The Athens 1896 and Athens 1906 Olympic Pins

By: Ioannis Thomakos
In October 2018, I managed to publish a Book related to the Athens Games, with the title “Athens 2004 Olympic NOC Pins & Related Memorabilia, Vol. 1.”

During the course of the preparation for this Book, I did extensive research on the History of Pins produced by National Olympic Committees from 1896 till today. The present article draws on this research.

During preparations for the Athens 1896 Olympic Games the Greek Olympic Organising Committee decided among other things to decorate the main streets of Athens and the entrance of the Panathenaic Stadium with big banners carrying the flags and emblems of the participating nations. The Greek banner depicted the flag and national emblem of Greece (blue with white cross). These banners greatly enhanced the celebratory atmosphere in the city of Athens.

In February 1895 a very important meeting took place at the Zappeion Megaron, in Athens. It was chaired by crown Prince Constantin and was attended by all members of the Olympic Organising Committee. In that meeting they decided to create nine sub-committees. Each was assigned specific organising duties. They also elected their members.

Spyridon P. Lambros, was appointed Secretary for the Olympic Preparation of the Greek Athletes, and he also co-authored the Athens 1896 Official Report. Lambros was a professor of history and rector at the University of Athens. In 1906, he was the General Secretary of the Athens 1906 Olympic Games, and in 1916 he became Prime Minister of Greece. He was a key contributor to the organisation and implementation of 2 different Olympic Games and as such holds a unique record. Lambros was a wise, highly educated man and his colleagues at the University of Athens called him “a walking encyclopaedia”. He was a giant of the Olympic movement and his great contribution to Olympic history and legacy has not yet received its due attention.
Spyridon P. Lambros held a key position in the Greek Olympic Organising Committee as Secretary of the Commission for the Olympic Preparation of Greek Athletes during the 1896 Olympic Games. He was also co-author of the Athens 1896 Official Report.

Photo: Ioannis Thomakos Archive

According to a report in local newspaper, when the American Team arrived in Athens for the 1896 Olympic Games, Lambros presented them with gifts on behalf of the Organising Committee. These were a number of white T-Shirts with the Greek national emblem. As seen in photos of these Games, some Americans proven to be students of Harvard University wore these shirts. In addition to the Greek colours, with which they wanted to express their attachment to the host country of the Olympics, they attached a small American flag to these shirts.

The first winner in Marathon history was Charilaos Vasilakos

The Marathon race was introduced to the Olympic programme as a result of a suggestion made by French philologist Michel Bréal to IOC co-founder Pierre de Coubertin. On 10 March 1896, the Greek Olympic Organising Committee (EOA - Epitropi Olympiakon Agonon) organised a race for the first time.

The occasion was the Panhellenic Preliminary Trial to select the best Greek Athletes for the Olympic team.

The winner of this first Marathon race in history was 20-year-old Charilaos Vasilakos, who recorded a time of three hours and 17 minutes for a distance of about 40 kilometres, and thus he became the first man in Sport History to win a Marathon Race. Spyridon Louis did not participate in this race.
On 24 March 1896 a second complementary race took place, to add 4 more Greek athletes to the initial 6 Athletes who qualified on 10 March 1896. Spyros Louis participated in this second race and although he finished 5th with 3:18:27 and Stamatios Masouris finished 6th with 3:19:15 hours they were added to the Final Start List by the intervention of army major Georgios Papadimantopoulos who was in charge of the Marathon race.

The Start list of the first Marathon race which took place on 10th March 1896 at the Panhellenic Games in Athens. Vasilakos finished first with a time of 3 hours and 18 minutes. Photo: Ioannis Thomakos Archive

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The Start numbers for the final Olympic Marathon race in 1896 were assigned to the runners in random order and not according to their finishing positions at the Preliminary Trials. On the final Marathon race Charilaos Vasilakos wore 7 and Spyros Louis 17.

Charilaos Vasilakos, the first athlete to win a Marathon race. He won the Greek Preliminary Trial and was second in the Marathon of the Athens 1896 Olympic Games.
In 2018 I discovered a significant element of non-recorded Olympic History. That happened when the grandson of Charilaos Vasilakos sent me the following letter:

"According to first hand knowledge and information that was conveyed to me by my grandfather Mr. Charilaos Vasilakos, following the initiative and proposal of professor Spyridon Lambros, Secretary of the Commision for the Olympic Preparation of Greek Athletes and co-Author of the Athens 1896 Official Report, shortly before the Athens 1896 Olympiad, the Greek Organizing Committee (EOA - Epitropi Olympiakon Agonon) created a limited number of Pins depicting the Greek national emblem (blue with white cross). These Pins were made by hand from a cloth fabric and they were given a few days before the Opening Ceremony, to a select number of Greek athletes who finished first in the Athens 1896 Preliminary Trials.

My grandfather finished first in the Prelimimary Trials of the Athens 1896 Marathon race and thus he was among the recipients of this Historical Pin."

Charalampos Vasilakos
Grandson of the first man to win a Marathon race
On 4 April 1896, one day after the Closing Ceremony of the Games and the distribution of prizes to the Olympic winners, the Mayor of Athens held a “farewell lunch reception” in honour of the foreign Olympic participants, in the Athens suburb of Kifissia.

Marathon 2nd place winner Charilaos Vasilakos was also invited in that event. He can be seen in a picture taken by the Greek photographer Ioannis Lampakis. Vasilakos is seated at the table, wearing the handmade Greece cloth pin on his coat.

To the best of my knowledge this is the first NOC Pin in the history of the Olympic Games.
The 50-Year Reunion of Athens 1906 Athletes in Stockholm

On Thursday, 12th April 1956, one of the greatest reunions in Swedish sport history took place. Twenty-three grey-haired men gathered at the Sports Palace in Stockholm. They had all been members of the glorious Swedish team and came together to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their participation in the Athens 1906 Olympic Games. The newspaper Svenska Dagbladets published two photos of that meeting accompanied by a brief description of the event.

I was really moved when I discovered those in 2017. For thirty years, I had been trying to find concrete evidence, to identify and document historically, the Swedish Olympic team pin of Athens 1906. And all of a sudden, these photos solved the mystery for me. It was an Olympic historian’s dream come true. I will never forget that moment.

Anyone who doubted the truth of the common ancient Greek quote “νοῦς υγιής ἐν σώματι ὑγιεῖ” (a healthy mind in a healthy body) would have been better advised had they come into contact with these sprightly men. They would experience a memorable excursion into the history of sports, when they would come across legendary athletes such as Knut “Knatten” Lindberg (1882-1961/silver – javelin), Carl “Calle- Sven” Svensson (1879-1956/bronze – tug-of-war), Hjalmar Johansson (1874-1857/1908 gold – diving), Robert “Robban” Andersson (1886-1972/fifth place in the swimming relay), Harald “Julle” Julin (1890-1967/bronze and silver medal in swimming and water polo 1908-1920) and Axel Norling (1884-1964/bronze – tug-of-war and gold in gymnastics in 1908-1912).

Swedish Olympic team pin from Athens 1906 Olympic Games. Right: Handmade participation badge given by the Greek Olympic Organising Committee to all athletes, coaches and delegation members who participated in the 1906 Olympic Games. The gold inscription OA (Olympiakoi Agones) and the year 1906 is clearly visible on this historic badge.
Three Swedish athletes at the reunion 50 years after their participation at the Athens 1906 Olympic Games. From left to right: “Robban” Andersson, Axel Norling and Erik Granfelt. Andersson proudly wears both the Swedish team pin and the Greek “participant badge” on his coat.

Photo: Svenska Dagbladets
50-year reunion at the Sports Palace in Stockholm in 1956. From left to right: the diver Hjalmar Johansson and the athletes "Calle" Svensson and "Knatten" Lindberg. Svensson and Lindberg wear the Swedish team pin, the latter also wears the Greek "participant badge".

Photo: Svenska Dagbladets

The average age of these athletes was about 80. The former IOC President J. Sigfrid Edström, who was a member of the Swedish Olympic Committee in 1906 and responsible for the Athletics department during the Athens 1906 Olympics, was the oldest of all at the age of 85.

Besides their age, everyone in that Reunion was in good shape and just the fact that 23 of 39 Olympians from Athens 1906 were able to attend a half-century anniversary was something quite exceptional.

As an Olympic historian & collector, the photos are of particular interest, as it was possible to historically identify the badge worn by the Swedish Olympians at the 1906 Games in Athens. They had honoured it for half a century. It is my hope and wish that the present article will be a valuable guide and a precious tool to anybody who wants to learn more about the unknown, non-recorded history of Olympic NOC Pins.
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This Article has been published in the Journal of Olympic History in March 2019 - Vol. 27, No. 1

JOURNAL OF OLYMPIC HISTORY
THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF OLYMPIC HISTORIANS

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