

# Greeks on Olympic road to nowhere as key projects stall

SIX MONTHS before the torch is lit, preparations for the Athens Olympics have been thrown into chaos with the city's two main showpiece projects grinding to a halt.

As the Greek capital awoke yesterday to the heaviest snowfall in decades, work was at a standstill at the main 80,000-seat Olympic Stadium and on the ancient marathon route.

After weeks of strikes and workers' protests, the Greek government was forced to cancel its contract with the construction firm revamping the 26-mile stretch of road from the village of Marathon into the city centre.

The route is central to Greek organisers' plans to play up the capital's heritage. Previously one of the ugliest and most congested roads into the city, it was due to be widened and repaved. Nassos Alevras, the Deputy Culture Minister, said: "The public works ministry has started the process to take the company off the project and replace it." The new deadline for completion has been pushed back from May to within weeks of the torch being lit at the Games, which run from 13 to 29 August.

The marathon runners will take an almost identical route to Pheidippides, a messenger who ran to Athens in 490BC to declare victory over the Persians, before dropping dead.

The construction company, European Technical, was in trouble last week when unpaid workers demanding back pay blocked traffic along the road. Officials from the firm said that employees and subcontractors were owed about €1m (£700,000)

BY DANIEL HOWDEN  
in Athens

and that they were in discussion with banks to solve the issue.

The marathon will be a major feature of the Games because it is one of two events to feature the old Olympic stadium where the Greek shepherd Spyros Louis won Greece's only athletics gold medal at the first modern Games in 1896.

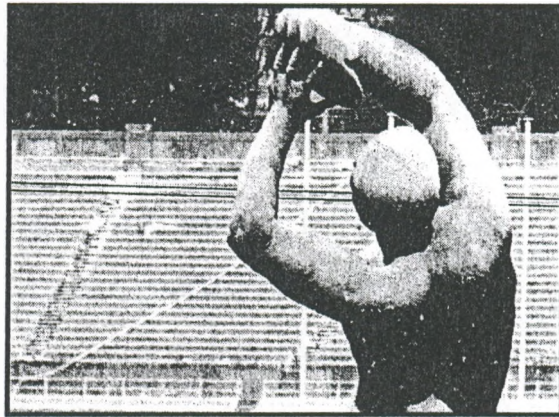
Organisers in Athens have said that they could afford no further delays. A disastrous start on planning led the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to consider switching hosts in 2000 for the first time.

Across town in the suburb of Maroussi, where Louis grazed his sheep before the last Athens Games, work on the main Olympic Stadium has also stopped. Plans to erect an enormous steel and glass dome roof over the concrete bowl have run into difficulties. The giant metal sunscreen, designed by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, will cost €150m.

There were signs of progress late last year when two giant arches were erected but officials said that high winds delayed the next phase. The delays follow mounting concerns over security at the first summer Games since the 11 September attacks.

A number of US athletes have expressed concern because the Games will be held close to the Middle East in a country with a strong undercurrent of anti-American sentiment. Among the most nervous are the NBA stars on the US basketball team who might be the biggest targets for terrorists. Jermaine O'Neal

of the Indiana Pacers said: "The players are definitely concerned. If you wanted to send a message to the world, what better place is there to do it?"



The statue of a discus thrower outside Athens' Panathinean, where the first modern Olympic games were held EPA