the Art of Pace Judgment - Athens 1896

Chapter 7 The Fascinating Struggle: Near-Death Drama at the Great White City - London 1908

Chapter 8 Marathon Mania - New York 1908-1911

Chapter 9 The First Great Women's Track Race: How Many Collapsed? - Amsterdam 1928

Chapter 10 Three Heroes of Berlin - Olympic Games 1936

Chapter 11 The Story of the Four-Minute Mile

Chapter 12 The Most Sensational Last Lap in History: Billy Mills's Olympic Dream - Tokyo 1964

Chapter 13 Out of the Tunnel: Joan Benoit and the Women's Marathon - Los Angeles 1984

Chapter 14 The New Atalanta: Allison Roe

Bibliography

About the Author

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My love of stories about running began at age 16, when the prize for winning a schools race near London was a slightly faded copy of the *History of the International Cross-Country Union 1903-1953*. My imagination was caught by the muddy triumphs of heroes like Alf Shrubbs and Alain Mimoun, and teams who were photographed standing in formal lines wearing baggy England or France tracksuits. Prominent in the book were several pages of photos of the officials who produced it. Whichever of them had the idea of awarding it as a race prize deserves my first acknowledgement.

My stories come from a lifetime of running and reading about running. The main published sources are acknowledged in the text and bibliography. But running is also a vibrant oral culture (just listen next time you are passed by two or more runners out training). I have learned much from my many friends who are runners, or writers about running, who are always generous in sharing ideas. In some personal cases, through conversation or private email correspondence, I have gained information or insight that I could not have obtained from any other source. My thanks to Professor Nicolaos Yalouris (ancient Greek athletics); Jonathan Beverly (the legend of Slievanamon, Mountain of Women); Yiannis Kouros (Greek messengers); Judge Isaac Braz (the Bible's "man of Benjamin"); Matthew W. Shores (Japanese messengers); Professor David Carnegie (seventeenth century London theater); the librarian of Shrewsbury School, and Peter Middleton (the Royal Shrewsbury School Hunt); the late Dr. David Martin (Olympic marathons and Violet Piercy); Peter Lovesey (Spyridon Louis

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I have absorbed material from more articles than I could appropriately list in the bibliography from *Running Times*, *New Zealand Runner*, *Marathon & Beyond*, *Runner's World*, *Podium Runner*, *New York Runner*, *Canadian Running*, *Athletics Weekly*, and other magazines, newspapers, and websites. A lifetime of reading in literature and history is hard to specify as "sources," too. For biographical details, I have referred to many Wikipedia and specialist running websites and to the media guides and releases provided by World Marathon Majors and other events that I have covered as a journalist.

I have also written about runners and the history of running for many publications. The most relevant for this book are: *Running Times*, *Runner's World*, *Marathon & Beyond*, *New Zealand Runner*, *Canadian Running*, *VO2Max* (New Zealand), *VO2Run* (France), the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, the online *Samuel Butler Project* of St. John's College, Cambridge, the *Turnbull Library Record*

(Wellington), and the “Legends” section of Athletics New Zealand’s website. I’m grateful for encouragement and editorial input, especially from Jonathan Beverly and Richard Benyo, and for perceptive advice (as always) from Tim Chamberlain.

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Not many writers thank their reviewers, but I’m grateful to all those writers, interviewers, and podcasters, and to many regular readers, who have been so positive about *When Running Made History* and my other books.

My deepest debt is, as always, to Kathrine Switzer. Her loving support and unflinching belief in my work are essential, her productive energy is a daily example, and her inside knowledge of running in her lifetime is unmatched. I left out her own story, one of running’s best, only because she has already told it so well in *Marathon Woman*, and a movie is

imminent. I hope this book's dedication to her makes up a little for that omission.



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INTRODUCTION

Every child that learns to walk will soon begin to run. Ask any parent - that instinctive and joyous moment is important in the narrative of every life. The human species has survived and flourished only because we can run. So it's no surprise that there are so many stories about running. It's no surprise that so many people today who identify themselves in part as runners should find inspiration from learning that their own small story is part of a long tradition of great stories.

This book is a selection of the best and most important. The stories come from many different eras, from mythical ancient Greece when goddesses advised on race tactics, through centuries when running was a key mode of communication and an emergent sport, to our world of televised Olympic races and mass city marathons, a world where running is a vibrant global community, culture, and industry. Some of this book's stories are about the most iconic names in running history - Atalanta, Pheidippides, Spyridon Louis, Dorando Pietri, Tom Longboat, Jesse Owens, Roger Bannister, Billy Mills, Joan Benoit Samuelson, Allison Roe. Others are about runners and races whose stories are less well known, but need to be celebrated. If you haven't heard of the Man of Benjamin, Mawbone and Groves, Guto Nyth Brân, Samuel Butler, Johnny Hayes, Henri St. Yves, Lina Radke, Sohn Kee Chung, or Wes Santee, please read on, because in different ways they created the tradition and the choices that you enjoy as a twenty-first century runner. We run in their footsteps. Their stories matter. And they are great to read.

This book also revises some of the stories we think we know, or clears up frequently asked questions. What did happen at Marathon? Why is a marathon 26 miles 385 yards (42.2km)? Why are runners called harriers? Who was the first woman marathoner? I'm a lifetime runner, and a writer, but also a scholar, so I like to get the story right. I've made some exciting discoveries. Research is like racing - do the training, show up, and you never know what might happen.

Among many historical firsts, this book reprints after four hundred years the world's earliest newspaper report of a footrace - the very beginning of sports journalism. It reveals the moment and place of origin of cross-country racing, and publishes for the first time the earliest graphic illustrations of that sport. It gives a detailed account of the forgotten first great running boom, 1908-12, and reports the race that was effectively the first world marathon championship. It cites new source material to clarify some key moments in the politically fraught Olympics of 1936. It tells at last exactly what really happened, in the notorious women's Olympic 800m in 1928, and shows that news reports, photographs, and even film that we have relied on for decades are false or misleading. That race changed the history of women's running, and we deserve to know the truth.

I decided against attempting a full history of running. That has been done, by Edward R. Sears in *Running Through the Ages* (2001, 2015) and by Thor Gotaas in *Running: a Global History* (2012). My contribution is to tell in more depth particular stories that readers will relate to, combined with research to get the history right, and exploring the personalities, and the significance, cultural heritage, or afterlife of each story.

That's often fun. I invite my readers to join me on a run across the farmland of Shropshire, searching for an obscure wet ditch. Locating it was a highlight of my life as a researcher. I connect the Greek legends of Atalanta to her

appearances in film or television adventures, a fighter now more often than a runner, and clad not in ribbons but leather crop-top and mini-skirt. I tell the story of her modern equivalent in the 1980s, who emulated her in revising the concept of femininity. I interview some eye-witness sources that Herodotos would have needed, if the story of Pheidippides really did happen as we have come (more or less) to believe. I check on the whereabouts of the British royals, and of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, while Dorando Pietri was desperately trying to finish his legendary marathon. I add a new footnote to *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. I share investigations of whether Spyridon Louis cheated, who was the mystery woman runner of Athens, and who shoved whom on the last lap of the Billy Mills 10,000m.

From the modern era, I chose that race, the 1964 Olympic 10,000m, and the first Olympic women's marathon in 1984, because those two have a good claim to be called the greatest races of all time - or the most familiar and iconic, as measured by YouTube viewing figures. I end with the story of Allison Roe, partly because she is the only iconic figure from the formative era of the women's marathon not to have published her own life story.

Any selection of "the greatest" will have its own omissions. I left out some great stories because others have already told them well, like those of Walter George, Emil Zátopek, Kathrine Switzer, or Terry Fox. I left out others because I have told them myself, in *Heroes and Sparrows*, *Running in Literature*, or *When Running Made History*. Tempting as it was to revisit the era of women's smock races, or the tragic stories of Abebe Bikila or Buddy Edelen, it seemed unfair to my earlier readers.

My *When Running Made History* (2018) is a book of history based on my own eye-witness experience, from 1948 on. This time, most of the stories happened before my own lifetime. This is a book not of observed but researched history, from 1080 B.C. to the first women's Olympic

marathon in 1984. It shows that running has a significant history, and a frequent place in wider history, sometimes long before it became a formal sport.

Every topic in this book is chosen for two things: a good, significant running story, and my ability to contribute something new to the telling of it. The book as a whole hopes to catch the reader's imagination, and expresses my belief that the stories of the past are a living force in the present and the future.

Chapter 1

Atalanta: The Founding Myth for Women's Running and the First Runners' Love Story



When Atalanta was born, her father was angry to see a baby girl. He wanted a son. He ordered the infant to be taken away and left to die on a hilltop at the edge of a forest. Wailing with cold and hunger, she was found there by a mother bear, who adopted and nourished her as one of her own cubs. Some say the loving bear was Artemis, goddess of wild nature and of virginity, and also the protectress of women in childbirth; or that the animal had been sent by the goddess to save the baby girl.

Later, hunters took over the care of the girl child, who grew up with a deep understanding of wild nature and the craft of hunting, and became so skilled with bow and arrow that none of the men could match her. She also became a supremely fast runner, and a very attractive young woman, especially beautiful when running at full speed, with her combination of grace and power. Because of this mix of male and female attributes, her guardians named her Atalanta, which means “balanced.”

Strong and resourceful, she had to confront some sexual assaults, including a double attack by two centaurs (half man, half horse). She fought them off, leaving both dead. She took a leading role as an archer in a hunt in Calydonia,

near her home, for a monstrous boar that was devastating life there. With her deadly accuracy with the bow, Atalanta's arrow got the first strike, hitting the boar behind the ear. After the other heroes finished off the monster, the expedition's leader, Prince Meleager, awarded her the hide as a trophy, a decision that caused fatal quarrelling among the men. Meleager was one of several men attracted to Atalanta, but she continued to maintain the chastity advocated by her patron goddess, Artemis. Her warrior skills also won her a place among the specially selected heroes who sailed with Jason on the *Argo*, and she fully earned the respect of the other heroes during that adventurous voyage.

After these travels, her father took her back, but continued to treat her in a conformist way by insisting that she needed to get married. She delayed that decision, and gave herself scope to make the choice, by taking a vow to accept only a suitor who could beat her in a footrace. That was an assignment as tough as it was tempting, for she was as fast as she was beautiful. Defeat for the challengers was fatal, since each eager suitor that she outran was put to death. But they kept hopefully trying, and dying, until one appeared who finally matched her, though not entirely by running ability.

Melanion he was called, or in many versions Hippomenes, or Milanion in Latin. At first he was understandably reluctant to risk his life by racing her on such terms. He showed up quietly to watch her in action. When he saw Atalanta running, so svelte, smooth-striding, yet powerful, her long hair streaming out behind her bare white back, and wearing little but some alluringly fluttering ribbons, he decided he had to chance it.

Melanion astutely paid a visit to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to ask for pre-race advice. That erotic goddess was not impressed by Atalanta's insistence on chastity. She had a plan. She gave Melanion three golden apples, telling him to drop them one by one ahead of Atalanta as they raced.

The distance of the race is never specified, but seems to have been about a mile, or 2km. That's about the distance of the long race at the ancient Greek Games, the *dolichos*. Short enough to keep the crowd whooping, yet long enough for Melanion to push too hard and get into what sounds very like oxygen debt. It was a major event, with the whole court present, all the ceremonies of trumpets and heralds summoning the runners to the start, and a big eager crowd buzzing with excitement. It adds to the sporting drama when you know the race will end with either a wedding or a funeral.

The two runners crouched side-by-side, waiting for the starter's signal, aware of each other but focused on the course ahead. Atalanta was a seductive mix of strength and serenity, Melanion youthfully ardent, yet with a mature masculine sturdiness. The crowd went quiet, awaiting the moment. Then the trumpet blared, and they were away, so fast that their flying feet seemed hardly to touch the sandy ground. This was a real race.

The crowd got behind the unknown outsider. Up on their feet, they were yelling, "Now! Go! Give it all you've got! Good job, Melanion, looking good, you can do it!"

Running with silken smoothness, judging her pace, Atalanta privately felt pleased at all the support for her challenger.

She could not bear to beat him. At last, her heart told her, after so many rejected suitors, this was the man she wanted. She felt no doubt. Every time she drew level, she gazed across with yearning affection into his face, and eased back the pace again. But it was blazing fast, and the pressure was beginning to tell. Melanion was struggling, his breath heaving, his throat burning, his mouth parched. And the finish was still way off.

Melanion pulled out the first golden apple, and rolled it glittering across the course. Atalanta, astonished at its beauty, checked, stooped, and scooped it up. The crowd

went crazy as Melanion hit the lead, but she powered back into her full flowing stride, and found herself edging reluctantly ahead again. She slightly eased her pace to allow Melanion to stay close.

The second apple came bouncing by. Again, she pulled up, and bent down to grab it. This time she seriously had to pick up the pace to close the gap and get back on terms.

Now they were coming off the last bend with the finish in sight. They were side by side. Melanion gasped a quick prayer to Aphrodite, and threw the last golden apple. It went spinning and bouncing across Atalanta's path and off to the side of the course. For a stride she hesitated. An impulse of love sent her after it once more. She slowed, veered away, and stooped to gather it.

Now she was clutching three apples, with no chance of being able to sprint. She kept slowly jogging. There was no finishing burst of speed. The race was over.

Melanion jubilantly passed the finish, with the crowd on their feet cheering, all delighted that the outcome this time was going to be a marriage feast, not a beheading. Atalanta crossed the line, trotted over to Melanion, slipped the three golden apples into the crook of one arm, and with the other lovingly took him by the hand.

The winner led away his prize.

Atalanta's Message

That last line, "the winner led away his prize," is straight from the Latin of the Roman poet Ovid, the main source – *duxit sua praemia victor*. It alludes to the practice in ancient Greece of sometimes awarding slave girls as race prizes, according to Homer's *Iliad*. But this is a match of consent, not mastery. Many details show Atalanta taking initiatives to show her love, and act on it, and clearly both are equally happy with the result. That's a major reason for the timeless

appeal of the story, and its special appropriateness today, in an age that values gender equality.

There's a postscript to the story in Ovid's version in *Metamorphoses*. Atalanta and Melanion enjoy a happy married life, and their sexual bond is so strong that when they are traveling together to visit Melanion's family, they feel impelled to make love, and go unwisely into a sacred temple or grove. According to Ovid, it is Aphrodite who fills them with passion at this inappropriate moment, since she feels aggrieved (as Greek goddesses often did) that Melanion hasn't given her enough grateful worship for her golden apples idea.

The temple's resident god is understandably offended, and punishes the over-ardent couple by turning them into lions. *Metamorphoses* means "transformations," and every story Ovid chose to retell had to involve some change in form. The other great running story in the collection is the god Apollo's long-distance pursuit of the swift and chaste Daphne, which ends with her being saved from the god's amorous attentions by getting turned into a laurel tree. Atalanta and Melanion's transformation into lions seems more random. Perhaps we can see a lioness as the ultimate hunter, fast and lethal, but to leave them as lions is a disappointing ending for such an action-packed romance story. It's a better closure when they leave the running arena hand-in-hand, after one of the most enthralling of all races.

My narrative above of Atalanta's life draws on many classical and English versions, primarily Ovid's account of the race. There are two loosely connected Atalanta stories, perhaps originating in different regions of what we now call Greece - Atalanta the wild-bred warrior woman who fights the boar, and Atalanta the beautiful fast runner who races for a husband. Most often they are merged, and I have done the same. Since this book is the first time that the running part of the story has been told by a runner, mainly for

runners, I tried to put it in language that runners in the 2020s will find accessible. At the same time, I tried to be true to Ovid's rich and unpredictable drama, vivid action, and psychological insight into Atalanta's thoughts and emotions.

Commentators like Robert Graves have suggested that the myth of the race may originally derive from ceremonial tests of manhood, or be an allegory for sexual selection. H.A. Harris, in his classic *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, mentions several such stories, including a race to win the hand of Penelope, the faithful wife of Homer's Odysseus/Ulysses.

Many cultures have stories of races to win marriage partners, some with the women as the contestants rather than as the prize, like the Irish legend when the hero Finn McCool staged a mountain race between women to choose himself a worthy wife, only to see the winner run off after the race because she fancied his younger cousin more. The mountain is still called Slievanamon, Mountain of Women. In some Scandinavian myths, young men held orienteering races through a maze to be the first to reach the female prize at the center. The Atalanta story is unique in having the sought-after bride as a contestant against her suitors in a series of head-to-head races.

The wilderness infancy and boar hunting parts of the Atalanta story connect the heroine with her immortal patron, Artemis, whose love of wild animals, hunting skills, and virginity were transferred in Roman times to the equivalent Roman goddess, Diana. Some modern versions of the golden apples story attribute the race to a young woman called Diana.

Stories abound in many cultures about apples, often golden. The divine hero Heracles (Hercules in Roman mythology) was set as his eleventh "labor" the task of stealing three golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides, who were nymphs, or minor earth goddesses,

and the apples were guarded by a giant snake. To enter the orchard of the Hesperides (in the words of the English poet Marlowe) means to achieve full sexual love, an association that is clearly present with Atalanta's golden apples that come from the goddess of love. A helpful footnote for those who know how hard it is to carry stuff when you're running is that in earlier usage "apple" could mean any fruit larger than berries, so Melanion's may have been apricot or peach size, say, not full-scale Granny Smiths.

If you're trying to find the authentic original version of stories like Atalanta's, it's important to remember that there isn't one. The Greek myths were, in simple terms, first recorded by bards (story-singers), from about 800 B.C., retelling old tales and religious ways of explaining the world. They were elaborated by poets, artists and sculptors through the era we call "classical Greece." The most familiar versions came even later, usually from the time of the Roman Empire, when Artemis became Diana, and Aphrodite was Venus. From this long process, it's not surprising that we're left with an uncertain connection between the two myths about Atalanta the virgin-huntress-warrior-runner-bride.

Whatever its beginnings, a good story doesn't die, and Atalanta's race has stayed in the shared imagination through different ages. Ovid became enormously popular in Europe during the Renaissance, and Atalanta's race emerged as one of his most influential stories. The poet Spenser is typical in alluding to the "golden apples...which Atalanta did entice." For Shakespeare, she was an emblem of speed, when the hero of *As You Like It* is complimented for his quick wit: "You have a nimble wit; I think it was made of Atalanta's heels." The story became a favorite of artists as important as Guido Reni. Google "Atalanta images" for many more. The moment of Atalanta stooping for one of the apples while Melanion/ Hippomenes races on at full speed is an irresistible visual challenge for a painter or sculptor.

In the Victorian era, poets continued to enjoy the race story. Swinburne's poem *Atalanta in Calydon* sets the time of year in one of the best-known of all lines of poetry, "When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces," and then evokes the almost divine woman athlete preparing for the race:

*Bind on thy sandals, O thou most fleet,
Over the splendour and speed of thy feet.*

The story was so well known that comic stage versions could flourish. At the Haymarket Theatre in London in 1857, the actress Ellen Ternan, future beloved of Charles Dickens, played the "breeches" role of Hippomenes, suggesting the treatment was much like a pantomime or vaudeville.

The last fifty years have seen another upsurge in interest in Ovid, and therefore awareness of Atalanta's story, with Allen Mandelbaum and Ted Hughes the best-known poets to retranslate it. The story has timeless appeal, with its elements of violence, death, gold, sex, gender rivalry, parental authority, divine intervention, sporting contest, running speed, crowd adulation, and sudden love. See Roger Robinson, *Running in Literature*, for a fuller discussion of the Atalanta literary tradition.

Many 1950s childhood radio listeners in the wider English-speaking world still remember a hugely popular American version, a loose adaptation of the story, titled "Diana and the Golden Apples," that focused on the climactic race. The narration was later used as the voice-over for a television cartoon version. It's surprising that there's no movie yet of the story, but running never films as well as fighting does. Several feature films make use of the name, for a boat in one case, but so did Handel, who lured me to an opera called *Atalanta* that, apart from the heroine's name, has no connection whatsoever with the old story.

Now Atalanta's descendants are everywhere. An outstanding comic book version, *Atalanta: The Race against Destiny* (2008), written by Justine and Ron Fontes, was illustrated by the distinguished comic book artist Thomas Yeates, who told me his rendering was inspired by the great African American sprinter of the 1960s, Wilma Rudolph.

Not all versions are so positive. As our popular culture has rejected the stereotype of the passive woman, swooning in the face of danger, always needing to be rescued, it has replaced her with the aggressive woman warrior, deadly with bow and arrow, and usually clad in skimpy leather. The fantasy idealization of the professional killer is a particular problem of modern culture, but we didn't invent the eroticized female version. Her origins go back to Hippolyta, the Amazon queen. Her recent formulations include Diana Rigg's Emma Peel in the television series *The Avengers* (1961-69), innumerable Barbarian Queens, the television series *Xena Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), the Keira Knightley warrior interpretation of Guinevere in the Hollywood movie *King Arthur* (2004), and the Marvel Comics and blockbuster movie *Wonder Woman* (2017). That heroine is again named Diana, and is supposedly the daughter of Hippolyta.

Atalanta appears as a character in the lumbering Hollywood fantasy adventure movie *Hercules* (2014), played by Ingrid Bolso Berdal in the now regulation glossy leather top and miniskirt. This warrior Atalanta also appears in video games and young adult fiction. You can buy her sandals.

Atalanta was an emigrant ship sailing between England and Australia in the 1850s, and was the model for a hood ornament on Studebaker automobiles in the 1920s. An American poet revived her in 1972, in a romantic tribute to Kathrine Switzer published in the *New York Times* (Harry Dee, "Bouquet to Kathy Miller (America's Atalanta):")

*Patron goddess, fair Diana,
On this day is proud of you,
Taking part in distance running
'Gainst a hardy, manly crew! (Dee, 1972)*

Atalanta also has a sporting life as name patroness of a top-flight Italian soccer team in Bergamo, Atalanta Bergamasca Calcio. She was adopted as a “sort of patron saint,” in Switzer’s words, by Avon Women’s Running in the 1970s-80s, gracing their stationery, awards, and medals. The image on the medals, derived from a statue in the National Museum of Athens, showed Atalanta running topless in a short skirt. A male senior manager at Avon insisted that her nipples had to be sanded off. She survived all these travails to become the nearest we have to a founding myth for women’s running, the best available female equivalent to Pheidippides. That’s why I’m telling her story.

Her best modern embodiment was the New Zealand marathon runner Allison Roe, who won the Boston and New York City Marathons in 1981 with exactly the “balanced” combination of physical power and feminine grace that the mythic Atalanta represented. Allison’s story ends this book in [chapter 14](#).

The meaning of Atalanta as “balanced” in gender attributes is a concept that has become wholly acceptable. (Her name can also mean “unswaying” or “resilient.” It has no connection with the city of Atlanta, which derives from the “Atlantic” Ocean, and so ultimately from the Titan Atlas and mythic city of Atlantis.) The image of an accomplished and independent-minded woman competing with men, and even matching them in sporting and warrior skills, appeals to our age, the first in history to have witnessed women racing every distance in the Olympic Games, and women serving in active combat in the military.

Atalanta's race may be a myth with many possible meanings, but the story has also come down to us as recognizable human reality. Her chase after the apples could seem to be merely about female susceptibility to the glister of gold, but the poets who have retold it all agree that there is another dimension. After defeating so many suitors, Atalanta for the first time feels sudden love for this challenger. When she's running at race pace alongside Melanion, suddenly she cannot bring herself to beat him. She decides to fall for the golden apples trick. It's her love, not her susceptibility to bling, that makes her stop three times, and so lose the race. Aphrodite got it right - she is, after all, the goddess of love, not gold.

So it becomes a story about a woman's independence and freedom of choice, and about feelings of attraction, romance, love, and bonding, for both women and men, and the rewards and risks those can involve. Our generation didn't invent equality in relationships. You don't have to believe in golden apples or crafty goddesses to enjoy the story's drama of credible romance.

This very old story is still true to the inclusive modern sport of running, and to the running community, where the bond between runners is stronger than any competitive rivalry. It appeals to the many modern couples who meet through running, and whose relationship (like mine) entails giving support to each other's fulfillment as runners.

That mid-race moment when Atalanta looks lovingly across at Melanion is the key. The forgotten old poet Laurence Eusden caught it perfectly when he wrote a translation in 1717:

*When a long distance oft she could have
gained,
She checked her swiftness, and her feet
restrained:
She sighed, and dwelt, and languished on his*

*face,
Then with unwilling speed pursued the race.*

The myth of Atalanta, the supreme woman runner, is also the first runners' love story.

Chapter 2

Pheidippides and the Battle of Marathon FAQ



Why “marathon?” What does it mean?

Marathon is the English form of *Marathōnos*. In ancient Greek the word means “field of fennel.” It is a small seaside settlement on the Plain of Marathon, where the fennel grew, a short way inland from the Bay of Marathon, in Attica, Greece. On that beach, the invading army of the Persian Empire landed in September 490 B.C., intending to attack the city-state of Athens, twenty-five miles/forty kilometers away.

What was the war about?

During the previous decade, Athens, operating independently, as Greek city-states did at that time, had supported a revolt against Persian rule by the cities of Ionia, across the Aegean, near what is now the Turkish coast. That provoked King Darius, even though it was a fleabite against his vast empire, which covered most of the modern Middle East - Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey and northern Greece. Darius had put down the uprising by 494 B.C., but wanted to secure his control over the Greek cities. Most paid formal tribute to him, but at Sparta, notoriously, his ambassadors had been flung down a well. He sent an invasion force to deal first with the Athenian troublemakers and set up a

puppet government. The army was led by his nephew, with the fleet under the command of the experienced Datis. Marathon was not their first landing, as they captured a number of Greek cities and islands on the way, notably Eretria after only a six-day siege (that's the small Greek city north of Marathon, not the modern Eritrea in northeastern Africa). Most other Greek city-states stayed out of the conflict, presumably getting favorable treatment for being willing to accept Persian rule.

What happened in the battle?

The underdogs won. The Persians had huge numerical and technological superiority, but the small Athenian army of infantry *hoplites* (citizen-soldiers) surprised them with a fast early-morning attack.

It can't have been that simple. How did the Greek generals succeed against such odds?

Probably by attacking before the Persian cavalry was ready. The invaders had crossed the Aegean in an armada of six hundred ships, some of them specially designed to carry lots of horses, as their main strength in battle was their horseback bow-and-arrow men. Their long-range projectiles, missiles fired from powerful catapults, were also the most advanced and destructive known at that time. The Athenians astutely decided to move quickly into close combat, thus neutralizing those two assets. The historian Herodotos doesn't even mention the Persian cavalry, leaving it a mystery as to why they were not deployed. Maybe the horses were being watered, or many of them may have been re-embarked. The Persians thought the Athenians were dithering, as they often did, and knew they would prefer to delay the fight until support came from Sparta. The Persians seem to have decided to divide their

force, send part of it to sail around Cape Sounion, and take Athens directly. Whatever the reason, their cavalry was not available or for some reason ineffectual. The Persians' artillery was of course useless, because the Athenians made it instantly a hand-to-hand combat, by moving so fast.

What does that mean? How did they move so fast?

The usual hoplite method was to attack in tightly packed blocks of men (a phalanx) using big shields and jabbing outward with long spears. You see similar tactics used against modern riots by closely packed police or National Guard officers, pressing and squeezing. It sounds almost mechanical, but the Athenian hoplites were also mobile when they needed to be. It's important to know that they were an unusual kind of army, a force of free citizens, supported by slaves who carried their equipment on the march but didn't fight. Young male citizens were educated at places that were a combination of liberal arts college, military training school, and high-performance sports center, called a "gymnasium." The most famous of these in Athens were the "Academia" and the "Lyceum." That's where we get our words "gym," "academy," "academic," and the German "Gymnasium" and French "lycée" for grammar school.

Unlike us, the Athenians saw intellectual education and physical education as inseparable and equal, both necessary for preparing a citizen to be capable of participating in a democracy, and protecting the community when necessary. Smart thinking. The students spent their time practicing running, jumping and wrestling, with philosophy professors hanging about in shaded corners decorated with statues and art works, ready to chat with them during rest periods. The emphasis in every way was on competition.

“Athletic activity was not just a hobby but the basis of education. Every day the Greeks engaged in exercise and competition, in the body and in the mind. The whole of Greece was like a great palaestra or gymnasium. The spirit of *agon* [sporting contest] was the basis of their civilisation,” the leading scholar of ancient Greek sport Nicolaos Yalouris told me at Olympia, in 1989. Even allowing for an element of idealization there, the point is that the young male citizens were well-informed, disciplined, and in great shape, honed by education founded day-to-day on *agon*, and trained to become *agonistes*, or contenders. As part-time soldiers, they could move fast, even carrying heavy shields.

That’s the key ability they used in 490 B.C. at Marathon. They moved what we would call heavily armed infantry very quickly. They seem to have covered about a mile (1.5km) down a steady slope at a fast pace, running much or all of it, and keeping in formation. Some historians (like V.D. Hanson) are skeptical about Herodotos’s use of the word *dromo* (run), and claim that tests show a mile-long run in armor is impossible without the troops’ formation disintegrating in exhaustion. That’s an oversimplification. Trained athlete/soldiers would be well capable of a mile-long march/jog/ run that probably accelerated as they drew near the enemy, with the overall pace moderated to keep their breathing under control. They were, at any rate, able to surprise the enemy and engage them with their moving walls of shields and spears before the Persians were ready, and certainly before they could get the artillery and cavalry into action.

Now the advantage lay with the Athenians. The Persians wore little armor. They relied on sheer numbers, and on horse-borne mobility, which the Athenians continued to prevent by hemming them in. They were vulnerable to this almost machine-like block of shields and thrusting spears that was so suddenly upon them.