

27. The Legend of Marathon

The 'marathon' is a sporting event. It is a running race of about 42 kilometres. The word 'marathon' also means 'a task or event that lasts a long time and requires a lot of effort and patience'.



The first marathon race was organized at the time of the first Olympic Games which were held in Greece. The marathon was started in the memory of a legendary Greek hero, Pheidippides, who had carried an important message from the battle of Marathon to Athens. Given below is the story of his famous run from Marathon to Athens. We do not know whether the story is historically accurate, but it has inspired many generations of sportsmen.

About two thousand and five hundred years ago, Persia was a mighty kingdom. Their large army had landed in the bay near the town of Marathon. Their target was Athens, a city state in Greece. Athens had a small army compared to the Persian one. But the Athenian soldiers were very brave. They had faced the Persians before, but they needed help from other Greek kingdoms now. They decided to send a special messenger to the neighbouring kingdom of Sparta. His name was Pheidippides.

Pheidippides was a young man who served as a 'day-long runner'. He ran to Sparta like the wind. He covered the distance of nearly a hundred kilometres

in a day. But alas! The people of Sparta were busy with some ceremonies. They did not want to join the battle immediately. Pheidippides took this message back to Athens with a heavy heart, but on light feet. Again, he ran a hundred kilometres within a day.

When the Generals of Athens heard the cold Spartan response, they did not lose heart. They were ready to fight on their own. The Persian army was watching Athens like a cat watches a mousehole. So, they decided to launch a surprise attack on the Persians. The Athenian Generals sent their flanks round the Persian forces like speeding arrows and began to draw them in. The Persians were not ready for battle.





Even so, they were skilled archers. They showered arrows on the soldiers of Athens. But the arrows simply fell off their helmets and strong armours. Also, the Athenians knew their seashore well. The Persians were new to the terrain. Many of them were killed. Many more were injured. Some of them were lost in the marshy areas. The brave Athenians drove back every single remaining Persian soldier back to their ships anchored in the bay. The battle was over within a few hours.

The battle was over but the Persians did not accept defeat. They saw that the entire army of Athens had rushed to the seashore, leaving the city of Athens far behind. Only the aged people, women and children were left in the city. The Persians now devised a new plan. The sea-route to the city of Athens was much shorter than the land route. The Persians decided to take the sea-route and pounce upon Athens from the seaside. The

Athenian army would take very long to travel back to Athens on foot, with their heavy armour and weapons. Seeing the Persians, the defenceless people in the city of Athens would think that Athens had lost the battle. Then it would be easy for the Persians to take over the city.

The Athenian Generals too, were good strategists. When they saw the Persian fleet leave in a hurry, they understood the Persian plan. They resolved to go back to Athens as fast as possible to defend it. But, it was very necessary to let the people of Athens know that they had won. Then they would not open the city gates to the Persians. They would wait for the victorious Athenian army to return. The city would be safe. Who would take this message to them? The message must be delivered before the Persians reached there. Who would travel faster than the Persian ships and that too, on a longer route? Who else but Pheidippides !

Pheidippides had already completed a run of more than two hundred kilometres just the day before. But he was a brave young man. He would do anything for his State. Also, this time he was to carry a happy message.

It was not easy for Pheidippides to reach Athens sooner than the Persians did. That is why, this time, he left the usual safe route and chose another one that passed through cliffs and mountains but was much shorter.

Pheidippides scaled the first steep cliff and picked up speed. He had to run more than forty kilometres. It was very hot. He began to perspire. There were some shady olive trees on one side of the road. But Pheidippides couldn't wait, couldn't rest. He just ran on and on. His heart began to beat faster, he became weak with hunger and thirst, but he didn't stop.

At last, Pheidippides came within sight of the city-gates of Athens! He

was successful in his mission. He had reached before the Persians.

The people of Athens threw open the gates to Pheidippides.

“What happened, Pheidippides? Do you bring good news or.....?”

“Yes ! Yes ! Joy to you ! We won ! We won ! ” As soon as Pheidippides had delivered this message, he collapsed – never to rise again. He had laid down his life in the service of Athens.

The story of Pheidippides has inspired the people of Greece for many centuries. His historic run from Marathon to Athens became a legend.

When the Olympic Games were started in Greece, this legendary event was commemorated in it in the form of the sporting event, the marathon. Today, marathons are arranged in many countries. When you see one, or when you are old enough to take part in one, remember the first marathon runner.

Things to do :

1. Show the major events in the story of Pheidippides on a ‘time-line’.

2. Activities

(1) Prepare and present a short speech on the following.

- * An inspiring incident in the life of a great leader.
- * How I accomplished a difficult task.

(2) Write a short essay on the following.

- * My favourite sports event.
- * What I would like to do for my country.
