

Why the Athens Marathon is on So Many Runners' Bucket Lists

By Paul Samaras

Many historians and philosophers consider the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. one of the most significant battles in human history; but the battle is perhaps now more famous as the inspiration for the modern marathon race.

In order to understand the event's importance to western culture, we need to go back to 508 B.C. Athens when the idea of democracy was in its infancy. Back then, democracy (*dēmokratía*), was a revolutionary new concept that gave the individual certain freedoms, a voice in how the power of rule would apply – "rule of the people".

This concept sparked new ideas and inspiration in Greek society and culture, and gave the people freedom to create, to be rewarded, and to be recognized for their achievements. Systematic thought that included the disciplines of biology, geometry, philosophy, and physics emerged. The Greek people introduced the literary forms of epic and lyric poetry, theater, tragedy, and comedy. In their pursuit of order and proportion, the Greeks created an ideal of beauty and perfection.

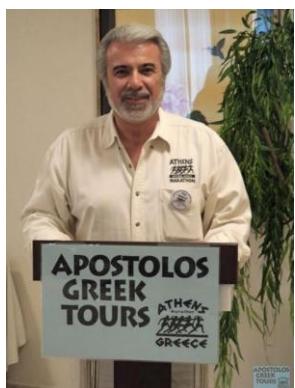
At this point, democracy had not been tested or fully established. Then came the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. The battle was fought by free men with a new concept; freedom against suppression and slavery. John Stuart Mill, one of the most influential English-speaking philosophers of the 19th century, famously suggested that "the Battle of Marathon, even as an event in British history, is more important than the Battle of Hastings."

The Battle of Marathon is significant because it allowed democracy to develop and establish itself. If the battle had been lost, this new idea of democracy would have vanished and would not have been documented in history. There would not have been a second battle and another test at the battle of Thermopylae. After the Athenian victory at the Battle of Marathon, Athens reached prosperous new heights. Democracy blossomed and became the foundation of western civilization.

L. Siegfried, a German philosopher said it this way: "When Greeks were fighting at Marathon against the spiritually unconnected mass of Persians, they were fighting as people who had clear awareness of the right for a free political life. The consciousness of mankind . . . was born at Marathon. We, the people of the West, must always kneel respectfully to the place where human dignity was established."

After the battle, legend has it that the Greek messenger Pheidippides ran from the battlefield at Marathon to Athens in order to relay news of the victory. He only said, "We were victorious!" and collapsed and died from exhaustion. The run became the inspiration for the Marathon event, introduced at the 1896 Modern Olympics. The original epic run of Pheidippides continues to inspire runners today.

Today, athletes who run the Athens Marathon on Nov. 9, 2014 will be running in the same footsteps as Pheidippides. But when they run the original historical course, they run not only in the footsteps of ancient Greek heroes and legends, they also run in the birthplace of democracy. You can learn more about the Battle of Marathon and the history of this epic race on Apostolos's website at athensmarathon.com.



Paul Samaras is the owner of Apostolos Greek Tours, Inc.
The Athens Marathon Specialist since 1994
(303) 755-2888
paul@athensmarathon.com
AthensMarathon.com