

Running a marathon was never crazier or harder than during the 1904 St Louis Olympics

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The runners set off from the stadium at 3:03pm on a hot summer day in 1904 for the men's marathon. *(Wikimedia Commons: Missouri History Museum)*

The Olympic Games have been shut down by wars, persisted through terrorist attacks and hostage sieges, and endured drug scandals, boycotts and fake mugging dramas.

But as far as the Olympics go, the Tokyo Summer Games are already pretty historic. This is the first time the event has been delayed by a global pandemic.

This week would have been the beginning of the Olympics in Japan's capital.

But while you can't settle in for three weeks of non-stop sporting triumphs, you can read about one of the wildest Olympics in modern history: the 1904 St Louis Games.

It featured a tug-of-war event, only one competition for women, and a racially insensitive sideshow in which First Nation Americans, Mbuti tribesmen and Filipinos climbed a greased pole and slung mud at each other.

Then head of the International Olympics Committee Pierre de Coubertin described the 1904 Games as an "outrageous charade".

But it was the men's marathon that really highlighted the disorder of the event.



Many of the runners who took part in the 1904 marathon had never completed one before. (Wikimedia Commons: Jessie Tarbox Beals)

The race featured 32 runners, multiple incidents of cheating, drugs, rotten apples, a president's daughter and feral dogs.

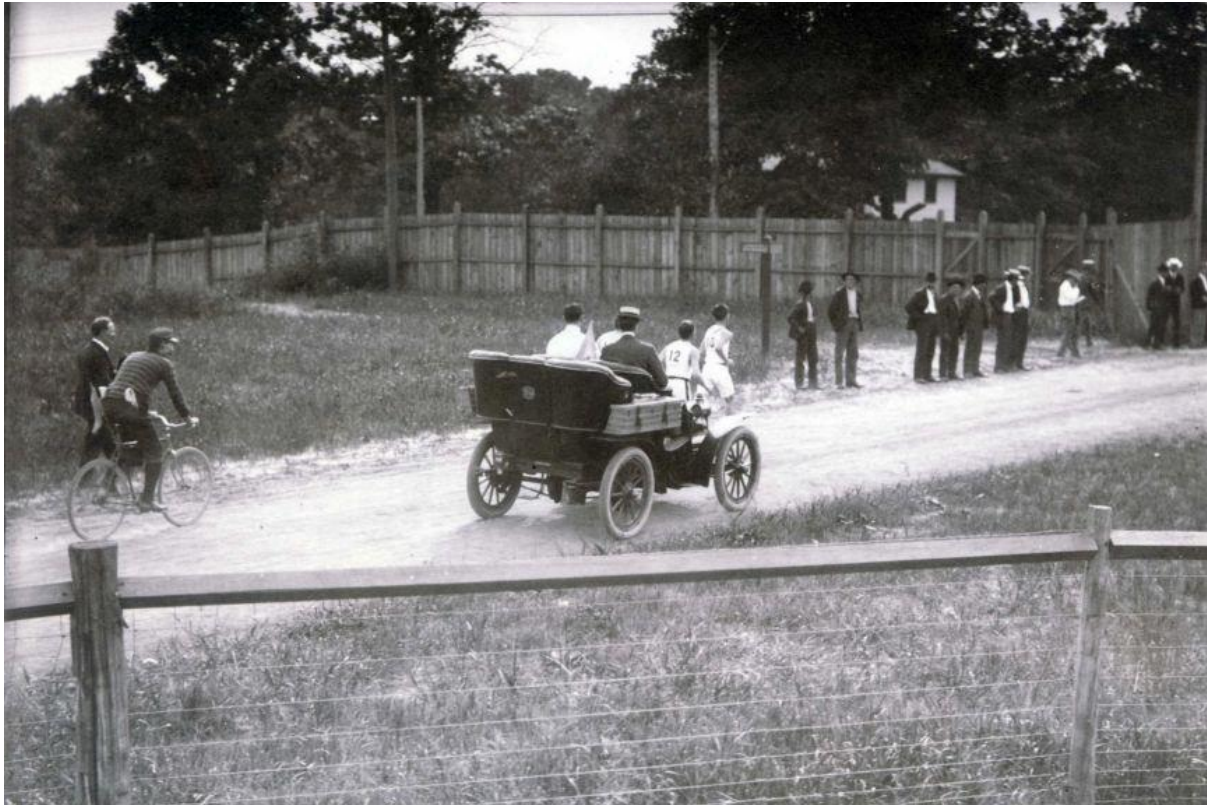
On a sweltering summer day, with organisers deliberately depriving athletes of water, more than half the participants dropped out from dehydration. Several nearly died.

The winner, who had to be dragged across the finishing line by his trainers, was doped up and hallucinating on rat poison.

That was only after it was discovered that the first person to cross the line, Fred Lorz, actually hitched a ride in a car for most of the race.

Odd cast in history's strangest race

The 1904 men's marathon was so poorly organised, so rife with fraud, and so life-threatening to the competitors, that the organiser wanted the race abolished from future Games.



The race featured just one water station because organisers wanted to test the theory that water diminished athletic performance. (*Wikimedia Commons: Missouri History Museum*)

The race was held at 3:00pm on a sweltering 32-degree day, and took the runners over dusty, unpaved roads.

James Sullivan, the chief organiser of the St Louis Olympics, was interested in 'purposeful dehydration' — an ill-advised area of scientific research at the turn of the century — and ensured there was only one water station on the entire course.

Most of the athletes who took part in the Olympic marathon were not experienced long distance runners.

Two members of South Africa's Tswana tribe, who were in town for the World Fair, are believed to have raced in bare feet.



A bystander helped turn Félix Carbajal de Soto's slacks into shorts with some scissors. (*Wikimedia Commons: Chicago Historical Society*)

Felix Carbajal de Soto, a Cuban runner, had raised money to go to America to compete in the Games.

But he blew all his donated funds when he went gambling in New Orleans, and had to hitchhike to St Louis in time for the marathon.

He showed up to the starting line in a dress shirt, slacks, leather street shoes and a beret.

A sympathetic bystander found a pair of scissors and helped him turn his pants into shorts moments before the race began.

The first 'winner' hitched a ride for 17km

The runners set off in a swirl of car fumes and dust, dodging men on horseback and people walking their dogs.

The conditions were so gruelling that American runner William Garcia collapsed halfway through the course and needed emergency surgery.

"He had ingested so much dust that it had ripped his stomach lining," historian Nancy J. Parezo wrote in *The 1904 Anthropology Days and Olympic Games*.

As the oppressive heat and lack of water took its toll, more and more men gave up.



Fred Lorz ran across the finishing line and nearly accepted the gold medal until his deception was uncovered. *(Wikimedia Commons)*

But then, suddenly, American runner Fred Lorz came into view at the Olympic stadium, much to the delight of spectators.

He ran across the finish line and had his photograph taken with president Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice.

Just as he was about to accept his gold medal, a witness stepped forward and declared Lorz a fraud.

The 20-year-old, exhausted and dehydrated, had given up at the 14th kilometre. His trainer had offered him a lift to the stadium so he could pick up his clothes.

But when his trainer's car broke down, Lorz figured he may as well run the rest of the way.

The officials and spectators were in an uproar as allegations of cheating were bandied about. Lorz insisted it was a misunderstanding, claiming he had only jokingly crossed the finish line and broken the tape.

With Lorz disqualified, the crowd turned back to the dusty, empty entrance to the Olympic stadium and waited.

The second winner was high on rat poison

Fourteen kilometres from the finish line, American runner Thomas Hicks was in agony.



Thomas Hicks, 20 kilometres into the marathon, battling through oppressive heat and thick dust. (Wikimedia Commons: Jessie Tarbox Beals)

He too was fading fast from the dust and heat, and tried to lie down on the road.

Hicks' trainers, who also believed that water diminished an athlete's performance, gave him small sips of a toxic cocktail to stimulate his nervous system.

High on rat poison which was mixed with an egg white and brandy, the 28-year-old staggered along for the rest of the course while hallucinating.

"Denied water, except for being sponged in hot water heated by a car radiator, Hicks lost eight pounds (3.6kg)," Nancy J. Parezo said.

The concoction seemed to give him a boost, according to Olympic historian Bill Mallon.

"At 32 kilometres, he was again ready to collapse when he was given the same treatment, along with sips of brandy," he wrote in his book about the 1904 Olympic Games.

The second time wasn't quite as effective.



The winner of the 1904 marathon Thomas Hicks was helped across the line by his trainers. *(Wikimedia Commons: Charles J.P. Lucas)*

When he reached the finish line, his trainers practically dragged him across it. Witnesses say he wandered the stadium in a stupor and forgot to collect his medal.

He had completed one of the toughest marathons in Olympic history in three hours and 28 minutes.

In comparison, Eliud Kipchoge won in just over two hours at the 2016 Rio Games.

Wild dogs and rotten apples along route

Only 14 men out of 32 managed to cross the finish line that day.

One of the Tswana tribesmen, Len Tau, turned out to be a talented marathoner, [but he was chased more than a kilometre off-course](#) by feral dogs. He placed ninth.



Len Tau (left) placed ninth in the marathon after he was chased off course by angry dogs. (*Wikimedia Commons: Missouri History Museum*)

And Felix Carbajal de Soto, who ran in a beret and dress shoes, managed to acquire food poisoning during the race.

His bender in New Orleans and frenzied journey to St Louis for the marathon meant he hadn't eaten in nearly 40 hours.

"Suffering from hunger, and with no coaches to assist him, he picked a green apple from a tree along the route," sports historian Thomas F Carter wrote in the book, *Olimpismo*.

But the rotten apple left him with painful stomach cramps, so he took a quick nap on the side of the road before continuing on the race.

The tenacious Cuban rallied, and still managed to come in fourth place.

'Asking too much of human endurance'

The race changed the lives of many of the men who attempted it.

Lorz was banned for life by the Amateur Athletic Union for his fraud, but the suspension was lifted after he apologised. He won the Boston Marathon the next year.

Felix Carbajal de Soto was sponsored by the Cuban government to travel to Greece to race in a marathon in Athens in 1906.



Félix Carbajal de Soto came fourth despite food poisoning and competing in street clothes. *(Wikimedia Commons: Missouri History Museum)*

But when he failed to show, he was presumed dead and his obituary was published in Cuban newspapers.

A year later, he surprised everyone when he returned to Havana on a Spanish steamship and resumed his running career.

James Sullivan, the director of the 1904 Games, agreed the marathon was so disastrous, the event probably wouldn't be back for the 1908 Olympics.

"I do not think the marathon will be included in the program, and I personally am opposed to it," he [told reporters at the time](#).

"A 25-mile run is asking too much of human endurance ... it is indefensible on any ground, but historic."

The Olympic Games have come a very long way since then, according to Dr Christian Wacker, President of the International Society of Olympic Historians.

"The early Olympic Games were a process of discovery. Rules and regulations were only developed and improved over the decades," Dr Wacker said.

Of course, the marathon would endure beyond the debacle at St Louis.

The organisers of the 1908 London Olympics learned from some of James Sullivan's mistakes — but not all.



Italian Dorando Pietri was disqualified in 1908 after Olympic officials helped him up when he stumbled at the finish line. (*Wikimedia Commons: Les Sports Modernes*)

The length of the marathon was standardised to 42.195 kilometres or 26 miles and 385 yards. Helping a runner over the finish line became a disqualifying offence.

But the distrust of water persisted, and runners continued to sip rat poison, brandy and even champagne to enhance their performance.

What was the secret to American runner John Hayes' victory in the 1908 marathon?

"I merely bathed my face with [cologne], and gargled my throat with brandy," he explained.

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