**‘Run Leonidas Run’: meet the stars of the track at the Ancient Olympic Games**

From completing three marathons in one day – post Olympic title – to chasing down a live hare, the achievements of the running idols at Olympia were remarkable.

Leonidas of Rhodes is not just the greatest runner of the Ancient Olympic Games, he is arguably the most impressive Olympian of all-time. The man’s feats were so extraordinary that he was deified by his countrymen in his own lifetime, and, were it not for the hard, indisputable historical evidence, his records would likely be dismissed as embellishment at best.

Undefeated, Leonidas won both premier sprint events and the race in armour at four consecutive Olympic Games, running 164BC to 152BC. Twelve victories in twelve years, with the final three coming at the age of 36 – even Usain Bolt cannot match that.

Without the benefit of detailed recordings, it is hard to pin down the secret of Leonidas’ success. But Toni Minichiello, the world-renowned coach who guided Jessica Ennis-Hill to the London 2012 heptathlon gold medal, is certain the man from Rhodes must have possessed several crucial ingredients.

“The reason people reach the highest level is that they can consistently produce a movement pattern that produces a level of performance – and technique leads to consistency,” Minichiello explained.

“And if you take the physical side out of it, it’s obviously the mental side, the determination, the drive, the enthusiasm, the enjoyment… The lack of feeling entitled, the fact you keep moving forwards, keep driving yourself.”

The *stadion*, which Leonidas won four times, was the oldest and most prestigious event at the Ancient Games. The only race at the first 13 editions, it comprised one length of the stadium, around 193m in Olympia’s case - the distance the hero Hercules could, according to legend, run on a single breath

Every subsequent race was a multiple of a *stadion*, a *stade*. The second sprint, the *diaulos*, was introduced in 724BC and consisted of two *stades*, bringing the turning post into the equation. With collisions inevitable, an early lead was vital.

At first the start and finish were marked solely by lines in the earth but by the fifth century BC a permanent structure had been installed with a fine rope fitted. A long row of narrow stone slabs with parallel grooves for feet and upright posts to separate runners followed. At the height of the Games there was room for around 20 athletes in each race. Starting positions were decided by the drawing of lots and false starts were met with corporal punishment.

A significant majority of the lauded sprint stars, particularly in the first few centuries of the Games, were shepherds or farmhands. For example, *stadion* victor in 596BC, Polymestor of Miletos was reported to have been noted as a talent after being seen catching a live hare in his bare hands while watching his flock of goats.

Coach Minichiello thinks he knows why a man who spent his days chasing animals down a mountain might end up an Olympic star.

“Over-speed is what you want,” said Minichiello. “People (modern athletes) sometimes run downhill to get that over-speed (in training). The idea is that it affects how quick you can send neural signals from the brain to the muscles.

“We (he and his athletes) use rubber bands that pull you at faster speeds than you can run. What you are trying to do is get your legs turning over faster than they have ever turned over before.”

Thanks to the fabled origins of the marathon, long distance runners have garnered just as much, if not more, coverage than their sprinting counterparts.

The story of Ageas at the 113th Olympiad (328BC) is typical. In the morning he won the *dolichos*, the major distance race habitually comprising 20 *stades* (around 3550m), and that afternoon he ran 100km-plus home to Argos to tell his family and friends about his victory. If anything, Polites of Keramos took this a step further. In one morning at the 212th Olympiad (AD69) he won the *stadion*, the *diaulos* and the *dolichos*.

Every athlete, from Polites to Leonidas, ran naked and barefoot at the Ancient Games. While Minichiello does not get his charges to take their clothes off, he does see the wisdom of removing their shoes.

“You need to exercise the under-sole of your foot in some way,” he said. “Walking in shoes has meant that people’s arches and the muscles in the base of the foot are not as well exercised as they may have been.

“We (Ennis-Hill and he) did a fair amount of work in sandpits, doing various drills to exercise the base of the feet, hopping and stepping through sand. It develops the ankle stability and the neural reception because at speed you put your foot down and then (you need) the ability to be able to control your foot and your ankle, to change direction even though you maybe buffeted by winds or slipperiness.”

Despite being the final of the big four running events to be added (in 520BC), the race in armour quickly became a prominent event. At first participants were clad in a helmet and a piece of armour called a greave and carried a shield. But the greaves were swiftly dropped and by the third century BC runners had just a heavy shield on their arm. Traditionally two *stades*, it was a sprint full of pomp and splendour, with personal insignias decorating the shields.

Just as he was in the *stadion* and the *diaulos*, the incomparable Leonidas became the king of this Games-closing race.