

## **In the Footsteps of Pheidippides**

1996 Spartathlon Race Report/Speech

**By Roy Pirrung**

I am going to describe why the history behind an event I have done 4 times is one of my most memorable foot races. Because the history on which the race was founded; an epic battle and a messenger's part in it, it will always remain that way.

Think back to your school days and recall the subject in world history covering the country of Greece and its affluent culture. There were many Greek philosophers and artists, but the backbone of the country and reason for its strength and stability, was its well-trained army.

From all the information I have gathered over the years, this is my understanding of one of the stories that has survived over the millennia.

In 490 BC it was reported that a large fleet had departed Persia en route for the coast of Greece. Over 10,000 soldiers were reported to have assembled prior to the armadas sailing date. In those times this was a huge army, unheard of prior to those days.

The soldiers were bearing swords, spears, bows and arrows for military hardware. Primitive battle gear, meant each individual would engage in hand-to-hand combat and there would be much bloodshed.

News of this invading force reached Athens' acropolis, the high point of the city, where the government was situated. Hearing the news they prepared a force of 1,500 of their best fighting men to march to the plains of Marathon, a city less than 25 miles from Athens, and the only place where a force that size could land.

While preparing the Athenian army for battle, a Greek messenger was dispatched to the city-state of Sparta, approximately 145 miles away. The messenger, by the name of Pheidippides, left at sunrise and reached his destination by sunset of the next day.

Wearing his battle gear and not having the benefit of modern athletic footwear or Wigwam socks, he made his way along the coast of Greece to the city of Corinth and then into the Peloponesian peninsula. Struggling in the heat of the day he reached the mountains of Sangas, as night fell and he trudged across the summit, the temperatures dropped near freezing.

Twelve hours after crossing the mountain range he began an uphill journey to Sparta.

His message to the Spartan King Leonidas was simple; the city-state of Athens requested they join forces with the Athenian army to increase their chances of success against the overwhelming size of the Persian army.

The king offered his regrets, as the population of Sparta was celebrating a religious period and then dispatched

Pheidippides to return and inform the King of Athens of the situation.

Within in an hour the day runner was on his way back to deliver his message to the king. Again, he struggled with the heat of the day, the dust from the olive groves and finding adequate food and water along the way. Two sleepless days later he returned to the acropolis, hobbling up to announce with parched lips the horrible news to the king.

Once the king received this unfortunate news he feared for his army and dispatched Pheidippides to run to the battleground to warn the general there would be no support from the Spartans.

Dragging his strained body to the plains of Marathon he was astonished at what he saw. There on the battlefield, an army was celebrating victory; the victory of a comparatively small fighting force against one nearly ten times as large. The unthinkable had happened, the small, but determined army of Athens had defeated a formidable force of gigantic size.

While there were a few Athenians still standing, there wasn't one capable of delivering the good news to Athens, so the bedraggled messenger, who had already run over 300 miles in 4 days, once again was ordered to proceed to Athens.

Coping with the elements, nearly breathless, and on his last legs Pheidippides did not argue, he just did his duty and ran towards Athens, obedient to the command, like a small child from a parent.

Knowing the announcement would be well received by the government and citizens of Athens he put the pain that he had endured for many days behind him and with each foot fall forward he repeated the words he was dispatched to deliver; “Rejoice, we have conquered.”

Upon his arrival, now nearly lifeless, he delivered the message that had played in his mind on the final leg of his journey, with his dying breath and expired.

For me this story of an obedient soldier, the victory of a small army over one far outnumbering their own and the determination of all, inspired me to run in the footsteps of Pheidippides in a race called Spartathlon, commemorating the 250-kilometer first leg, of four, that the military messenger undertook, each without complaint or questions.