

Facts and figures

- The top five marathons in the world in 2009 were: New York (43,250 finishers), London (35,266), Berlin (34,994), Chicago (33,475) and Paris (30,334).
- World record holders are Haile Gebrselassie (2:03:59 achieved in Berlin in 2008) and Paula Radcliffe (2:15:25 in London in 2003).
- In 2005, the average finishing time in US marathons was 4:32:08 for men and 5:06:08 for women.
- The London Marathon has 20 ever-presents who have run every race since its inception in 1981.
- Sir Steve Redgrave collected a world record £1.8million in sponsorship when he ran London in 2006.
- The world's toughest race is said to be the Great Wall Marathon in China (pictured), which features 5,164 steps.
- At Tromsø in Norway's midnight sun marathon you can run in middle of the night in broad daylight.



# Ancient race of endurance

**Marathons:** This Sunday is the 2,500th anniversary of the first iconic race in Greece. But the history of this test of endurance has not been a smooth one **BY JAMES ELLIS**

Anyone disappointed at receiving a Dear John letter from the organisers of the Virgin London Marathon earlier this month should spare a thought for the Greek soldier Pheidippides. With the Athenian and Persian armies raging in battle outside the town of Marathon 2,500 years ago, the messenger was sent on a 150mile (240km) round trip to Sparta to ask for help, which he ran barefoot in two days. No sooner had he returned than he was dispatched to the Greek capital to announce an Athenian victory. So he set off again and ran the 25 miles to Athens and shouted: 'Nenikéamen!' ('We won!') before collapsing and dying from exhaustion. The legend of the marathon race was born – one that on Sunday will see 10,000 runners join in the 2,500th anniversary celebrations as the Athens

Classic Marathon follows what is thought to have been his route. While the accuracy of Pheidippides' reported exploits has been questioned, there's no doubt the marathon is a race distance that captures the public imagination more than any other, from memories of Paula Radcliffe's infamous call of nature in the 2005 London race, to the thousands of people who complete one of the 300 annual races approved by the Association of International Marathons and Distance Races (AIMS). 'It's an ultimate test of endurance,' says Hugh Jones, former English marathon champion and AIMS secretary. 'It's also an event that, because of the distance, any number of people can take part and say they competed against the world's best in the same race.' Despite the almost universal popularity of the marathon today, it took many years for it to become established.

When preparations were under way for the first modern Olympics in Athens in 1896, French historian Michel Bréal proposed an event that would provide a link between the spirit of ancient Greece and modern times. A re-enactment of Pheidippides run from Marathon to Athens was chosen. According to James Coote, author of *A Picture History Of The Olympics*, all sorts of inducements were offered if the winner proved to be Greek, including a lifetime of free shaves, 2,000lb of chocolate, a large barrel of wine and even a marriage proposal. Coote writes: 'George Averoff, a local rich merchant offered the hand of his daughter and a dowry of a million drachmas – exactly the cost of the reconstruction of the Pan Athenian stadium [where the games were held].' Fortunately for Mr Averoff's daughter, the victor, a water carrier called Spyridon Louis, was already married, although he did accept the offer of a field in recompense. The success of the modern Olympics meant the marathon remained part of the Games calendar, although early races were not over a set distance, instead any suitable route that approximated the 40km (25-mile) mark was used. London's 1908 Games changed all that, with a number of circumstances, including Queen Alexandra wanting to have the best view of the finish, conspiring to increase the distance to 26 miles, 385 yards (42.195km). The 'race of the century', as it became known, where Dorando Pietri collapsed numerous times towards the end before he was helped over the finish line and later disqualified, saw the official marathon distance set to that seen in the 1908 Games in 1921. For 50 years, the marathon remained a niche feat of endurance until well into the mid-1970s. 'America's Bicentennial year in 1976 was the catalyst for change,' says Jones. 'The organisers of the New York Marathon decided to scrap the previous route, multiple circuits of Central Park, and devised one through the city's five boroughs. When the marathon moved to the streets, it became the race of the people.' The rest is very ancient history. James Ellis's running blog is at [www.1095miles.com](http://www.1095miles.com)



Keep on running: The Athens Classic Marathon

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