

Edwin Flack – Australia's lone competitor

Introduction

Australia has participated at every modern summer Olympic Games since the first in Athens in 1896. Australia had only one representative at the first Olympic Games. This individual represents so much of the Olympic spirit.



Focus:



Use the following sources and your own research to investigate the way Edwin Flack participated in the 1896 Olympic Games. This should include:

- His background and how he became a competitor for Australia.
- o Why Edwin Flack was called the 'Lion of Athens' by the end of the Games?

Gathering the facts

Aspects for consideration in planning your presentation -

What was Edwin Flack's background in the events in which he competed?

In what events did Edwin Flack compete at the Athens Olympic Games?

How old was Edwin when he competed in Athens in 1896?



Activities

Explore the accounts of Edwin Flack at the Athens Olympics in the text below and at the following weblink <http://media.olympics.com.au/tags/keyword/Edwin%20Flack>

Then complete one of the questions below.

Australia and the Olympic Games

The First Games Athens 1896

Performances



How would you create a media sporting hero of Edwin Flack if he had achieved these results in a recent Olympics? Consider the methods used by various Australian media today to build a larger-than-life 'persona' of sporting identities.

OR

Examine the current Olympic rules and regulations related to an athlete participating in different types of events, such as rowing and track and field and swimming. Have there been other multi-event competitors in the Olympic Games in the last four or five Olympic Games? Try to explain why or why not.

Edwin Flack – Background to our first Olympian



Focus:

- Edwin Flack's background and interest in sports
- Does he seem prepared for the first Modern Olympics in Athens?
- Why was he interested in these particular Games?

WHEN TEDDY FLACK, aged twenty-one, was sent to London by his father in March 1895 to work and study as an accountant, he knew that the first modern Olympic Games would take place in Athens the following year, and had formed a vague plan to attend them, either as an athlete or as an onlooker. He had been a good schoolboy athlete at Melbourne Grammar School (where he had studied Greek and learned something of the traditions embodied in the ancient Olympics), and later had some success with the Melburnian Hare and Hounds club — whose members were Old Boys of the school — as a middle distance Flack kept a ledger, a running account in every sense, of all his performances from June 1891, when he was seventeen years old. It was apparently intended for his eyes only, and was discovered in 1960, twenty five years after his death, when his friend and accountant colleague Gordon (later Sir Gordon) Allard took over his old desk. It is a fascinating document, a kind of audit of an athletic career, and it offers crisp testimony to the man's honesty as well as to his book-keeper's mind, focused as it was on a passion for running. Meticulously he recorded every race: the date, event, distance, handicap, finishing place, time and "remarks". After one 5-mile cross-country race he confessed with disarming candour: "Lost my way and had to give up." And after his last event, a 2-mile handicap in October 1897: "Did not finish. Had an attack of the stitch."

What emerges from Flack's own precise profit-and-loss record of his career before the Olympics of 1896 is a picture of a fine, dedicated athlete, if not a great one. He won the Australasian mile championship in November 1893 (in 4 min 44 sec) and two days later, at the same carnival, finished fourth in the 3-mile championship. He had wins, mainly in club events, at distances ranging from 440 yards to 7 miles, and was third in the 10 mile cross-country championship of Victoria in 1894. Often enough, though, in the ledger column headed "position at finish", he recorded a cryptic "nowhere".

Running in December 1894 for the last time before his departure for England, he won both the Victorian half-mile and mile titles in the one afternoon. Of the half-mile he remarked, "won easily", and underneath, against the mile, he jotted a laconic: "ditto" to his father

He was a tall, loose-limbed youngster, with a strong jaw and a steady eye. Like many good middle-distance runners, he was lightly framed, with a free-swinging gait and a fine, sweeping stride. One athletics commentator wrote that he was "as game as a pebble", but felt he needed to be taken over by a good pro: "At present he carries his arms as if he did not know what to do with them, and his action must tire him."¹ He was also very amiable, and during competition in Melbourne and Sydney he made some close friendships; one of these was Richard Coombes, sportswriter and athletic administrator, who later became Australia's first member of the International Olympic Committee.

The Australia Flack left behind as he sailed for England via Cape Horn was not a nation, just a loose bundle of six colonies, arguably linked more closely in terms of sentiment to Britain than to each other. Still nearly six years away from federation, it possessed no flag, no anthem of its own, no national emblem on its postage stamps, and not much visible international identity. What it did own was a passion for sport; some who disapproved of this, like the Reverend Dr Bevan, of the Collins Street Independent Church in Melbourne, felt it was dangerously close to an obsession. It was a condition which had been seeded on the goldfields, where diggers indulged in bare-knuckle prize fights, foot-races and a brand of football that had a Gaelic accent but was unburdened by too many rules; it was nourished to a large degree by distance from the old world, an entrenched sense of inferiority, and a latent desire, in a land so split into separate cells, for a feeling of oneness. Success in sport offered a unifying force, and there is not much doubt that whatever small mark Australia had made abroad was attributable to a large degree to its sportsmen: its cricketers, and people like the world champion scullers Ned Trickett and Henry Searle and the boxer Young Griffio (Albert Griffiths).

Flack's father Joseph had been a manager in the London office of Price Waterhouse before he emigrated in 1878 with his wife and young Edwin (generally called Ted or Teddy), who had been born at Islington East on 5 November 1873. Joseph lived in South Yarra, Melbourne, prospered as an accountant, and became a partner in the firm Davey, Flack & Co. When Edwin Flack finished school at Melbourne Grammar in 1892, he joined the company, and when he was judged ready for further training and study in London, his father arranged a job with his old boss Edwin Waterhouse. Such was the goodwill of Waterhouse for the younger Edwin that he arranged for Flack to visit the Buenos Aires office of Price Waterhouse while en route to London.

Soon after his arrival, Flack joined three clubs: the London Athletic Club and both the Thames and the Hampton Court Hare and Hounds. The hare-and-hounds movement was a popular form of cross-country racing, with several good runners (the hares) being given a start on the rest of the field (the hounds); often the hares set an uncharted course, leaving a paperchase trail behind them. Flack finished "nowhere" in his first 2-mile handicaps, and noted that in one of them he had started from scratch, behind sixty other runners. In November 1895 he had an easy win in the Thames Hare and Hounds challenge cup over about 4.75 miles: a fine performance considering he "did not know the course as no trail was laid (and I) lost a lot of ground." Of his remaining eight races before his departure for Athens, he won three (all with the Thames Hare and Hounds) and got lost once. His London form did not greatly impress the correspondent of the Sporting Life, who wrote: "Though hardly up to the best English form Flack has, however, shown sufficient pace and stamina to earn for himself a distinct and meritorious place as a cross-country runner at home."

Flack's early loose contemplation of the trip to Greece for the Games firmed gradually towards certainty in London, but he kept an open mind about whether he might compete. His plan, he wrote later, was that "if I could arrange it, I would take part in them, or at any rate, go and see them". He justified the journey on the basis that Greece was "such an interesting place in itself, and so well worth seeing". Flack kept a full daily diary, separate from his athletic ledger, in 1895-96; a compulsive chronicler, he recorded his bus and train rides around London, his meals, the dismal weather, each letter he wrote or received, even the fairly tedious work he did at the office—"balancing off, inking in figures and generally cleaning up". Perusal of the diary disproves the oft-repeated claim that his parents and close friends were unaware of his voyage to Greece. Athens was

very much on his mind in the early months of 1896. On 31 January he spent much of the afternoon being briefed on the coming Olympics by a Greek acquaintance with a very long name: "... it would be too much of an effort for me to write (it) down". On 16 March, he received a batch of letters from home, including one each from "the Pater" and "the Mater" and one from his friend, Basil Parkinson? His mother advised him of her plans to go to London, and the man he used to call "Parkie" told him of a recent visit he made to Flack's home. Parkinson, an absolute enthusiast about every facet of amateur athletics, was Flack's close confidant. His letter described a conversation he had had with Flack's father about the Athens project, and went on to advise him that Flack senior was "quite willing" for Edwin to make the trip - as long as the expense did not exceed £30.

Flack's reaction to this news was swift. By deferring holidays, he had banked up a month's leave, and he now began arranging with his senior at Price Waterhouse (a man referred to in his diary as GF) to take the accumulated period from the end of March. He did not explain why: "My main concern," he wrote later, "was lest Mr Edwin Waterhouse ... might hear of what I was doing, and probably disapprove of a member of the staff careering across Europe to take part in athletic contests." On 26 March he received final permission from JGF to take the leave immediately, went straight to the office of Thomas Cook and paid his fare to leave the following day for Athens via France, Switzerland and Italy.

Flack's rewards for his victories were two silver commemorative medals, two crowns of olive branches (which he later presented to Melbourne Grammar School) and a couple of handsome diplomas. He returned to London, but did not run again until October 1897, when he competed in two London Athletic Club events, and won one of them: the 3 mile challenge cup. On his way home early in 1898, he disembarked in Western Australia and remained there long enough to open offices for his father's business in Kalgoorlie and Perth. With his father and brother Henry, he later expanded the company (which became Flack & Flack) to other major cities in Australia and New Zealand. He remained unmarried, became a director of a number of major Australian companies, bred stud cattle and sheep on a property near Berwick, Victoria, and became a keen golfer. He died in 1935.

Edwin Flack had a later involvement with Olympic history, as part of the first Australian delegation to attend a congress of the IOC (see Chapter 7)." But his great contribution to Australia's Olympic movement was of course as a pioneer athlete. He was the first hero: the first to compete, the first to win. Moreover, his unexpected appearance in Athens gave Australians their first real awareness of the existence of the Olympic Games. Australia is rightly proud of its unbroken link with the modern Olympics, ever since their birth. It is a claim which owes much to the very private decision of a modest young accountant. who loved to run. to embark on his own small adventure.

Source: Harry Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, University of Queensland Press, 1994, pp. 10-13