
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE MARATHON RUNNER WHO STOPPED FOR APPLES

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE MARATHON RUNNER WHO STOPPED FOR APPLES

The 1904 Olympic marathon in St. Louis was the strangest race in Olympic history. Runners were chased by dogs, poisoned by their coaches, and nearly died from heat exhaustion. One competitor stopped to take a nap. Another ate apples from an orchard and got severe stomach cramps. The winner was disqualified for riding in a car.

The race took place on one of the hottest days of summer, with temperatures over 90°F. The 24.85-mile course followed dusty roads where cars drove ahead, kicking up choking dirt. There was only one water station—at mile 12. Organizers wanted to study the effects of dehydration on athletes. Today, we'd call this dangerous and unethical.

The first man to cross the finish line was Fred Lorz. The crowd cheered as officials prepared to award him gold. Then someone revealed the truth: Lorz had hitched a ride in a car for eleven miles when he developed cramps. He claimed he was joking, not actually trying to win. He was banned from athletics for life.

The actual winner, Thomas Hicks, nearly died. His trainers gave him strychnine—a poison used as rat killer—mixed with egg whites and brandy. They believed small amounts would boost performance. Hicks hallucinated, collapsed multiple times, and had to be carried across the finish line. Modern rules would have disqualified him.

Then there was Felix Carvajal, a Cuban mail carrier who had walked to the starting line from New Orleans after losing his money gambling. He ran in street clothes cut into shorts with scissors. Hungry during the race, he stopped at an orchard to eat apples—which gave him severe cramps and forced him to lie down. Despite this, he finished fourth.

Of 32 runners who started, only 14 finished. The 1904 marathon became a cautionary tale about heat, hubris, and the limits of human endurance.

Word Count: 316 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: National Institutes of Health

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 Why was Fred Lorz disqualified from the marathon?

- ☐ A) He took a shortcut
- ☐ B) He rode in a car for part of the race
- ☐ C) He pushed another runner
- ☐ D) He started before the signal

2 What dangerous substance did Thomas Hicks's trainers give him?

- ☐ A) Caffeine pills
- ☐ B) Strychnine (rat poison)
- ☐ C) Alcohol only
- ☐ D) Sleeping medication

3 What does the word 'hubris' most likely mean?

- ☐ A) Extreme caution
- ☐ B) Excessive pride or dangerous overconfidence
- ☐ C) Athletic ability
- ☐ D) Scientific knowledge

4 Why did organizers limit the race to only one water station?

- ☐ A) They couldn't afford more water
- ☐ B) They wanted to study the effects of dehydration
- ☐ C) The course was too remote
- ☐ D) Runners requested fewer stops

5

Thomas Hicks 'had to be carried across the finish line' but still won. How would this race be judged differently under modern rules? What does this tell us about how standards have changed?

6

The passage describes organizers deliberately limiting water 'to study the effects of dehydration.' What responsibilities do sports organizations have to protect athletes? When does pushing limits cross the line?

ANSWER KEY

The Marathon Runner Who Stopped for Apples

1. B) He rode in a car for part of the race

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'Lorz had hitched a ride in a car for eleven miles.'

2. B) Strychnine (rat poison)

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states his trainers 'gave him strychnine—a poison used as rat killer.'

3. B) Excessive pride or dangerous overconfidence

DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. 'Hubris' appears alongside 'heat' and 'limits of human endurance' as cautionary lessons—suggesting overconfidence led to dangerous conditions.

4. B) They wanted to study the effects of dehydration

DOK 2 — Text evidence. The passage states: 'Organizers wanted to study the effects of dehydration on athletes.'

5. Sample Response:

Under modern rules, Hicks would be disqualified for receiving physical assistance and for taking prohibited substances (strychnine). Standards have changed to prioritize fair competition and athlete safety. In 1904, 'winning' meant crossing first by any means; today, athletes must complete the race under their own power without banned drugs.

6. Sample Response:

Answers will vary. Organizations should ensure basic safety: hydration, medical support, reasonable conditions. Pushing limits is acceptable when athletes consent and risks are manageable; it crosses the line when conditions create unnecessary danger. Strong responses will consider the balance between achievement and safety, and who should make those decisions.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Marathon Runner Who Stopped for Apples

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Organizers deliberately limited water 'to study dehydration.' When does scientific curiosity cross ethical lines?
- Hicks was poisoned by his trainers and carried across the finish line but still 'won.' What should victory actually require?
- Standards have changed dramatically since 1904. What current sports practices might future generations consider unethical?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Comparison: Research modern marathon rules. Create a then-vs-now chart of how races have changed.
- Research: Find another historical sporting event with strange or dangerous practices. Present your findings.
- Ethics: Write a letter to the 1904 Olympic committee from a modern sports medicine perspective.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- National Institutes of Health / NIH Genetic and Rare Diseases Center