

The Odd Olympics of 1904

by Judy Jamey

The 1904 Olympic marathon took place on a blistering-hot August day. Horses and automobiles moved slowly in front of the marathon runners to clear the path, and the hooves and wheels blew clouds of dust into the runners' faces. The crowd cheered when the first person crossed the finish line, a New Yorker named Frederick Lorz. The cheers turned to jeers when it was discovered that Lorz had covered a large part of the race in a car.

First-place honors were passed to Tom Hicks, a British man, who was so weak at the end of the race that his trainers had to carry him across the finish line. Also racing was Félix Carvajal, a mailman from Cuba, who showed up to race in street shoes, a long-sleeved shirt, trousers, and a beret. Carvajal stopped often to chat with spectators and became ill after eating fruit that he picked along the route. A policeman cut off Carvajal's trousers at the knees to give him some air. There was another racer who was chased a mile off course, through a cornfield, by an angry dog.

All in all, it was an unusual marathon. It was an unusual Olympics.

The modern Olympics had started only eight years earlier, and the 1904 games were the first games held in the Western Hemisphere. Chicago was going to be the host, but the organizers of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair didn't want another big event competing with the fair. The fair that year was celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase.

The International Olympic Committee eventually agreed to give the games to St. Louis, possibly regrettably. The 1904 Olympic games were fairly lackluster. The competitions weren't separate from the other activities of the World's Fair, and they became a kind of sideshow to the huge, international exhibits at the fair. But it wasn't just the fair that made the games that year rather uninspired. The Olympics today draw over 11,000 athletes from more than 200 countries. But in 1904, only 12 countries were represented. It was

expensive and difficult to travel overseas, so fewer than half of the events involved athletes from outside the United States. Of course, that meant Americans won most of the medals.

But the medals were the one thing that went well at these games: The medal system the Olympics uses today—gold, silver, and bronze for first, second, and third place—got its start at the St. Louis Olympics.