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# Marathon – A True Story

- Tannistha Roychoudhury, Grade VII

**M**y childhood has not been a great one. When I was seven, a tutor came to my home to teach to read and write. On the first and only day he came, he stormed out, complaining how I was a born idiot and should be prohibited from education, like a slave. I ultimately never did touch education, but I also never liked to do anything else. Everyone, including my rich parents, said that I was good for nothing. But there was one thing I was good at. I liked to run. It gave me a very refreshing feeling, like I was drinking water from the coolest spring in the world. Whenever I got the chance, I ran. My parents did not approve of my running and no studying, but I didn't care about that.

Then, when I was a young adult, I first went to see the Olympic Games. I was mesmerized by the accuracy of the spear-throwers and the strength of the boxers, and many more. But I was just simply enthralled by the long-distance runners. They had so much speed, so much stamina, and so much endurance. It was then that I promised myself that I would work hard to become an athlete and participate in the Games.

My name is Pheidippides. I was born in the Greek city of Athens. Greece was doing quite well at my time. Ever since the fall of the Mycenaean Empire several centuries ago, Greece had been receiving bad harvests. All of Greece's residents had to drop everything involving education in order to have many farmers to grow food. By doing so, most Greeks forgot many of the skills they had learned, including reading and writing. Then, a couple of centuries later, Greece started to trade with the people of other civilizations such as Egypt and Assyria. The Greeks grew wealthier and were able to reinforce the skills they had lost during the fall of the Mycenaean Empire.

I kept the promise I had made when I first saw the Olympic Games. I worked hard day and night, running round and round the entire city until I was groaning in pain. I ate only bread and boiled vegetables twice a day. I took plenty of rest. I even lifted heavy weights with my feet. It took me about thirty years, but after that time, I was readier than ever to compete in the Games and claim the gold crown for long-distance running.

I was very excited that I would participate in the Games, until that day when my life took a different turn. I was forty years old. I had just registered my name in the list of participants, and I had sworn to Zeus that I had been in training for at least ten

months.

Then the messenger came.

I was returning home, happier than a man who had won every event in the Games, when the messenger came sprinting through the street, shouting, "They're coming! The Persians are invading!!!"

My happiness instantly transformed into dismay. I knew then that I wouldn't have a chance this year to participate in the Olympic Games. The Games were canceled when there was an invasion. But that wasn't what bothered me most. There was a rule that all men who had registered their name for the Games would be drafted into the military and serve the army until the invasion was over.

I had to immediately report to the Acropolis. All the other participants were present. General Antenor, the commander of the hoplites in Athens, gave a very long speech about how we should serve our country faithfully and die for it if necessary. We were then recruited into the army by the general.

We started training immediately. Some of the competitors had trained only for the combat events and were such experts that they did not need further training. Most of the competitors, including me, had trained for the other events, and did not know much about combat. It was a hard day. The training was just grueling. By the end of the day, all my muscles felt like they had been roasted in a fire. But it was worth it, because now I, and mostly everyone else, knew how to handle a sword, spear, dagger, mace, and countless other weapons. We also knew how to put on armor and how to block and parry. We were ready for the counterattack for the next day.

During the training, General Antenor noticed how agile and fast I was while dodging my opponent. The general challenged me to a race of twenty laps around the Acropolis. I was a little bit nervous because the general was the winner of the golden crown of long-distance running in the Olympic Games twelve years ago.

He was no match for me. While he was running his seventh lap, I had finished my twenty laps. The general was groaning in frustration and he was showing how mad he was at me beating him. His face was red and his eyes were full of fury. Then I saw the slight smile on his lips and realized that he was actually impressed.

After training had ended, the general approached me. "Pheidippides," he declared. "I am impressed by your speed and endurance. We need

fast people like you in the military.”

“Why is that, sir?” I asked.

“For messengers, of course! Now that I think of it, one of our messengers has fallen off a cliff and died. You will make a fine replacement.” he boomed as he slapped me on the back. My heart sank. The Messenger was one of the lowest ranks in the Greek military. Not only was the messenger positioned in the last row of the hoplite phalanx, but the messenger’s main job was to relay messages between the army on the battlefield and Athens. Because of the treacherous landscape, full of rugged mountains and deep, muddy streams, messengers were not allowed to use horses. Messengers were not allowed to travel by sea in case of capture by the enemy fleet.

Early the next morning, General Antenor and the hundred new hoplite recruits left for the battle. Antenor gave a speech just before we left. “Men! The time has come for us to fight to the death! Remember that we have to fight our hardest, even if the odds are against us. We must be brave! We must be strong! And also remember that the Persians use the weapon known as the scimitar, which is more powerful than the sword or spear. The Persians also disregard the use of armor, so they are very vulnerable to our attacks. Remember that even if we don’t win, we tried our hardest!” He raised his sword and everyone cheered.

On the journey, Antenor informed us that the battle would be taking place at Marathon. Marathon was a small coastal village on the Southern coast of the Greek peninsula. The Persians had landed on the coast and plundered the village, taking no prisoners. Apparently, the last messenger had described Marathon as “a city of the dead,” since all the houses and temples were in ruins and hundreds of corpses were littered on every street.

When we arrived, the remainder of the Greek military, meaning the garrisons from all the other Greek cities, had already started the battle. We heard clangs of swords against scimitars, and cries of people who were slashed and killed. We saw blood spilled all over the rocks and grasses. There were war cries from both the hoplites and the Persians.

We were all near the back of the hoplite phalanx. Since I was the messenger, I was in the last row. None of the enemy ranks had reached me yet. I wasn’t doing anything. I was just standing there at the back of the phalanx while the other hoplites were fighting for their lives at the front. I didn’t like being out of the action. Plus, I was cold, and no fighting meant that I wouldn’t get any warmer either. Everyone was wearing scarves. I had on a green one.

Less than a day had passed and I was already called to General Antenor for my first message. It wasn’t a good one. “Pheidippides,” Antenor said.

“We are losing the battle. Our hoplites are not enough to defeat the Persians. The Persians fight dirty – too dirty. You must carry this message to the Spartans, our good friends. They are the most powerful and fearsome fighters in the whole of Greece. There was no time to send the message to them before counterattacking, but now we need them, and fast,” he continued, handing me a stone tablet with words written on it, words which I could never hope to understand. “It says that we need reinforcements. And here’s a map,” he said, handing me a simple map on an Egyptian papyrus. “Here is Sparta,” he said, as he showed a point on the map.

“How far is it?” I asked.

“It’s not far...only about fifty leagues.” He replied.

I nearly passed out. My ears were certainly deceiving me. Fifty leagues?! That was a very, very long distance, longer than I had imagined running. It would take a day at least to get there and another day to get back here. The harsh landscape would leave me exhausted. And to make matters worse, I had to carry a heavy stone tablet and a papyrus, which would only add to my exhaustion. “That journey will take me two days at least. Are you sure you can hold off the invaders for that long?” I asked him.

“According to my calculations, we have enough soldiers to hold out the Persians for two weeks. The only problem is that after two weeks, we’re lost, because the Persian fleets keep arriving all the time.” He answered. He must have noticed that I had become wan, because he said, “Don’t worry, lad. You’ll make it. You just have to believe in yourself.” He slapped me on the back and dashed back into the battlefield, shouting orders to his hoplite soldiers. I stood there for a few moments, deep in thought, and, finding no other option, took off for Sparta.

I started off with a fast jog over a grassy field. It was nearly as fast as running, and it would conserve more energy for the remaining journey. It felt quite pleasant at first. It was nice to be jogging on a grassy field with the cool breeze rushing through my skin. The feeling didn’t last long.

It wasn’t long before I tripped for the first time in my journey. It was a huge boulder, which I somehow hadn’t seen before. It was as if it appeared there just as I was about to jog past. I fell over onto the grass, and my left knee grazed a sharp, jagged rock. I cried out in pain as blood began dripping from the cut in my knee.

It wasn’t a serious cut, but every time my right foot touched the ground, a burst of pain would shoot up my leg. Soon, after about half a league, I found a small stream. The water was clean and I washed my knee in order to prevent the pain. I also drank some of the water, even though it tasted a little metallic. It quenched my thirst a bit. Soon, I was up and jogging.

As I went along, the grass started disappearing. I was seeing more of a grey, barren landscape. Even the sky started becoming grey. Soon the grass was gone, and I started to see rocky, grey mountains towering above me. According to the map, I had to go over these mountains to get to Sparta, which meant a full-scale climb. I groaned. Something told me the day was going to get much, much worse.

I tripped three more times before reaching the first mountain, all of which were over a rock. When I reached the mountain, I saw that it was a steep climb. And since I hadn't brought any climbing tools with me, I knew that the climbing would take lots of effort.

I wrapped the stone tablet and the map around my green scarf and strapped them to my military belt. At least they would be safe. Then I started the climb. It was grueling. There were not many hangings to climb on and I had to cling onto the rocks with my fingernails. When I finally reached the top ages later, one of my fingernails had broken off and I had dozens of tiny blisters in my hands.

Looking around, I was relieved. I wouldn't have to climb back down yet. This was a mountain range, and all I had to do was to climb from peak to peak. It wasn't so hard.

Well, it wasn't hard until I reached a peak that was so tall that I could barely see the summit. I could see a faint blue light shining from the top. I recognized it as Mt. Olympus. I had seen it in many pictures painted by artists in Athens. This was the legendary Mountain of the Gods. Zeus lived there along with the other gods such as Poseidon and Aphrodite. It was considered a sin to climb to the mountain's summit, so I decided to cross it. It would take more painstaking effort to do that, but I wasn't about to commit a sin in order to make the journey easier to handle.

After what seemed like ages, I crossed Mt. Olympus. I was sweating and all my hands were ashen with the texture of rock. My heart was beating faster than a rabbit can hop, and each of my breaths came in painful fractions. I was so tired I could barely stand up. I decided to rest for a while on the side of The Mountain of the Gods.

I nearly fell asleep. I needed all my mental strength to keep my eyes open. After some time, I was ready to begin again. Before I started, I muttered a prayer in the direction of the heavens. "Gods, please help me have strength to continue my journey."

I started. There were not many peaks remaining to go over. Soon, I had reached the last peak. Now the hard part would start: going back down!

Suddenly, the scarf tied to my belt came loose. "No!" I screamed, and reached for it, a moment too late. It had disappeared down the mountain, taking my message and map with it. I had to get down and

retrieve it!

I cautiously placed my left foot on a rocky ledge. My first mistake was to look down. I was nearly a league off the ground. Along with the realization came dizziness and nausea. I almost fell over the top. I tried my hardest to regain balance and forced my mind to forget my current altitude. My second mistake was to think that there were more rocky ledges underneath this one to place my right foot on, which there weren't. This time I really did fall over.

My body was the wrong side up. I felt very ill as I fell. Then I hit the side of the mountain. My face collided with sharp rocks. But that wasn't the end of it. I could see the ground coming up. I then saw that I was about to land on hard rock. Before I could reach out my arms to protect myself, my head crashed onto the rocks and I felt an agonizing pain that sent my body straight upright. I could feel the blackness covering up the corners of my vision. I managed to keep my eyes open long enough to see that my scarf was just beside me, its contents still intact. "Safe," I muttered, and blacked out.

When I woke up again, I was not at the foot of the mountain. I was in a very bright room. I realized that the walls, floor, and ceiling were made of white marble. Only the wealthy could afford such a material. Then I realized I was lying in a warm, comfortable bed. The mattress was covered with white velvet. I sat up and realized that there was a bandage around my head.

I took in my surroundings. There were many statues of some old Greek generals around the room. There was also a large portrait of a handsome couple on the wall. There was a window on the other side. Through the window I could see a huge garden with many flowers and plants. There was a beautiful fountain in the middle of it all.

"Do you like the garden?" said a voice. I spun around. There was a very old woman standing in the pillared doorway, smiling. Her long silver hair flowed down her back. Her face was covered in wrinkles and she had kind eyes. She was wearing a long white dress. I recognized her as the lady from the portrait but much older.

I suddenly remembered what had happened. "Where am I?" I asked. "I remember falling down a mountain and crashing into some rocks, and then..."

The lady held up her hand. "Don't fret, messenger. You are in my house, and I know what happened. I was strolling along the outside of the town when I saw you fall. I was terribly scared, and I returned to the city and called my daughter. Together we brought you into our house, and my daughter nursed you. I hope you feel fine now?"

I smiled weakly. "Yes, thank you very much. But I must be going. I have a message to deliver to Sparta and...wait...how do you know that I'm a messenger?" I asked.



"You are in Sparta. While we were carrying you to our house, I noticed the stone tablet on your belt. I read it and passed it to General Hector, who commands the Spartan army. He says that he would be happy to help your troops succeed against those pesky Persians," she answered.

"Phew!" I gasped in relief. "Did the general say the amount of time it would take to ready his own troops?"

"No. You must talk with him. Come." She said. "And by the way, my name is Cassandra."

"Pheidippides," I answered as I followed her out.

As I went along, I noticed the beauty of Sparta. Athens was nothing compared to this city. The streets were cleaner and no common mongrels wandered them. Almost all the houses were made of expensive white marble. There was less noise around the marketplace. All the people were friendly, saying "Welcome to Sparta" whenever they saw me. The grass was greener and the air was fresher.

We soon reached a huge building that I realized as the Barracks of Sparta. There was a heavily-built and muscular man sitting on a bench in the front lawn, staring at the tall fountain. "General," said Cassandra. "He is here." She turned to leave. "I wish you the best of luck, Pheidippides." She bowed. I nodded in thanks.

I watched as the general turned around. I couldn't help staring at his face. There were various scars on his forehead and down his cheek. He had a crooked nose and he was wearing a black eye patch. His mouth was twisted down into the most terrible frown and his lips were dull grey. Flies flew around his head and he smelled of rotten eggs. He was more like a filthy street-beggar who had stolen a general's coat rather than the general of the most powerful military force in the whole of Greece.

When he saw me gaping at his face, he grinned, showing cracked, yellow teeth. "Hello, messenger. I hope you've had a nice rest." He said. His voice came as a sharp cackle which made me shiver. I made no answer.

He laughed heartily. It sounded more like a bear growling. "You seem to be surprised by my poor state. It was a drastic accident." Now he was sniffing, as a tear rolled down his open eye. It was blood-red in color. "It was a long time ago. I was a common messenger like you. I fell off a mountain and hit a very sharp rock. The impact made my teeth break permanently, made permanent scars on my face, and removed one of my eyes permanently. I also had a broken leg, a broken arm, and a broken nose. Still, I endured the long hours of pain and made it back to Sparta. As a reward, I was promoted to lieutenant, and when the general died, to general." He held out his hand, and I shook it.

"General Hector," I started, finally back in

control. "Have you accepted our proposal to assist our troops?"

"Aye," replied the general. "I don't like those Persians. They raided our settlement near the Nile and stole everything. Well, now they'll know never to anger old Hector! Messenger, I promise you that I will lead my forces to assist yours at Marathon. It would take nearly two days to refresh my troops because, well, it's been more than six years since we've fought last. And also they held an unauthorized banquet last night. But after they're ready, I promise that we will reach Marathon in three days. Now give this message to old Antenor, will you." He reached through a coat pocket and pulled out a very thin piece of papyrus.

"The message is on this papyrus?" I asked.

The general chuckled. "This here is the finest papyrus you could find. Imported directly from Egypt. Lighter and handier than stone. Worth every piece of gold we spent on it. Now off you go, young lad, and good luck." He patted me on the back and returned to the Barracks. I could hear him shouting, "Wake up, you lazy drunkards, and get running! Come on!! You'll never vanquish those Persians if you're in this state." I chuckled quietly to myself as I left the city.

The trip back to Marathon was quite uneventful, except that I fell off the last mountain on the trail. I hit my bandaged head on a rock and blacked out. When I woke up, the sun was setting. I quickly hurried off again.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard the sounds of battle coming from Marathon. My relief vanished when I saw the piles of corpses, of which most were Greeks.

Antenor was leading the battle at the front. I saw him cut through a Persian soldier and then slash at four Persians at the same time. Desperately, I called to him. He heard me and let his lieutenants take over the front. He hurried to me.

"What news, Pheidippides?" he asked, panting. I handed him the papyrus. Somehow, he wasn't surprised to see it. Perhaps he always got messages from Sparta in the same manner. He read the message and sighed in relief. "Thank the gods," he gasped. He turned around and called to his troops. "Help is on the way! Fight your best!" This seemed to have an impact on the Greek soldiers. We could hear less Greek cursing and more Persian cursing as they died.

The general turned to me again. "Pheidippides, I know that you're not a lieutenant," he said. "But how would you like to join me at the front of the ranks? As a reward for delivering the message this fast."

I accepted. For some reason I fought better than most of the well-trained soldiers. I think I had a sense of patriotism inside me. I had claimed several

Persian lives with my sword, while not one Persian fighter had even touched me with his scimitar. Soon, the piles of Persian corpses were exceeding the Greeks.

I fought for a bit longer until I felt something very, very hard hit my head with unbelievable force. I was out before I hit the ground.

Later, I woke up again. I was in a tent. There was a second bandage around my head and the nurse of the army of Athens was by my side.

“How long has it been since I went down?” I asked sleepily.

“It has been five days,” answered the nurse.

I sat up hurriedly. “Five whole days?! Have the Spartans arrived yet?”

“They will soon.”

“I must talk to General Antenor at once!” I stood up and looked at the nurse. “Where is he?”

She answered in a sad voice, “I am afraid that the general has left us. A Persian soldier stabbed him in the stomach. I tried my hardest to cure him, but the wound became infected and he died. I am sorry.”

I took this all in. The general was a nice person. He had stood by me all the time and had allowed me to fight. I felt that I had to avenge his tragic death. “I’m going back in,” I said with clenched teeth. The nurse was about to protest, but she must have noticed how determined I was, so she gave me my weapons and armor instead.

I ran back into the battlefield, roaring in rage. I slashed at every Persian I could find, showing no mercy. I slashed and stabbed and blocked until I was so exhausted that it took all my strength to lunge with my sword.

Just then, I heard a familiar voice. “Avast, ye Persians! Go back to where you came from!” It was General Hector, with his army of five thousand soldiers. The Persians in front of me stared in shock for a few moments until their fighting side took over and they started attacking again.

The Spartan army was a juggernaut. It destroyed every Persian in its path. After some time there were no more Persians left alive. All those who were alive had fled to their ships. We saw the ships

moving away into the horizon.

All the Greeks left alive shouted, “Victory for us!” We sounded like a thunderstorm.

General Hector approached me. “To Acropolis! Run, Pheidippides, one race more! Victory is ours! Athens is saved, thank Pan, go shout!”

I ran. I cannot forget the sensation. The wind whipping through my body and the grass cool under my bare feet, I ran. I ran for nearly a day without stopping. I did not feel my breath coming in tiny gasps. I did not feel my heart beating faster than my body could withstand. I only felt victory.

The sun was setting by the time I reached Athens. I ran though the streets screaming, “We have won! Victory is ours!” Everyone cheered and cried out with joy.

I kept running. I didn’t stop until I reached the Acropolis. When I reached there, I collapsed to the floor. All the officials of the Greek government were staring at me in wonder and surprise.

“We have won!” I managed to gasp. I then realized that I wasn’t breathing. My heart had stopped beating. I lost all my senses. I did not see the officials jump up with joy and start dancing. I did not hear the shouts and cheers of the officials and all the other locals who had followed me into the Acropolis. I did not feel the floor beneath me. There was only darkness. That day, in front of nearly everyone in Athens, I breathed my last.

I was famous for a time, but soon I was forgotten. Luckily, my story was recorded by a man named Herodotus about forty years after I died.

Herodotus’ writings were discovered in the nineteenth century and poet Robert Browning wrote a poem about me. In the modern world, I have no significance. But there is one thing that relates to me in the modern world. Something that many people enjoy.

The famous long-distance running event which is about forty two kilometers long is named after the battlefield in which I fought. It is known as the... marathon.

### Author’s Note

*The story is based on the poem by Robert Browning. The Battle of Marathon is a true historical event. The legitimacy of the part when Pheidippides runs to Athens without stopping and dies from exhaustion and the part when Pheidippides runs to Sparta to request reinforcements has not been proved, and historians still debate if it is true. □*