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# The Wildest Race Ever: The Story Of The 1904 Olympic Marathon



## Synopsis

From Megan McCarthy the award-winning author of *Pop!* and *Earmuffs for Everyone* comes the quirky, fascinating, and inspiring story of perseverance and the importance of sportsmanship set at the 1904 St. Louis Olympic Marathon. It was 1904 and St. Louis was proud to host the World's Fair and America's First Olympics. Hundreds of thousands of people came by car, by train, by boat. Part of the Olympics was a wild, wacky marathon. Forty-two racers registered, thirty-two showed up, and of the three racers vying for the finish line: one drove part way, one was helped by his trainers over the line, and one was a postman who travelled from Cuba and ran in street clothes that he cut off to look like shorts. How they ran and who won is a story of twists and turns that only wouldn't be believed if it weren't true! And it is! Find out who won in this wacky and well-researched picture book all about the historic Olympic Marathon of 1904.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 4 - 8 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 3

## Customer Reviews

K-Gr 3 • McCarthy presents a look at the first Olympic marathon held in America. This 24.85-mile race took place in 1904 and was part of the St. Louis World's Fair. The 32 runners who endured the 90-degree heat were offered water only at mile six and mile 12. The track was dirt, and cars and bicycles churned up so much dust that the athletes could hardly breathe. The illustrations

are rendered in colorful acrylics, and McCarthy portrays her cartoonlike characters with bug eyes with tiny black pinpricks for pupils. The tone is lighthearted and humorous; for instance, McCarthy describes the antics of runner Felix Carvajal, a mailman from Cuba, who wore trousers and work shoes, pausing to chat with passersby to practice his English and resting in an apple orchard when he got hungry. Endpapers are comprised of photographs of World's Fair postcards of the time period, which enhances the historical flair. VERDICT Children will enjoy hearing about this unusual race and comparing the differences between this competition and marathons today. —Blair Christolon, Prince William Public Library System, Manassas, VA

With her signature narrative zeal and goggle-eyed characters, McCarthy takes readers to the first Olympic marathon in America, held during the St. Louis World's Fair. The vehicles trailing the pack kicked up dust that choked and blinded the runners. Cuban Felix Carvajal couldn't resist stopping for fresh fruit or practicing his English with cheering onlookers. South African Len Tau "was chased a mile off course by an angry dog." American Fred Lorz, first over the finish line, probably rode most of the course in a car. And Thomas Hicks, another American and the eventual official winner, was given a concoction of egg white and strychnine en route. Readers who have grown up with highly orchestrated sports events on TV may be surprised to learn just how slapdash, hazardous, and idiosyncratic early competition could be. But the story requires a marathoner's concentration to keep track of its 10 main characters, and the subject matter doesn't offer McCarthy the kind of meaty ambiguity that have made her previous works like *Earmuffs for Everyone!* so fun and compelling. (Publishers Weekly December 7, 2015) McCarthy presents a look at the first Olympic marathon held in America. This 24.85-mile race took place in 1904 and was part of the St. Louis World's Fair. The 32 runners who endured the 90-degree heat were offered water only at mile six and mile 12. The track was dirt, and cars and bicycles churned up so much dust that the athletes could hardly breathe. The illustrations are rendered in colorful acrylics, and McCarthy portrays her cartoonlike characters with bug eyes with tiny black pinpricks for pupils. The tone is lighthearted and humorous; for instance, McCarthy describes the antics of runner Felix Carvajal, a mailman from Cuba, who wore trousers and work shoes, pausing to chat with passersby to practice his English and resting in an apple orchard when he got hungry. End papers are comprised of photographs of World's Fair postcards of the time period, which enhances the historical flair. VERDICT Children will enjoy hearing about this unusual race and comparing the differences between this competition and marathons today. (School Library Journal February 2016) In time for the 2016 Summer Olympics, McCarthy spotlights

the men's marathon at the first Olympic Games hosted by the United States, held at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Representing six countries, the race's 32 starting athletes included 17 Americans. McCarthy focuses on 10 runners, including two South Africans, a Cuban, a Frenchman, and six Americans. The 90-degree heat and scarce water daunted the athletes—several succumbed to cramps and nausea. Attendees in autos and on bicycles created thick dust clouds that impeded the runners' vision and breathing. Justifying the titular claim, McCarthy recounts events that contrast with the tightly scripted modern Olympics. Len Tau, chased by an angry dog, ran a mile off course—and still finished ninth. Felix Carvajal, the Cuban, stopped to snack and practice his English with bystanders—and cried to learn that he had finished fourth. American Fred Lorz, driven off in an automobile after suffering cramps, mysteriously showed up first at the finish line—but was quickly disqualified for cheating. Prefiguring today's doping scandals, Thomas Hicks, the marathon's winner, begged for water during the race—and was given strychnine by his trainers. Trademark googly eyes notwithstanding, McCarthy's acrylic compositions of runners are based on period photographs. Endpapers reproduce fairgoers' handwritten postcards. Solid research underpins whimsy in McCarthy's latest historical foray. (historical note, photographs, selected bibliography)

(Informational picture book. 5-8) (Kirkus Reviews 1/1/16) The wildest race? That's a pretty big claim, but as McCarthy retells the tale, it just might be true. The year was 1904 (long before marathons were an every-weekend event), the place was the World's Fair in St. Louis (that of hotdog and ice cream cone fame), the route was awful (rain had turned roads to mud, which then dried to dust), the weather was smothering (August heat at three in the afternoon), the runners were, well, quite a crew, and their trainers were, well, nothing short of ignorant by today's standards. McCarthy introduces ten contestants in thumbnail bios that give an indication of the range of experience on the track that day—from Cuban Felix Carvajal, who arrived in long sleeves and street shoes, to Fred Lorz, a bricklayer who trained after work, to Ian Mashiani and Len Tau, South African messengers during the Boer Wars who were now working at the Fair. Many runners dropped like flies, some engulfed in clouds of dust that impaired their vision and breathing, some from exhaustion, some from dehydration as their trainers refused to give them water; one water-deprived runner was given strychnine by his trainer in an early version of performance-enhancing drugs. Others did splendidly, stopping to chat with fans along the route, or sprinting across the finish line with the expressed wish that the course had been longer. McCarthy's signature googly-eyed cartoon cast neatly underscores the absurdities of the race, and her early invitation for readers to guess the winner gives them some stake in the

game. A lively endnote elaborates on some of the more vibrant runners and touches on the strychnine issue and bibliography directs kids to original newspaper reports. (BCCB, \*STARRED Review\* February 2016) What an accurate title! The first Olympic marathon run in America as part of the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 involved everything from blistering heat to contaminated water to strychnine poisoning. And that's to say nothing of the individual participants. McCarthy begins by introducing some of the runners, including Félix Carvajal, a Cuban mailman; Fred Lorz, a Boston bricklayer; and Jan Mashiani and Len Tau, black South Africans who were employed at the fair. Kids familiar with marathon races will see little resembling those well-orchestrated events here. Automobiles follow the runners, stirring up dirt and dust that affects the runners' breathing. Vomiting and stomach cramps begin almost immediately, perhaps because runners were given unclean water. Carvajal decides to take an apple break under a tree. And a leading runner is given poison by his trainers. The comic effect is heightened by the art: google-eyed characters who look askance at the goings-on as readers will. A long author's note gives background and more of this strange-but-true (and captivating) story. Ilene Cooper (Booklist February 15, 2016) The year 1904 saw the running of the first Olympic marathon on American soil, taking place in St. Louis during the World's Fair. How fitting that this particular marathon was a race for the ages, with cheating runners (one caught a ride in a car), contaminated water, pilfered peaches, and strychnine poisoning. All this makes great fodder for McCarthy (Daredevil: The Daring Life of Betty Skelton, rev. 5/13, and many others), who mixes the zany events into another appealing informational picture book. The colorful cast of characters most of whom feature in a montage near the book's start are rendered in McCarthy's recognizable cartoonlike acrylic illustrations. As the race heats up, McCarthy picks up the pace suitably, following myriad subplots—one athlete being chased off course “by an angry dog,” another stopping to pig out at an apple orchard, and a medic driving cinematically over an embankment (complete with hats flying and chickens squawking). While McCarthy's writing can get a tad too chatty—she peppers the text with exclamation points whose surfeit becomes monotonous—it's nonetheless another winning title for young readers. (The Horn Book Magazine March/April 2016) This nonfiction book is about the first Olympic marathon, held on August 30, 1904 in St. Louis, Missouri. The text includes quotes from people and publications of the time, as well as full-color illustrations. The story follows a few runners in the marathon and how they did during the race. When one runner gets cramps, they climb into one of the cars following the racers and rejoin the race later on. Runners were not given much water because it was thought that

it was bad for them to drink during a race. Facts are presented with explanations and graphics that help children picture the action and stay engaged in the book. The font is easy to read and the sentences finish on one page. The book ends with information about the runners, including quotations, that provides background information for older readers. Bibliography. Website. Recommended (School Library Connection May 1, 2016)

Lots of info and good story.

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