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## DOSSIER: Historia de las prácticas deportivas en América Latina, siglos XIX y XX

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► “Juegos Atléticos Internacionales”, Atlántida (Buenos Aires), 30 May 1918.

# A World Record in Buenos Aires in 1918? Sporting Time and History in the Marathon<sup>1</sup>

*¿Un récord mundial en Buenos Aires en 1918?  
Tiempo deportivo e historia en el maratón*

*Um recorde mundial em Buenos Aires em 1918?  
Tempo esportivo e história na maratona*

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► **MATTHEW BROWN**

University of Bristol, United Kingdom

[matthew.brown@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.brown@bristol.ac.uk) | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2025-4433>

## Artículo de investigación

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1 I am grateful to the national libraries of Argentina, Brazil, Britain, Chile, Colombia, France, Spain, the Library of Congress in the USA, the Institute of Historical Research in London and the Archivo Tea y Deportea in Buenos Aires. I was able to map the route thanks to the historical maps preserved in the Max von Buch archive at the Universidad San Andrés in San Fernando, just 1.35 km from the marathon's 1918 turnaround point. I acknowledge the financial support of the University of Bristol that allowed me to make the necessary research trips to conduct this research. I thank the archivists of Westminster University library in London, where they have preserved the Polytechnic Harriers archive in great condition. I am grateful to Andrés Baeza, Júlia Belas Trindade, Emma Fraser, Klaus Gallo, Sarah Gilmore, Nemesia Hijos, Martin Hurcombe, Ed King, Veronica Moreira, Paula Seiguer, Alina Silveira, and Pablo Ariel Scharagrodsky for the conversations, clues, and coffees that have shaped this work thus far.

**ABSTRACT** **Objective:** In 1918 the Chilean athlete Juan de Dios Jorquera Bascuñán won the Buenos Aires Marathon in a time of 2 hours 23 minutes and 5.6 seconds. No one had ever run a marathon as fast as this. Across South America it was reported as being a new world record for this event. However, Jorquera's achievement was not recognised elsewhere and does not appear in the history of the sport. In this article I examine the factors that combined to invisibilise this achievement—which was the first world record set by any Chilean athlete. **Methodology:** The article is based on revision of newspaper reports of the race in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, and the institutional archive of the Polytechnic Harriers in London. The race route was reconstructed and estimated using GPS technology. **Originality:** The article is the first to study the 1918 Buenos Aires marathon and contextualises it within contemporary ambiguity over the distance of a Marathon between 1908 and 1921. **Conclusions:** Jorquera's record has disappeared from history under the imperial weight of disputes about measurement, governance and record-keeping in a new post First World War era of globalization and standardisation that further marginalised the achievements of athletes from outside of Europe and North America. Building on the pioneering work of scholars such as Mandell (1976), Guttmann (1978), Parry (2006), Woodward (2013), Hijós (2021), and Sikes (2023), it explores the social construction of sporting times and how place, as well as time, has shaped the histories and legends of sports and societies.

**Keywords:** Argentina; athletics; Chile; marathon; media; records; running.

**RESUMEN** **Objetivo:** en 1918 el atleta chileno Juan de Dios Jorquera Bascuñán ganó la maratón de Buenos Aires, con un tiempo de 2 horas, 23 minutos y 5,6 segundos. Nunca se había corrido tan rápido una maratón. Por el continente sudamericano se informó que Jorquera había puesto un nuevo récord mundial. Sin embargo, no se reconoció en otros lugares, y no aparece hoy en la historia del deporte. Este artículo explora los factores que combinaron para invisibilizar a este logro, el primer récord mundial de un atleta chileno. **Originalidad:** es el primer artículo que estudia la maratón de Buenos Aires de 1918, y la contextualiza dentro de la ambigüedad contemporánea sobre la distancia de una maratón que existía entre 1908 y 1921. **Metodología:** el artículo se basa en la revisión de informes de prensa en Argentina, Brasil y Chile, y del archivo institucional del club Polytechnic Harriers en Londres. La ruta de la carrera se ha reconstruido y se ha estimado utilizando tecnología GPS. **Conclusiones:** el récord de Jorquera ha desaparecido de la historia bajo el peso imperial de disputas sobre como medir distancias, gobernar y anotar récords durante la primera post-guerra, una época de globalización y estandarización que ha marginalizado aún más a los logros de atletas en lugares lejos de Europa y América del Norte. Con los trabajos pioneros de Mandell (1976), Guttmann (1978), Parry (2006), Woodward (2013), Hijós (2021) y Sikes (2023) como fundamento, el artículo explora la construcción social

de tiempos y récords, y como los lugares han moldeado a las historias y leyendas de deportes y sociedades.

**Palabras clave:** Argentina; atletismo; carrera; Chile; maratón; medios de comunicación; récords.

**RESUMO** **Objetivo:** em 1918, o atleta chileno Juan de Dios Jorquera Bascuñán venceu a Maratona de Buenos Aires com o tempo de 2 horas, 23 minutos e 5,6 segundos. Ninguém jamais havia corrido uma maratona tão rápido quanto essa. Em toda a América do Sul, foi relatado como um novo recorde mundial para o evento. No entanto, a conquista de Jorquera não foi reconhecida em nenhum outro lugar e não aparece na história do esporte. Neste artigo, examino os fatores que se combinaram para invisibilizar essa conquista—que foi o primeiro recorde mundial estabelecido por um atleta chileno. **Originalidade:** o artigo é o primeiro a estudar a maratona de Buenos Aires de 1918 e a contextualiza dentro da ambiguidade contemporânea sobre a distância de uma maratona entre 1908 e 1921. **Metodologia:** o artigo se baseia na revisão de reportagens de jornais sobre a corrida na Argentina, Brasil e Chile, e no arquivo institucional dos Harriers Politécnicos em Londres. O percurso da corrida é reconstruído e estimado usando tecnologia GPS. **Conclusões:** o recorde de Jorquera desapareceu da história sob o peso imperial das disputas sobre mensuração, governança e manutenção de registros em uma nova era pós-Primeira Guerra Mundial de globalização e padronização, que marginalizou ainda mais as conquistas de atletas de fora da Europa e da América do Norte. Com base no trabalho pioneiro de acadêmicos como Mandell (1976), Guttmann (1978), Parry (2006), Woodward (2013), Hijós (2021) e Sikes (2023), o artigo explora a construção social dos tempos esportivos e como o lugar, assim como o tempo, moldou as histórias e lendas dos esportes e das sociedades.

**Palavras-chave:** Argentina; atletismo; Chile; corrida; maratona; mídia; recordes.

## Preparing for the world record breaking race

As the twenty marathon runners gathered in on the grassy field of the elite Gimnasia y Esgrima sports club (GEBA) in the Palermo suburb of central Buenos Aires, the wintry dawn light cast an air of grandeur across their small figures. At 7:30 a.m., with the temperature at around 4 degrees Celsius, cloudy and windless conditions, they sought warmth from the rising sun as they stood in their white vests and shorts, arms flapping to raise their body temperatures a little.<sup>2</sup>

2 Weather forecasts and reports from “El Tiempo”, *La Vanguardia* (Buenos Aires), 24 May 1918; and “The Weather”, *The Standard* (Buenos Aires), 25 May 1918, 1; “The Weather”, “Local Meteorological Office”, *The*

**Figure 1.** “The Marathon Runners Ready for Departure”.<sup>3</sup>



Source: “Juegos Internacionales – La Carrera de Maratón”, *La Nación*, 27 May 1918.

Outside, newspaper sellers cried out their latest headlines, with the news of the Great War reaching the Italian, Germans, Spaniards, and Britons who made up half of the city’s rapidly growing population. Towards the end of the line of runners waiting for the starter’s flag to drop was a gawky athlete with floppy black hair, dark eyes and gangly arms hanging by his sides. He had probably greeted the newsagents as he passed them that morning, as back in Santiago de Chile that was his employment too. Like others in the new wave of Chilean distance runners

*Standard*, 26 May 1918, 1.

3 “Juegos Internacionales – La Carrera de Maratón”, *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 27 May 1918, listed the runners as: Juan Arriondo, Manuel Montenegro, Alfonso Montenegro, Juan V. Migliaso, Domingo Entrecasas, Manuel Bellagamba, Domingo Varela, Gregorio Varela, from Club Pedestres Unidos; Antonio Galeano, the Club Batlle y Ordoñez; José Willington, Jenaro Rinavera and Augurio Castrillejo, from Club San Martín; Luciano Castellarini, from the Virtus Club; Carlos H. Lucioni, Justo Gayo and Guillermo Santillán, from Club Velocidad y Resistencia; Juan Jorqueira [sic], Ernesto Lamilla and Luis A. Urzúa, from Chile; and Manuel Bustos and Miguel Dustra, from Uruguay. “Crónica Deportiva: Concursos Internacionales – El Chileno Jorquera Vencedor de la Maratón”, *La Razón* (Buenos Aires), 27 May 1918, had the same list but with Varela and Gayo having not started the race.

who stood alongside him, Juan Jorquera had gained his running prowess carrying newspapers back and forth across the city, strengthening his legs and accustoming his lungs to the long periods of exertion that were essential to successfully running a marathon. The Buenos Aires socialist newspaper *La Vanguardia* called him “a humble worker who steals time from his labour to train”.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2.** Juan Jorquera.



Source: “Juegos Atléticos Internacionales”, *Atlántida* (Buenos Aires), 30 May 1918.

On the start line, with number 63 pinned to his white vest, Juan Jorquera was in the form of his life. Only the day before he had won the mile in the inaugural South American Championships in a personal best of 4 minutes 37 seconds, looking “in great form as he swept his rivals away” according to *La Argentina*.<sup>5</sup> Looking

4 “La Gran Carrera de Maratón: Los corredores chilenos que tomarán parte”, *La Vanguardia*, 22 May 1918.

5 “Campeonatos Internacionales”, *La Argentina* (Buenos Aires), 26 May 1918.

along the line of athletes he was clearly “the one to fear” even though the local runners had been immersed in a “severe and methodical regime” in preparation.<sup>6</sup>

The route was a simple one. The runners were to head north-west from the GEBA stadium (which was famed for hosting many international football matches in recent years) in a straight line up the Avenida Alvear, continuing through the districts of Belgrano, Vicente Lopez, Olivos, Martinez, and San Isidro until they reached the half-way point at Victoria in San Fernando, where they would turn around and retrace their steps. There was no wind, and the weather seemed perfect for running. Thousands of Buenos Aires sports fans had come out and lined the route with a buzz of expectation.<sup>7</sup>

## Methods and hypothesis

Juan Jorquera’s victory and world record in the 1918 Buenos Aires marathon was noted by the first generation of Chilean sports historians, most notably Pilar Modiano.<sup>8</sup> Building on this work, I have searched many South American newspapers from the period, as well as British, U.S., and French collections. His prevalence in the former, and his absence from the latter, suggested a mystery of sorts. In this article I reconstruct the race on the basis of the surviving documentation, mainly in Argentinian newspapers. I also mapped out the original out-and-back route as best I could, and ran it (in one direction only) in April 2025, in order to measure it using GPS technology. The analysis explores Jorquera’s achievements and their (lack of) memorialization in the belief that sporting biographies, politically, socially, and globally contextualized, can provide insight into otherwise difficult to interpret networks, connections and changes in the early twentieth-century.<sup>9</sup> This article presents a preliminary account of the race and sets the foundations for a broader contextual biographical analysis of Jorquera, his sporting achievements,

<sup>6</sup> “La Próxima Carrera Maratón”, *La Argentina*, 18 May 1918; “Campeonatos Internacionales”, *La Argentina*, 26 May 1918.

<sup>7</sup> Route reconstructed from “Campeonatos Internacionales”, *La Argentina*, 24 May 1918.

<sup>8</sup> Pilar Modiano, *Historia del deporte chileno: orígenes y transformaciones, 1850-1950* (Santiago de Chile: DIGEDER, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> John Bale, Mette K. Christensen and Gertrud Pfister, eds., *Writing Lives in Sport. Biographies, Life Histories, and Methods* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2003); Matthew Brown and Pablo Scharagrodsky, *Nadando contra las corrientes: Lilian Harrison y las cruce a nado en la década de los 1920* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2024).

and his subsequent erasure from sports history. I have not run a full marathon, but now I sometimes think about it.

The article is therefore situated within, and builds upon, a South American sports scholarship that is contextualising and understanding the role of sports other than football in the construction of local, regional, and national societies and identities in the twentieth-century. Building on the work of Matthew Taylor and others, it looks to dig into the dark corners of the global history of sports, seeking to throw light onto once significant histories that have been marginalized and/or forgotten.<sup>10</sup> Moving on from Mandell and Guttmann's theorization of the transformation of sports from ritual to record as part of the transition to modernity, it delves into one case from the modernizing Global South, where a world best time was neither widely acknowledged nor recognised as a record. In marathon running, what Sigmund Loland calls a "quasi-record sport",

not only the facts about the venue, but also very much facts about the weather conditions under which the race was run, makes the question of whether a new world record should also be regarded as the best performance of a marathon quality wise, a live issue.<sup>11</sup>

Jorquera's 1918 run provides a useful case study for Jim Parry's analysis of "the problem of recognition", given that contemporaries were immediately debating whether the race was "inadequately quantified or standardised". South American elites were on a modernizing and nation-building quest in the 1910s, using both sports and urban planning to project a vision of their societies that could be considered on a par with those of Europe and North America. The reporting of Jorquera's record in Buenos Aires and beyond provides some insight into what Jim Parry calls "the *ideology* of recognition, according to which certain performances are excluded on social, political, or moral grounds".<sup>12</sup>

South American endurance runners were clearly very competitive in world competitions in the first half of the twentieth century. The figure of the long-distance

10 Matthew Taylor, *World of Sport: Transnational and Connected Histories* (London: Routledge, 2025).

11 Sigmund Loland, "Record Sports: An Ecological Critique and a Reconstruction", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 28 (2001): 128; Steffen Borge, "Sports Records are Social Facts", *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 9, n.º 4 (2015): 361.

12 Jim Parry, "The Idea of the Record", *Sport in History* 26, n.º 2 (2006): 201.

athlete, as Pilar Modiano and César Torres have both shown, achieved a considerable degree of status in 1920s Chile, as first Jorquera and then Manuel Plaza won many continental titles. Plaza's silver medal in the 1928 Olympic marathon was recognized as the most significant achievement of this Chilean running boom, to which Juan Jorquera's 1918 world record has served as a prequel and footnote. In the 1930s Argentinian endurance runners surpassed even Plaza's achievement, with Juan Carlos Zabala winning Olympic gold in 1932 and Delfo Cabrera repeating the feat in 1948. As Torres showed, the Argentinian state and media embraced this victorious as demonstrating the virility and resistance of the Argentinian nation in contrast to its regional neighbours – including Chile.<sup>13</sup>

## The history of the marathon in Buenos Aires before 1918

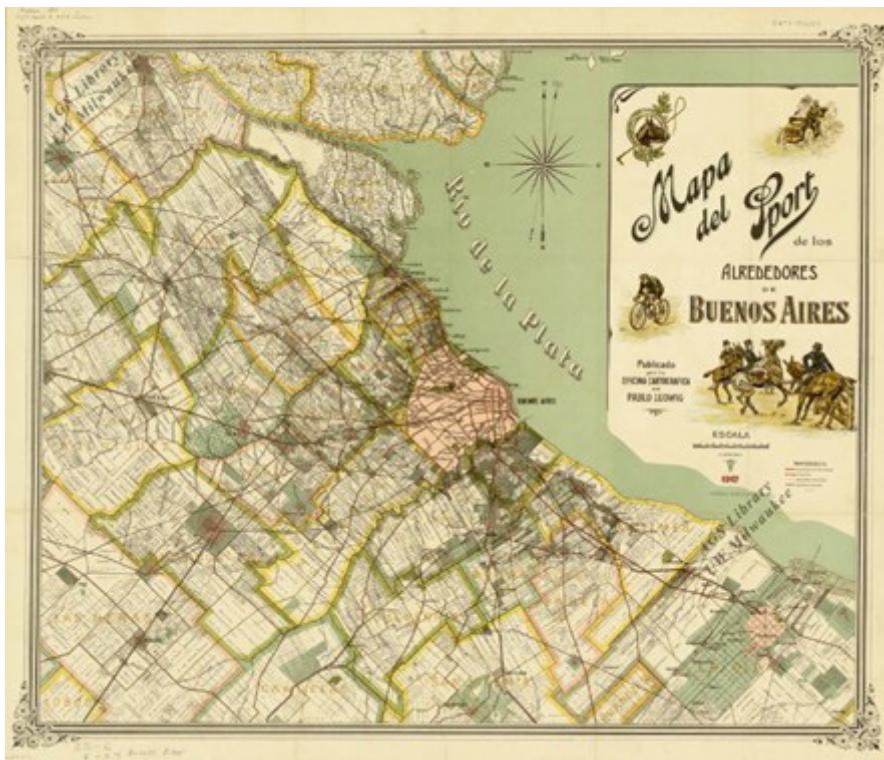
Around the start a gaggle of journalists, administrators, officials and photographers hustled in a mass of nervous energy as the start slipped back from 7:30 a.m., race controllers on bicycles and motorcycles from the Argentinian Cyclists Federation (FCA) and Argentinian Motorcyclists Federation (MCA) were drawn into position around 8 a.m., ready to accompany the runners and make sure they stuck to the route set out in the previous day's newspapers. One cyclist and one motorcyclist –‘a flying controller’– would accompany each runner throughout.<sup>14</sup> Putting on a marathon race through the urban bustle of early twentieth century Buenos Aires was no easy task, but there were many officials with ample experience of the logistical and administrative tasks. Citizens and administrators had come to think of Buenos Aires as a city of sports that extended beyond the urban boundaries, as demonstrated by a map published in 1917 (figure 3). The urban marathon was “the main event” on the day's busy sporting programme.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Cesar R. Torres, “Corrió por el prestigio de su país’: El Maratón Olímpico y el nacionalismo deportivo en Argentina y en Chile (1924-1936)”, *The Latin Americanist* 57, n.º 3 (2013): 3-28.

<sup>14</sup> “El Próximo Torneo”, *La Época* (Buenos Aires), 11 May 1918; “Campeonatos Internacionales”, *El Diario* (Buenos Aires), 10 May 1918; “Campeonatos Internacionales”, *La Argentina*, 11 May 1918. “Crónica Deportiva”, *La Razón*, 24 May 1918 listed all the cyclists and motorcyclists, including Roberto Harsch, later the historian of Argentinian athletics.

<sup>15</sup> “La Carrera Pedestre Internacional”, *La Argentina*, 27 May 1918.

Figure 3. Mapa del Sport de los Alrededores de Buenos Aires.



Source: Oficina Cartográfica de Pablo Ludwig, "Mapa de sport de los alrededores de Buenos Aires", 1917, map, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee–Libraries Digital Collections The American Geographical Society Library Digital Map Collection.

This was the twelfth marathon held in the country in the last fifteen years, and the eleventh in the capital, as many as in London or New York.<sup>16</sup> These had been organized by a range of institutions, and most of them went north-west from the centre to San Isidro and back. Many institutions took a turn: National Physical Exercise Association (1903); the Shooting and Fencing Organization (1907, 1908);

<sup>16</sup> On the early history of the marathon in Buenos Aires, including dates, times and winners of all the races listed here, see Roberto Harsch, *25 años de atletismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Pucci e Hijos 1925), 58-63. The Boston Marathon had been held almost annually since 1897, but because its distance was under 40km, it does not tend to be included in discussions of marathon world best times.

the Sociedad Sportiva Rosarina (1909, in Rosario); the Club Pedestre Sportman (1909); Sociedad Sportiva Argentina (1909). In the latter, the athletes ran 15 laps around the 3km Hipódromo Nacional racecourse.

The three marathons in 1909 were followed by three in less than a month in 1910. On 15 May a marathon was organised as part of the Centenary Olympic Games, with a winning time of 3 hours 12 minutes. Nine days later, another special marathon was organised, to take advantage of the visit of the Italian runner Pietri Dorando, who had shot to fame when he was stripped of the 1908 Olympic marathon title. Capitalising on this, the Organising Committee of the Centenary Olympic Games put on another one. Seven years passed and it seemed like the craze had passed. But in 1917 the *La Razón* newspaper decided to put on a marathon race from GEBA to San Isidro and San Fernando and back.<sup>17</sup> No doubt they were influenced by other media outlets organising sporting events to boost circulation, most famously *L'Auto-Vélo* and the Tour de France.

In 1918 all these factors came together to make the Buenos Aires race a significant sporting event. The route had been tried and tested the previous year, won by a Chilean, Alfonso Suárez, and was under the auspices of a major newspaper and backed by a new continental athletics federation. Spectators knew what a marathon was and were prepared to come out onto the streets to support the runners. This one was coordinated by the Argentinian Pedestrian Federation out of their office on 1062 Freyre Street, with the support of *La Razón*. Delegations from Uruguay and Chile had been formally invited and welcomed, and just two days earlier they had met in *La Razón*'s office to form the South American Athletics Federation (CONSUDATLE). This was in imitation of the South American Football Federation (CONMEBOL), set up two years earlier.<sup>18</sup> This was a serious event and there is no reason to doubt the competence of the people setting or measuring the route. Nevertheless, the very existence of so many clubs and institutions vying for attention in this space meant that there was no one "properly constituted and accepted recognizing authority" for

<sup>17</sup> "La Carrera de Maratón", *Fray Mocho* (Buenos Aires), 18 May 1917, noting the distance as 42 km 194 m and Suárez's winning time as 2 hours 59 minutes 44.8 seconds. The route went "from Palermo on Avenida Verbitsz, Blandengues, the car road, Nuñez, Olivos, San Isidro, San Fernando and then back to the Gimnasia y Esgrima field". 48 runners started. It should be noted that this is exactly the same route as that described in the Buenos Aires press a year later, even though that distance was often stated to be 40 km 200 m.

<sup>18</sup> "Crónica Deportiva", *La Razón*, 24 May 1918; "Confederación Atlética Sudamericana – Su Constitución", *La Razón*, (Buenos Aires), 25 May 1918, with a list of the founding delegates of CONSUDATLE on 26 May 1918.

marathon running in Argentina (let alone worldwide!), which Parry has identified as a prerequisite for the setting of a universal emulation record.<sup>19</sup>

Long-distance running in Argentina was reviving in popularity at the time, with clubs like Velocidad y Resistencia, Sempre Atrás, and Velocidad Argentina organizing many 10k, 20k, and 30k races within the city, as well as half-hour and one-hour timed races. The out and back route was the most popular, such as between Plaza Rosas and Palermo, Plaza de Mayo and Congress, Palermo and Recoleta, Palermo and Belgrano, or Plaza de Mayo and Belgrano. A “Buenos Aires Circuit” race had been held over 30 km in 1912, 1913, 1914, and 1918. The marathon route chosen by the organisers in 1918, from GEBA to San Fernando and back, therefore built on these races whilst at the same time harking back to the early Buenos Aires marathons that had lapsed during the war. It was a widely-accepted extension of the common practice of closing main public roads and racing up the straight boulevards that connected the centre to the flourishing suburbs to the north. Many previews stated that the marathon was a highlight of the two-day games, and a “parade of the marathon runners” was programmed for 3:30 p.m. on Saturday 25th, the day before the race.<sup>20</sup>

In 1918 the city was in the midst of a wave of urban expansion towards the north, as the leafy suburbs and urbanisations joined up with the city’s grid and real estate speculation to move the urban frontier constantly outwards from the centre.<sup>21</sup> The race route went through Vicente López, Olivos, San Isidro, and San Fernando, and as historian Lila Caimari has shown, the names of these places “resonated with the most inviting meaning of the term ‘suburb’, one promising a life free from the kinds of regulations typically found in city neighbourhoods, as well from the madness of urban life”. At the same time, this period witnessed the expansion of police powers in Buenos Aires and the surrounding area, as new technologies (guns, cars, telephones, and radios) enabled new forms of mobility and visibility for the forces of order.<sup>22</sup> On marathon day, the provincial Buenos Aires police provided a special service with mobile bases at Olivos, Martinez, San Isidro, Punta Chica, and Victoria

19 Parry, “The Idea of a Sports Record”, 204.

20 Harsch, 25 años, 14; “Campeonatos Internacionales”, *El Diario*, 10 May 1918.

21 Adrian Gorelick, *La grilla y el parque: espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936* (Buenos Aires: UNQ, 1998).

22 Lila Caimari, *While the City Sleeps: A History of Pistoleros, Policemen, and the Crime Beat in Buenos Aires before Perón* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 130, 140.

under the auspices of an Inspector.<sup>23</sup> Their aim was to keep the runners and spectators safe from the potential disorderliness of weekend holidaymakers and illegal gamblers who frequented the area. Just as the 1896 marathon to from Marathon to Athens had presented a revitalised vision of Ancient Greece, and the 1908 marathon had joined the monarchical traditions of Windsor Castle and the Imperial Exhibition at White City, the 1918 Buenos Aires marathon showcased the grand avenues and modernity of this expanding southern hemisphere metropolis.<sup>24</sup>

The presence of Chilean and Uruguayan runners added an international dimension of excitement and expectation. Prizes had been donated by many commercial and institutional partners.<sup>25</sup> The Argentinian officials on the start line eagerly awaited a home victory in their marathon, which would cement their nation's status as the continent's premier athletics nation.

## The race itself

The runners on the start line were a mixture of heights, physiques, and footwear. All wore white vests with large numbers pinned to them. Most wore white shorts, with a few, including Jorquera, wearing dark shorts. The generous space allocated to trees in the background of the photograph highlights the rural setting of the sports ground where the race would start and finish. In close up Jorquera and the eventual runner up, Urzúa, look stern, sturdy, and resilient. The organisers had set a cut-off of four hours for the runners to finish and charged an entry fee for spectators inside the GEBA grounds.<sup>26</sup>

At 8:20 a.m. the starter finally signalled that the runners could begin, some fifty minutes after the original planned time of departure. They ran through the Tres de Febrero park, "as packed as we have ever seen it", and then turned past the Rosedal Park and the Spanish Monument and then set off along the Avenida Alvear and Avenida Vértiz for the long stretch to San Fernando. The thronging crowd opened up for the runners to pass through, and they were followed by "an infinity of cyclists, motorcyclists, and cars following the race".<sup>27</sup> The runners settled into

23 "Campeonatos Internacionales", *La Argentina*, 24 May 1918.

24 Information on the pre-marathon races in Buenos Aires comes from the comprehensive records preserved in Harsch, 25 años, 14-17, 63-71, 77-79.

25 "Crónica Deportiva", *La Razón*, 24 May 1918.

26 "Campeonatos Internacionales", *La Argentina*, 24 May 1918; "Pedestrismo", *El Diario*, 24 May 1918.

27 "La Carrera Pedestre Internacional", *La Argentina*, 27 May 1918.

their rhythms and the race developed. According to a Chilean journalist writing in *El Deportivo*, “it was a fascinating spectacle: the exertions of youth, a most beautiful and attractive sight which delighted the public”.<sup>28</sup>

Families came to their front doors to see the runners, and they applauded and commented on the race as it unfolded. The good form of the Chileans was taken for granted, and the locals hoped that one of the Argentinian contenders, Lucioni, would distinguish himself.

A photograph reproduced in *El Deportivo* shows Jorquera moving easily to the front of the field in the first few kilometres (figure 4). He ran in a white vest numbered 63 with coloured shorts and white shoes. He appears to be confidently striding away from Lamilla and Urzúa, with fans on bicycles and pedestrians monitoring his progress. Journalists noted that from the start the race was dominated by the Chilean and Uruguayan runners, with the Argentinians lagging behind.<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 4.** Jorquera leads the field.



Source: “Nuestros Campeones”, *El Deportivo* (Valparaiso), 1 June 1918.

When they passed the National Racecourse, still in Palermo, Jorquera was already one block ahead of his countryman Lamilla. This was around 200m and so his lead was already nearly one minute. They were followed by Urzúa, and 150m further back was Bustos. The leading Argentinian, Lucioni, ran with Gave another

28 “Nuestros Campeones”, *El Deportivo* (Valparaiso), 1 June 1918.

29 “Nuestros Campeones”, *El Deportivo*, 1 June 1918.

block behind. Two more blocks behind was Santillany, and as the runners spread out spectacularly, next was Galiano, Arriondo, Entrecasas, Willington and then a group of runners headed by Rinavera.<sup>30</sup>

When they reached the Club Atlético San Isidro at around 19 km, the following positions were recorded:

- 1st, Juan Jorquera.
- 2nd, 4.5 minutes behind, Ernesto Lamilla and Luis Urzúa, both also from Chile.
- 4th, 30 seconds behind, Manuel Bustos from Uruguay.
- 5th, 30 seconds further back, the Argentinian runners were headed by Lucioni, and 4 minutes behind him came Santillana/Castellarini, and Gaye; D. Entrecasas and Bellagamba a further 5 minutes back.<sup>31</sup>

On the way back Jorquera extended his lead at a much faster rate –he was flying. At Olivos he was thirty blocks ahead of the group of followers who had coalesced in his wake, and the Argentinian hope Lucioni was another ten blocks behind them, struggling with cramps and being forced to stop on several occasions to stretch. Lucioni later abandoned when in fifth place, disappointing his local supporters and those who had apparently placed heavy bets on his victory. For *La Argentina* this was “a lamentable failure” from a “over-confident” athlete.<sup>32</sup>

Back at GEBA, the crowd waited with a degree of anticipation whilst they watched some track and field events as part of the South American Championships.<sup>33</sup> When they learned how far ahead Jorquera was, and how ahead of schedule he was, journalists reported, there was “surprise and incredulity”. They had not expected the Chilean’s triumph to be so impressive and decisive and his arrival “exceeded all of the calculations and predictions that had been made”. It was quickly realised that he would be faster than the current world best time for a marathon.<sup>34</sup>

When Jorquera entered the field for three final laps of the track before crossing the finish line, therefore, he was greeted with a huge round of applause and many cries of “¡Viva Chile!”. A crowd of over three thousand had paid

30 “Nuestros Campeones”, *El Deportivo*, 1 June 1918.

31 “Juegos Internacionales – La Carrera de Maratón”, *La Nación*, 26 May 1918.

32 “Crónica Deportiva – Concursos Internacionales – El Chileno Jorquera Vencedor de la Maratón”, *La Razón*, 27 May 1918; “La Carrera Pedestre Internacional”, *La Argentina*, 27 May 1918.

33 “Crónica Deportiva – Pedestrismo”, *La Época*, 26 May 1918.

34 “Crónica Deportiva – Pedestrismo”, *La Época*, 26 May 1918.

a peso each to enter the GEBA grandstand, 50 cents for the popular terracing (30 cents for children and women entered for free). The watch was stopped at 2 hours, 23 minutes and 5.6 seconds. After crossing the line, he was lifted up onto the shoulders of the crowd, and carried to the stand where the officials watched, then he was introduced to the Chilean Minister, the future president Emiliano Figueroa Larraín.<sup>35</sup>

*La Época*'s reporter estimated that the second athlete, Lamilla, was fully 4 km behind when Jorquera finished. Fifteen minutes went by before Lamilla appeared. Jorquera had defeated the rest of the field by unprecedented margins. Lamilla was closely followed by Urzúa, who summoned hidden depths of energy to sprint the final two laps and catch and overtake his rival. These two had worked in tandem in the central part of the race to dislodge their rivals, and Chileans finished first, second, and third. The crowd remained to applaud the other finishers.<sup>36</sup>

## Reaction to the time

News of Jorquera's achievement spread fast through telegraphs and newspaper offices. Photographs of the victorious Chileans were splashed across the Buenos Aires press (figure 5).

35 "Crónica Deportiva–Pedestrismo", *La Época*, 26 May 1918; "Pedestrismo", *El Diario*, 24 May 1918.

36 "Juegos Internacionales – La Carrera de Maratón", *La Nación*, 27 May 1918; "Nuestros Campeones", *El Deportivo*, 1 June 1918, 1; Harsch, 25 años, 102–103; "Crónica Deportiva – El Regreso", *La Razón*, 27 May 1918.

**Figure 5.** The Top 3 Photographed in *Atlántida*.

Source: "Juegos Atléticos Internacionales", *Atlántida*, 30 May 1918, noting the distance as 40 km 200 m and Jorquera's time as 2 hours 23 minutes 5.6 seconds.

In every account the nationality of the winner was recalled, and in several photographs he had a Chilean flag pinned above his number. *La Nación* marvelled at Jorquera's success in "our capital":

In yesterday's great race between representatives of the sporting institutions of Chile, Uruguay and Argentina, there was no competition for first place. There couldn't be, when his opponents were faced with the brilliant efforts of a Chilean runner who surpassed all possible expectations and calculations and won the marathon with the fastest ever time recorded. Jorquera had arrived in our capital preceded by news of his great performances in Chile, and he imposed himself on the race in the style of a great racer at the peak of his form, vigorous, elastic and leaving others in the shadow of an indisputable champion.<sup>37</sup>

37 "La Carrera de Maratón", *La Nación*, 30 May 1918. Author's translation.

Reporters marvelled at the “ease” of his “outstandingly brilliant performance”, “running according to a pre-planned strategy without worrying about his rivals”, and were taken aback by his expressed desire to compete in the 800 m final that afternoon, apparently confident of another victory.<sup>38</sup> *La Vanguardia*, *La Época*, and *El Diario* all reported the breaking of the world record in their editions that evening or the next day.<sup>39</sup>

In order to assess the quality of Jorquera’s achievement, *La Nación* provided details of all the previous Olympic marathon winning times: 2 hours 55 over 42 km in Athens, 1896; 2 hours 59 over 42 km in Paris, 1900; 3 hours 28 over 48 km in St. Louis, 1904; 2 hours 55 over 42.194 km in London, 1908; 2 hours 36:54 over 40.200 km in Stockholm, 1912. The journalist observed that yesterday’s race had been run, “according to what we have been told, over 40 kilometres and 200 m”, the same as in the most recent Olympics in Stockholm. “We cannot guarantee the accuracy of the data but, whichever way you look at it, Jorquera’s performance was first class”.<sup>40</sup> *El Diario* marvelled that “he has broken all known times in a feat that will be talked about for a long time”.<sup>41</sup>

In Rio de Janeiro, the next day’s edition of *Vida Sportiva* also drew readers’ attention to the breaking of a world record. It hailed Jorquera for breaking the “world record time” in the “celebrated Marathon”.<sup>42</sup>

In Buenos Aires, several clubs and migrant institutions organised lunches and banquets to celebrate Jorquera’s achievements.<sup>43</sup> When he returned home to Chile, the celebrations stepped up a level as Jorquera was received as the new world record holder. A photograph of him in *El Deportivo* was headed “the arrival of Chilean champions”. On the train journey back from Buenos Aires to Santiago the week after the event there were “large gatherings” at intermediary stations as Los Andes and San Felipe, “in honour of the Chilean champions returning to the patria”. The Mapocho railway station was filled with waiting fans from early in the morning, and bands repeatedly played the national anthem until the arrival of the

<sup>38</sup> “Juegos Atléticos”, *El Diario*, 26 May 1918; “Crónica Deportiva–Pedestrismo”, *La Época*, 26 May 1918; “La Carrera Pedestre Internacional”, *La Argentina*, 27 May 1918.

<sup>39</sup> “Juegos Atléticos”, *El Diario*, 26 May 1918; “Crónica Deportiva–Pedestrismo”, *La Época* (Buenos Aires, 26 May 1918); “Pedestrismo”, *La Vanguardia*, 27 May 1918.

<sup>40</sup> “La Carrera de Maratón”, *La Nación*, 30 May 1918.

<sup>41</sup> “Juegos Atléticos”, *El Diario*, 26 May 1918.

<sup>42</sup> “Pedestrianismo”, *Vida Sportiva* (Rio de Janeiro), 1 June 1918.

<sup>43</sup> “Atletismo – Representación Chilena”, *La Época*, 28 May 1918.

train. Juan Jorquera stepped into the midst of all the enthusiastic cries of joy, and when he stepped onto the platform hundreds of hands were held out to welcome “the great world champion”. He and the other athletes received beautiful laurel crowns adorned with the national flower, the *copihue*, and they warmly expressed their gratitude to the pupils from the Institute of Physical Education charged with the presentation. Jorquera was interviewed in the Santiago offices of *El Diario Ilustrado*, and *La Nación*, and was celebrated by the *Asociación de Sports Atléticos*.<sup>44</sup> The first finishers, as reported in the press,<sup>45</sup> were:

- Juan Jorquera (Chilean): 2 hours, 23 minutes, 5.6 seconds.
- Luis A. Urzúa (Chilean): 2 hours 40 minutes.
- Ernesto Lamilla (Chilean): 2 hours 43 minutes.
- Manuel Bustos (Uruguayan).
- Luciano Castellarini (Club Virtus).
- Justo Gayo (Club Velocidad y Resistencia).

A few days later, government dignitaries and sporting celebrities gathered in the Parque Cousiño, one of Santiago de Chile’s legendary sporting spaces, “to pay homage to Jorquera” for breaking the world record “by running 42.200 m in 2 hours 23 minutes and 6 seconds”. A 35-minute film of the event was recorded and edited, directed by Salvador Giambastiani and produced by the Federación Sportiva de Antofagasta, Giambastiani Film and the Chile Film Co. At the time, Giambastini was producing dozens of films a year to be shown in new urban cinemas. This film, sadly, is lost.

The mayor of Santiago proclaimed Jorquera’s achievement as a mark in the campaign for publication health and against vice and alcoholism. He named a commission to look into financing a national athletics stadium in the city. On 16 June, the film was shown at the Teatro Septiembre. A newspaper preview in *El Mercurio* described how it “details the entire moving ceremony and Jorquera’s apotheosis”. If nothing else, the organisation of this event, and the recording and distribution of the film, demonstrates that Jorquera was welcomed back to Chile as a world-record breaker of quasi-religious significance in the national sporting pantheon.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> “La Llegada de los Campeones Chilenos”, *El Deportivo*, 8 June 1918.

<sup>45</sup> “Crónica Deportiva – Concursos Internacionales – El Chileno Jorquera Vencedor de la Maratón”, *La Razón*, 27 May 1918.

<sup>46</sup> A technical description of the film is at “La coronación de los atletas chilenos en el Parque Cousiño (o La coronación de Jorquera en el Parque Cousiño) (1918)”, CineChile. Enciclopedia del cine chileno,

## How records were recognised

Richard Askwith, in his seminal fell-running book *Feet in the Clouds*, noted that “there is satisfaction in endurance running in nature that goes beyond records, though they are important, but also in aliveness, solace, beyondness”.<sup>47</sup> One hopes that Juan Jorquera enjoyed his “beyondness” and the awareness of the fluidity of his movement as he raced through the suburbs of Buenos Aires, given that his record time of 2 hours 23 minutes and 5.6 seconds for a marathon, which should have made him Number 1 in the world, is absent from the history of sport.

Kath Woodward’s book *Sporting Times* helps us to understand what happened to Jorquera’s record by thinking critically about “how time matters in sport”.<sup>48</sup> Jorquera’s story supports Woodward’s argument that “regulatory frameworks, including the mediatized processes of representation and systems of governance of sport, are constitutive of its time scales”.<sup>49</sup> For Woodward,

One way in which past, present and future are bound together is through the making and remembering of memories, which are strongly connected to the past and to the idea of summoning up in the present what has happened or has been felt at an earlier time in the making of legends and myths, which is so much a part of the culture of sport and sporting times. Time in sport is not only concerned with record keeping and record setting, it is also about making and re-making the stories through which the social and cultural implications and meanings of sport are transmitted. Sporting times are concerned with a whole range of time-based records which then become embedded in the stories which make up sporting times and sporting histories and legends. Memories of times achieved and beaten in sport become its myths and legends and make its future.<sup>50</sup>

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accessed 26 September 2025. CineChile takes the information from Ximena Vergara, Antonia Krebs and Marcelo Morales, *Sucesos recobrados. Filmografía del documental chileno (1897-1932)* (Santiago de Chile: RIL, 2021). Description of the film screening is in “La coronación de los atletas chilenos en el Parque Cousiño”, *El Mercurio* (Santiago de Chile), 16 June 1918, 21. News of the mayor’s speech is in “Ecos de los Concursos Internacionales”, *La Razón*, 7 June 1918.

47 Richard Askwith, *Feet in the Clouds: A Tale of Fell-Running and Obsession* (London: Aurum, 2004).

48 Kath Woodward, *Sporting Times* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 15.

49 Woodward, *Sporting Times*, 16.

50 Woodward, *Sporting Times*, 29.

The exclusion of a record from sporting memory, therefore, shapes sporting futures. Without pioneers, or knowledge of their legacies, societies can struggle to engage with the challenges of the present. My analysis concurs with Woodward that time is “movement from A to B, but it always social, albeit in different ways. The regulatory systems of sport offer specific ways of measuring time in relation to the movement of bodies through space and suggest ways of negotiating time in the present”.<sup>51</sup> It would have been perfectly possible, and indeed it remains totally feasible, for a history of the best performances in marathon races to be imagined in which Jorquera’s time in Buenos Aires is remembered as what it was –the best time in the world up to that date, on a course which fit the accepted definition of what a marathon was at the time– a race of over 40 km.

Jorquera’s claim to a place in global sports history has not been helped by the overwhelming “football-centrism” of much sports historiography in South America. Even on the day after Jorquera’s run, the Buenos Aires press dedicated multiple columns to football and other sports, and athletics quickly slipped again to the margins. Recent scholarly challenges to this have allowed us to question some of the assumptions about the links between sport, masculinity and nation that have become commonplace for almost half a century.<sup>52</sup>

The history of running remains a very minor part of this field, though it has been embellished by recent works in historical sociology and ethnography as that by Nemesia Hijós.<sup>53</sup> Hijós’ study shows how contemporary runners in Buenos Aires give meaning to their bodies, and to the city, by running through it, and how the places that are run –distances, routes, and speeds– are shaped by commercial and political contexts as well as the desires and efforts of the individual. Michelle Sikes’ history of *Kenya’s Running Women* reveals how race, class, colonial and gendered cultures shaped running cultures in the early and mid-twentieth century. Who ran, where they ran, how they were represented was a significant part of the transition from colonial rule to independence.<sup>54</sup> Jorquera’s missing marathon record is another example of a South American contribution to sports history that

51 Woodward, *Sporting Times*, 62.

52 Julia Hang, Nemesia Hijós and Veronica Moreira, eds., *Deporte y etnografía: pensar la investigación social entre los géneros* (Buenos Aires: Gorla, 2021), 20.

53 Nemesia Hijós, *Runners. Una etnografía en una plataforma de entrenamiento de Nike* (Buenos Aires: Gorla, 2021).

54 Michelle M. Sikes, *Kenya’s Running Women: A History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2023), 13-15.

has been marginalised by an Anglophone and Eurocentric scholarship.<sup>55</sup> Of course, South American sports history is not short of examples of the marginalization of the achievements of non-elite performers on the grounds of ethnicity or gender, most obviously women but also indigenous practitioners of sports.<sup>56</sup>

The marginalization of Jorquera's achievement began even before he left Argentina. Factional disputes between Argentine running clubs and their federation were already simmering through 1918 and led to a boycott of the marathon by one of the major clubs, Club Pedestres Unidos, whose twenty runners failed to register. They cast doubt on the legitimacy and the length of the race, and subsequently organised rival events claiming international status.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, CONSUDATLE appears to have been partly set up the day before the race to "change ideas about the organisation of the international competitions sponsored by the Argentine Pedestrian Federation". In its first meeting, CONSUDATLE approved the list of events for its championships, which was published in *La Razón* on 26 May 1918 –and the marathon did not appear.<sup>58</sup>

Jorquera's claim to a world record therefore entered the world in a complex situation of institutional change, media interest and political manoeuvring. It was reported across the continent but not around the world. The English language press in Buenos Aires did not report on the run and newspapers in New York and London did not follow up on the story. Some Argentinian commentators and administrators even did their best to undermine Jorquera's achievement by casting doubt on it. *La Razón*'s own report the next day sniffed that "without wanting to detract from the winner's achievements, which were truly excellent, yesterday's

55 Matthew Brown, *Sports in South America: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023); Brown and Scharagrodsky, *Nadando contra las corrientes*; Mark Dyreson, "Imperial 'Deep Play': Reading Sport and Visions of the Five Empires of the 'New World' 1919-1941", *International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, n.º 17 (2011): 2415-2441.

56 For examples see Brenda Elsey and Josh Nadel, *Futbolera: A History of Women and Sports in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020); Carolyne Ryan Larson, "Natural Athletes: Constructing Southern Indigenous Physicality in Late Nineteenth-Century Argentina", in David Shenin, ed., *Sports Culture in Latin American History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 61-83; Brown and Scharagrodsky, *Nadando*.

57 For the factional disputes, see "Tentativa de Sánchez", *La Razón*, 21 May 1918; "Club Pedestres Unidos", *La Razón*, 13 June 1918; "Club Pedestres Unidos", *La Época*, 13 June 1918 and "La Próxima Carrera Maratón", *La Argentina*, 18 May 1918; "Campeonatos Internacionales", *La Argentina*, 26 May 1918.

58 "Crónica Deportiva – Confederación Atlética Sudamericana – Su Constitución", *La Razón*, 25 May 1918; "Crónica Deportiva", *La Razón*, 26 May 1918.

race left a bad impression amongst our sportsmen, who could not ignore the insignificance of the Argentinian representatives".<sup>59</sup> The previous year's winner, Adolfo Suarez, who had been excluded from the Chilean team after a selection race and was in Buenos Aires promoting himself, promised to run the route and better the winner's time. The Club Pedestre lent their support to Suarez, hosting a lunch in his honour, suggesting that this factionalism was transnational as well as local.<sup>60</sup>

Argentinian athletes were suffering at the hands of their Chilean and Uruguayan rivals in continental competitions, and this loss was keenly felt. A good illustration is a history of Argentinian athletics published in 1925, which presented the times of the Argentinian athletes in brutal tables, demonstrating the superiority of United States, French, Uruguayan, and Chilean athletes to Argentinians. The vent of the marathon itself was denigrated, with the author, Roberto Harsch of Club Deportivo Nacional and the Argentinian Athletics Federation, describing it as "lacking any atmosphere" and that it was "no surprise that no one wanted to run it". The setting of a world record marathon time by a Chilean in Buenos Aires, instead of being celebrated, was rubbed and ignored.<sup>61</sup>

Roberto Harsch appears to have been crucial in denigrating Jorquera's achievement in Argentina. Had the Argentinian Athletics Federation made more of the 1918 marathon, it might have been better remembered elsewhere. But Harsch was scornful of even considering Jorquera's win as a "marathon" at all, dismissing it as "nowhere near the proper distance". He wrote that "in very few cases could the distance as announced be seen to be exact, because if that was the case, then we would have been witnessing some extraordinary performances, with world records being broken". Jorquera's time had become unbelievable, and his memory passed into the shadows.<sup>62</sup> In Harsch's book *Twenty Five Years of Athletics in Argentina* he recorded H. Holehmainen's time of 2 hours 32 minutes 35.8 seconds at the 1920

59 "Crónica Deportiva – Concursos Internacionales – El Chileno Jorquera Vencedor de la Maratón", *La Razón*, 27 May 1918. See also criticisms in "La Carrera Pedestre Internacional", *La Argentina*, 27 May 1918.

60 "Tentativa de Sánchez", *La Razón*, 21 May 1918; "La Próxima Carrera Maratón", *La Argentina*, 18 May 1918; "Pedestrismo – Demostración de Sánchez", *La Época*, 4 May 1918; "Club Pedestre Argentino", *El Diario*, 4 May 1918.

61 Harsch, 25 años, 15.

62 As a further kick in the teeth to Jorquera, in a perfunctory note on the 1918 race Harsch recorded his time as 2 hours 38 minutes 5.6 seconds – fifteen minutes slower than that recorded on the day! Harsch concluded by noting that 'this shows that the distance was less than 40 km'. In a table on the next page, it was 2 hours 33 minutes, and no distance was provided. Harsch, 25 años, 58, 61, 63.

Olympic Games as the “world record”, and ignored Jorquera’s feat.<sup>63</sup> In long lists of South American records and Argentinian records, the marathon did not appear. It was as if no one had ever run a proper marathon in Argentina!<sup>64</sup> Although Jorquera ran the fastest marathon in history at its own inaugural South American Championships, CONSUDATLE does not mention him in its online or published histories. It does not provide online records from before 2009. Its centenary history did not mention any of Jorquera’s South American championship victories.<sup>65</sup>

## Making the record

Part of the problem was that there was no certainty, between 1896 and 1924, as to what the world record for the marathon was, or even if this record should exist. Some lists spoke of world bests, but the measuring of an exact distance was often marginal to the task of putting on a marathon race.<sup>66</sup> For shorter distances the accuracy of timepieces was an issue, and technological innovation was often contested. The competition between imperial and metric measurements during this period of rapid globalisation was also a major issue. Athletics tracks themselves varied between 330 yards and 500 metres. The 1908 track at White City used for the London Olympics was 1/3 of a mile, being 583.6 yards (533.64m). The 1920 and 1924 Olympics were run on 500 m tracks, and then the track in Amsterdam in 1928 was 400m and that became the norm. This was itself a compromise of sorts between metres and yards –a quarter of a mile is just under 402 m.<sup>67</sup> It is not clear how long the GEBA track was in 1918. Marathons, run on streets where measurements were even more difficult to pin down, were even more shaped by disagreements over length and accuracy. Allegations of short cuts, secret rides in

<sup>63</sup> Harsch, *25 años*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Harsch, *25 años*, 10-11. Jorquera does appear as the 5,000 m South American record holder.

<sup>65</sup> Rubén Aguilera, Eduardo Biscayart and Luis Vinker, *Campeonatos sudamericanos de atletismo: el historial* (Buenos Aires: CONSUDATLE, 2023).

<sup>66</sup> In 1964 the *Polytechnic Harriers* were insisting that marathon ‘records are not established as conditions vary’. This was true for them – as late as 1972 the runners ran an extra three miles by mistake after the lead car broke down. *Polytechnic Harriers Marathon Race Programme* (London: Polytechnic Harriers, 1964). See for example the “World Marathon Best Progression”, *Uncle Ben’s Polytechnic Marathon 1995* (London: Polytechnic Harriers, 1995). Consulted in Westminster University Archives (WUA), London, Polytechnic Harriers Archive (PHA), box (b.) 5, folder (f.) 1, sheet (s.) 33, 26.

<sup>67</sup> Gotaas, *Running*, 147.

vehicles and poorly measured courses have been presented in marathon reporting since the very beginning.<sup>68</sup>

The marathon transitioned from a 40 km race to a 26 miles 385 yards (42.195 km) between 1908 and 1921. The first race called a marathon was in 1896, at the Athens Olympics, and was around 40 km in length, estimated at being more or less the distance a soldier called Pheidippides had run from Marathon to Athens two millennia earlier. Though often presented as such in popular Olympic histories, this was certainly not the first time that athletes had run this far, and the marathon was adapted onto existing endurance competitions often called pedestrianism in the late nineteenth-century.

The delivery of a route “of 40 kilometres” for the 1908 London Olympic Games marathon was mandated by the International Olympic Committee to the British Olympic Committee who were organising the games. They passed on the responsibility to the Amateur Athletic Association, who themselves delegated the task to the Polytechnic Harriers running club, and its honorary secretary Jack Andrews.<sup>69</sup> After putting on a trial race of around 23 miles (37 km), Andrews mapped out a route of 25 miles (40.2 km), which was then extended by a few hundred yards to avoid a cobbled section around Wormwood Scrubs, another 700 yards when the King agreed to the start being on the East Terrace of Windsor Castle, and a final extra 200 yards when it was decided to run the lap of the track in the unconventional counter-clockwise direction.<sup>70</sup> Andrews later told a colleague that “the race was intended to be about 24.5 miles” and having settled on a route “he learned that the *London Evening News* was going to promote a professional race over the same route and, in consequence, he changed his finish and altered the distance”.<sup>71</sup>

The Polytechnic Harriers’ route went from the royal residence in Windsor to the Royal Box at the White City stadium, with “history and royal patronage” central to the route, which also passed close to the elite private schools of Eton

<sup>68</sup> John Bryant, *The Marathon Makers* (London: John Blake, 2008), 81-107; David Goldblatt, *The Games: A Global History of the Olympics* (London: Macmillan, 2008), 49-50, 82-83.

<sup>69</sup> *Polytechnic Harriers Trial Race* (London: Polytechnic Harriers, 1908). Consulted in the WUA, PHA, b. 5, f. 2, s. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Bob Wilcock, *The 1908 Olympic Games, the Great Stadium and the Marathon: A Pictorial Record* (Brentwood: Society of Olympic Collectors, 2008), 31.

<sup>71</sup> A.E. Winter, “From the legend to the living” [photocopy of an article], no location, no date, WUA, PHA, b. 5, f. 14, s. 6.

and Harrow. This ended up being over a mile longer than the International Olympic Committee's recommended metric of 40 km, at 26 miles 385 yards in imperial measurements.<sup>72</sup> Famously, the leader of the race, Pietri Dorando, collapsed ten metres short of the finish line. Race officials –including Andrews– picked him up and helped him over the line and then disqualified him after a complaint from the US team. The race was heralded as “the most thrilling event in Olympic history” so far.<sup>73</sup> Uncertainty over the distance run in 1908 persists to the present day.<sup>74</sup> Yet rather than dismissing 1908 as an improvised, chaotic and unfortunate mess, the sporting administrators at the Imperial Sports Club and the Polytechnic Harriers insisted on repeating and establishing “their” distance. The race director Jack Andrews wanted his annual race to be “the most important annual event in the athletic world”.<sup>75</sup> In 1909 he secured the sponsorship of *Sporting Life* magazine for an amateur marathon race over the same distance at that of 1908 (though finishing at Stamford Bridge stadium rather than White City). Even here, however, 26 miles 385 yards was never a fixed distance. An enormous cup well over a metre in height was commissioned, the *Sporting Life Trophy*, to be awarded to the winner of “a race of not less than 25 miles” (40.2 km).<sup>76</sup> This race was run in 1909, 1911, 1912, 1913, and 1914 which point it paused for the Great War. Elsewhere, marathon distances continued to oscillate around 40 km according to local circumstance. The International Amateur Athletics Federation were eventually persuaded to recognise 26 miles 385 yards (40 km 200 m) as the official distance in 1921.

The athletics journalist J. Armour Milne reflected that the Polytechnic Harriers’ marathon was known as “a race backed by many fine traditions, and having an intimate link with the Royal Family”.<sup>77</sup> The links to royalty and aristocracy went beyond the

72 Martin Polley, “From Windsor Castle to White City: the 1908 Olympic Marathon Route”, *The London Journal* 34, n.º 2 (2009): 163-178; David Goldblatt, *The Games: A Global History of the Olympics* (London: Macmillan, 2016), 82.

73 Ernest A. Bland, ed., *Olympic Story* (London: Rockliff, 1948), 23.

74 Bryant, *The Marathon Makers*, 265-276; Sean Ingle, “Mystery Solved After 116 years: how the King helped prove marathon really is 26m 385yds”, *The Guardian* (London), accessed 26 September 2025.

75 *The Polytechnic Magazine*, (London), March 1909, particulars for the Polytechnic Marathon Championship for Amateurs, extracted from *The Sporting Life*, 18 February 1909.

76 *The Sporting Life Marathon Race Trophy for Amateurs* (London: Polytechnic Harriers, 1935). Consulted in WUA, PHA, b. 5, f. 1, s. 4. The trophy is in 2025 awarded to the winners of the London Marathon: see Ian Ridpath, “The (sometimes) vexed history of the Sporting Life Marathon Trophy”, accessed 26 September 2025.

77 James Armour Milne, “Famous Marathon Races Recalled”, in *The Sporting Life*, 3.

start line, and included the patronage of princes and princesses as starters, and the administrative involvement of sporting elites as Lord Desborough (chair of the Olympic Committee in 1908, and president of the Amateur Athletic Association in the 1930s) and Lord Kinnaird (chair of the Football Association), both of whom were renowned for their links to government and monarchy as well as sporting institutions (and the military, in Desborough's case).<sup>78</sup> The Polytechnic Harriers' surviving archive shows a punctilious regard for mapping and measuring routes.<sup>79</sup>

What later race organisers called the "spirit of the race" revolved around the now much storied distance of 26 miles and 385 yards. In 1918, however, this distance was certainly not fixed, and it is only with considerable hindsight that Jorquera's run could be considered as too short to be thought of as a marathon. His world record, therefore, arrived at a time of greater uncertainty as to what the distance should be. To try to contextualise and demonstrate his achievement, *La Nación* printed the distances and times of all previous Olympic marathons.

- 1896, Athens: Louis (Greece): 42 km. 2 hours 55 minutes.
- 1900, Paris: Theato (France): 42 km, 2 hours 59 minutes.
- 1904, St. Louis: Hicks (US): 48 km: 3 hours 28 minutes.
- 1908, London: Hayes (US): 42.194 km: 2 hours 55 minutes 18 seconds.
- 1912, Stockholm: Arthur (South Africa): 40.2 km, 2 hours 36 minutes 54 seconds.<sup>80</sup>

Put simply, in 1918 there was no international governing body prepared to ratify a world record for the marathon. *The Times* claimed that the Swede Alexis Alhgren's 1913 London Polytechnic Harriers run was a "world record", with 2 hours 36 minutes 6.6 seconds. Jorquera had smashed over 12 minutes off of Alhgren's time. *La Época*'s reporter, writing up his report that afternoon, asserted that the

<sup>78</sup> Nicholas Fishwick, "Kinnaird, Arthur Fitzgerald, eleventh Lord Kinnaird of Inchture and third Baron Kinnaird of Rossie (1847-1923)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Bibliography*; Ian F.W. Beckett, "Grenfell, William Henry, Baron Desborough (1855-1945)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Bibliography*.

<sup>79</sup> See for example the roles of maps with plans A, B and C in the uncatalogued folder of rolled maps of London marathon routes with various dates, WUA, PHA, b. 5, f. 7. For confirmation that the first 700 yards were measured correctly, contradicting rumours across the decades that it was not, see the unpublished work of Joe Neanor, deposited in 2024 in WUA, London, PHA, b. 5, f. 28.

<sup>80</sup> "Crónica Deportiva", *La Nación*, 1 June 1918.

world best time had been “beaten by 13 minutes”.<sup>81</sup> Neither *The Standard* in Buenos Aires nor *The Times* in London reported on it.<sup>82</sup> Jorquera’s time began its slow descent into obscurity.

## Towards an intersectional explanation

One of the reasons why Jorquera’s time does not feature in marathon history is because of doubts about the length of the course. These, I think, can now be dismissed. The route of the Buenos Aires marathon on 26 May 1918 was recorded as 40.2 km by *La Época*, *La Argentina* and *La Nación* – the same length as the most recent Olympic marathon, in Stockholm in 1912. The different papers reported slightly different routes, suggesting a degree of uncertainty in the days leading up to the event, with *La Nación* stating that the turnaround point was in San Isidro (shorter), and everyone else that it was San Fernando (further). As was noted earlier, *El Deportivo*, in Chile, when reporting on Jorquera’s reception in Santiago, noted the length as 42.2 km.

When I mapped it and ran it in 2025, using GPS tracking on Strava, I measured 1.5 km from the start line of the GEBA track to the Spanish monument, and 19.14 km from there to Victoria railway station in San Fernando. These are estimates based on my joining the dots between the different posts and stations noted in race descriptions, and it will be a few hundred metres too long thanks to a couple of diversions I had to make around San Isidro and Victoria because of new road construction. This should be doubled to reflect the out-and-back nature of the route, and then 1200 m added to reflect the 3 laps of the GEBA track at the end. I measured the GEBA track as 400 m today, though it may have been shorter or longer in 1918. All this gives a total of 1.5 km+19.14 km+19.14 km+1.5 km+1200 m= 42.48 km. Further analysis using historical maps is no doubt in order, such as those in the Max von Buch collection and it would be helpful to locate a photograph or other evidence of Jorquera turning around at Victoria, but this at least sows the seed that Jorquera’s race was certainly over 40.2 km and may well have been raced

81 “Crónica Deportiva–Pedestrismo”, *La Época*, 26 May 1918.

82 “Polytechnic Hariers’ Meeting. ‘Maraton’ Race Won in ‘Record’ Time”, *The Times* (London), 2 June 1913; claiming that Ahlgren broke the “world track record” for the marathon. Reproduced at <http://www.ianri-dpath.com/polymarathon/1913Timesreport.jpg>

over the full marathon distance as set out in London in 1908 and adopted by the IAAF from 1921.<sup>83</sup>

A full explanation of the reasons for Juan Jorquera's invisibilisation from sporting history, however, go further than apparently neutral disagreements about the measuring over the distance run. A fuller biographical treatment than can be attempted here is required, engaging with the Chilean sources throughout his career, as well as with institutional archives. Jorquera's early training regime, his performance at the 1920 Olympics, the disputes over professionalism and his later life will all feed critical perspectives into our understanding. At present, in contrast to the wealth of biographical detail known about Manuel Plaza thanks to the many press interviews he gave, and the scholarship of César Torres, even the bare facts of Jorquera's name, birth and death are confused and uncertain in the surviving texts. There is a clearly a lot more to be learned (figure 6). Later in life, or perhaps after his death, a sculptor created a bust of Jorquera's face. It is in the National Museum of Chile. We don't know why or how it got there (figure 7).<sup>84</sup>

83 "Crónica Deportiva–Pedestrismo", *La Época*, 26 May 1918; "La Carrera Pedestre Internacional", *La Argentina*, Buenos Aires, 27 May 1918. *La Argentina*, in rejecting Jorquera's claim to a world record, recalled the route of the 1917 marathon as 42.194km, won by Alfredo Suarez. Intriguingly, however, it described exactly the same route as that mapped out in 1918. Its other main reason for dismissing the world record was that it was "very windy" in 1917 so it was not a fair comparison.

84 Mask made 17 March 1952, according to the records reproduced at Santiago Mahan, "Retrato de Juan Jorquera Bascuñán", SURDOC, accessed 26 September 2025.

**Figure 6.** “Juan de Dios Jorquera Bascuñán”.



Source: “Juan Jorquera”, Olympedia.

**Figure 7.** Jorquera’s Face in the Museum (1952).



Source: Santiago Mahan, “Retrato de Juan Jorquera Bascuñán”, SURDOC, accessed 26 September 2025.

Figure 8. Jorquera's Body in *El Deportivo* (1918).



Source: *El Deportivo*, 1 June 1918, 1.

Jorquera was certainly distant from the elite image of Chilean sporting success being presented by the authorities in 1918, who had been running and winning long-distance races since 1911.<sup>85</sup> One illustration of Jorquera's potential incompatibility with the Chilean sporting model of virility and masculinity is provided by the front cover of *El Deportivo* the day after his record-breaking run. Jorquera was shown alongside the celebrated sprinter Rodolfo Hammersley, under the headline "Our Champions". Jorquera appears smaller, darker and more diffident than the bold Hammersley, whose image fills out the page. *El Deportivo* presented Jorquera

<sup>85</sup> "La Gran Carrera de Maratón", *La Vanguardia*, 22 May 1918.

as a different class of athlete, underlining this by giving the title of D. (Don) to the sprinter but not the endurance runner (figure 8).<sup>86</sup>

Juan Jorquera's rapid fall from grace after his 1918 record suggests another avenue that might explain his absence from history. As César Torres has explained, when Manuel Plaza rose to fame, the Chilean media created an image of him as a humble working-class hero and champion who combined working in his central Santiago newspaper kiosk with fatherhood and training. Plaza was a pure, modest amateur and family man. In contrast, Jorquera failed to regain the heights of 1918, and looked on as Plaza went from strength to strength.<sup>87</sup> In 1920 Jorquera travelled to the Antwerp Olympic Games, and tired from the journey and the poor conditions provided for athletes at the village, and finished 33rd out of 35, nearly an hour slower than his world record time. His failure in 1920 cast further doubt on his 1918 achievement. In attempting to monetize his success he then fell foul of the amateur athletics regulations, like many other working-class athletes before and after.<sup>88</sup> In 1921 he was declared a professional and in 1922 he was not selected for the Chilean national team because of his poor relationship with the authorities.<sup>89</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, therefore, there were no institutions promoting his record or safeguarding his achievements.

## Conclusion

Jorquera's achievement has never been entirely forgotten in Chile. The mask of his face preserved in the National History Museum, and the essays recalling his days of glory in mid-century issues of *Estadio*, demonstrate this. Into the twenty-first century, as sport, globalisation and nationalism became even more tightly entwined

<sup>86</sup> “Nuestros Campeones”, *El Deportivo*, 1 June 1918. On photography in South American sports media see Pedro Acuña, “Snapshots of Modernity: Reading Football Photographs of the 1930 World Cup in Uruguay”, *International Journal of the History of Sport* 36, n.º 9-10 (2019): 832–853; “Representaciones chilenos en la próxima maratón”, *La Razón* (Buenos Aires), 18 May 1918; “Las próximas olimpiadas”, *La Época*, 20 May 1918. Jorquera's coach, the former Olympian Leopoldo Palma, was often mentioned in these previews.

<sup>87</sup> César Torres, “A Golden Second Place Manuel Plaza in South America”, *Journal of Sports History* 36, n.º 1 (2009), 43-72. Torres cites Luis Gálvez Chipoco, *Historia del atletismo sudamericano* (Lima: Imprenta Amaru, 1983), 19-21; and Modiano Vásquez, *Historia del deporte chileno*, 117. Both recognise, however, as does Torres, that the 1918 run was the world's fastest marathon.

<sup>88</sup> On these ideologies and the conflicts they created, see Brenda Elsey, *Citizens & Sportsmen. Fútbol and Politics in Twentieth-Century Chile* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

<sup>89</sup> The most recent account is in Lilah Drafts-Johnson, “The Language of Sport: Understanding Chile and Chilenidad through Marathon Races and Futbol Games”, *Honors Papers* 149 (2018).

than they were in Jorquera's day, his memory is still recalled. In the midst of the global Coronavirus lockdowns in 2020, two Chilean journalists, Ignacio Alarcón, and Luis Navarrete, published a reminder to readers of the online sports pages of the *La Tercera* daily that 102 years previous, "Juan Jorquera broke the world marathon record". Readers who tried to follow this up in the online marathon history records would, as we have seen, have been disappointed and perhaps confused. Later that year *El Mercurio* reflected on the centenary of Jorquera's "terrible fate" at the 1920 Olympics, the bad day which contributed to his fall from grace and eclipse by Manuel Plaza.<sup>90</sup> The rehabilitation of Jorquera's world record time could provide the basis for a lineage for national success on the global scale into the future. He would be Chile's only ever world record holder if he were to be recognised as this. However, the long-established institutional memory that his was not a "proper" marathon –poorly measured, or not long enough, or just wrong– means that his supporters still have a mountain to climb.

This analysis of the 1918 Buenos Aires marathon has highlighted the ways in which the marathon distance in 1918 was a long way from being recognised globally as 26 miles 385 yards in imperial measurements, or 42.194 km in metric. Between 1908 and 1921, vibrant South American endurance running cultures were producing regular races over a range of long distances, and there were plenty of elite athletes to run in them, such as Jorquera. These races, like other examples from Latin American experience of modernity studied by Nicola Miller, provide "evidence for the need to rethink some widely accepted general claims about what it means to be modern".<sup>91</sup> The 1918 Buenos Aires marathon was at a far enough remove from the universal standards of measurement that would underpin a recognised world record elsewhere. It shows that a global history of sport can go beyond tracing connections and networks, and incentivise re-assessment of some of the standard assumptions about historical sporting distances, performances and records.

<sup>90</sup> Ignacio Alarcón and Luis Navarrete, "26 de mayo", *La Tercera* (Santiago de Chile), 26 May 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Nicola Miller, *Reinventing Modernity: Intellectuals Imagine the Future, 1900-1930* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 188.

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