

Raising the standard



The result was success that perhaps even the most optimistic person involved would only have dreamed of. The 2002 edition of the race attracted over 6000 runners, nearly 500 of them from overseas. A genuine elite athlete, Constantina Dita (the 2008 Olympic champion) beat the 16-year old event record.

From that dramatic breakthrough year, progress has been little short of meteoric. For the next four years, the combined field for all events grew by 50% each year... 10,000, 15,000, 21,000, 31,000. Foreign participation soared as well, reaching 1,800 in 2006. As a saturation level approaches, growth has slowed slightly over the last two years, but numbers still jumped by 30% in 2007 and 20% in 2008.

The quality of the marathon experience offered is what has driven the growth. While little can be done about the less than comfortable climatic conditions -

World Marathon champion Luke Kibet and three-time World Cross-Country champion Edith Masai won the 2008 Singapore Marathon, and posted impressive times given the tough conditions faced only 130km north of the equator. The heat and humidity – and the consequently early start time of 05.30 did not deter 15,000 runners from tackling the marathon, and another 33,000 from the associated half marathon and 10km races. Such huge numbers testify to the success of the Standard Chartered-sponsored event that began only six years ago.

The city-state of Singapore, with a national territory covering only 700 square kilometres, was one of the original “tiger” economies. It made huge strides forward after independence in 1965 and continued to develop its economy through electronics, petrochemicals, tourism and financial services to the point where it now has the sixth highest gross domestic product per capita in the world, and huge foreign exchange reserves.

Under the Standard Chartered stewardship the marathon has recently followed a similar development trajectory, although for many years it was held in the doldrums partly by the success of the wider Singaporean economy. Founded back in the 1980s the Marathon was only fully embraced by the city in 2002. Before then the Singapore Marathon was an event that had become out of step with the wider world marathon movement, relying on a “rolling closure” of roads that was

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impossible to enforce in practice. In terms of its marathon Singapore was a backwater, playing host to an event that did not live up to the city’s status as a world capital.

The 2001 event was a watershed. Singapore Marathon had joined AIMS only a month previously, but basic shortcomings in the organisation of the race – including inadequate water stations and traffic control – led many participants to protest at their experience. Representations were made and very soon the authorities were faced with a basic dilemma: disband the event or reconstitute it entirely. To their lasting credit they seized the opportunity and called in help for a root-and-branch re-think.

The dangers were only re-emphasized when one of the team called in to assist, scouting out a new route, met with a serious traffic accident. At the same time, Standard Chartered were looking outside their base in Hong Kong, where they had taken over the Hong Kong Marathon in 1997, at other countries in which they could raise their standard. This eventually led to them becoming title sponsors in the Dubai Marathon and the inaugural Mumbai and Nairobi Marathons, but Singapore was the first to which they committed.





RESULT

MEN:			
1	Luke KIBET	KEN	2:13:01
2	Johnstone CHEPKWONY	KEN	2:15:12
3	Amos MATUI	KEN	2:15:15
4	John STEVEN	TAN	2:17:39
5	Victor MANGUSHO	KEN	2:17:57
6	Sammy TUM	KEN	2:18:06
7	Francis KIPROP	KEN	2:18:26
8	Joel Kimaru KEIYO	KEN	2:18:31
9	Evans KIPKOSGEI	KEN	2:19:17
10	Tariku JAFUR	ETH	2:19:28
WOMEN:			
1	Edith MASAI	KEN	2:34:15
2	Silvia SKVORTSOVA	RUS	2:37:10
3	Rose CHESIRE	KEN	2:42:39
4	Irene CHEROP	KEN	2:45:32
5	Gebre ROMAN	ETH	2:46:11
6	Madina BIKTAGIROVA	RUS	2:46:55
7	Junli ZHANG	CHN	2:49:26
8	Lena GEVELIN	SWE	2:50:48
9	Helen STANTON	AUS	2:50:50
10	Seki KIMURA	JPN	2:52:25

apart from making the start time earlier, runners (who now set off half an hour earlier at 05.30) have been offered a more congenial route, taking in the city centre in the first and last few kilometres, but also incorporating a long out-back section from 12-30km along the palm-fringed coastline of the East Coast Park.

The new route, though objectively better, was not particularly spectator-friendly. To compensate, the race organisers found a formula. They created the "Runspiration" initiative, in which freelance supporters were offered an optimised shuttle bus service around the course so that they could cheer their runners home from strategically located vantage points. All of a sudden, vociferous cheer leading groups appeared in relatively isolated locations.

Runners depart southbound from the Esplanade for a quick out-back section and then turn eastward onto Raffles Avenue at 4km. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, after whom the road and the famous hotel was named, signed a treaty on behalf of the British East India Company in 1819 for a port concession. Five years later Singapore became a colony, but it was only in 1867, with a population of 100,000, that it became an official possession of the British Crown. Singapore was released from that status by unilateral declaration in 1963, although it subsequently spent a fruitless two years within an abortive Malaysian Federation before attaining its present status as an independent city-state.

Runners do a quick out-back between 6-8km and then head directly to the East Coast Park. By the time they return they have covered 30km. The 12.2km



remaining does not include the 4km out-back starting section so, among other diversions, runners go around the Kailong Riverside Park to make up the distance. Sweeping past the Singapore Flyer ferris wheel, runners pass the landmark floating platform at 40km. Then they rejoin their outward route. Dispensing with the out-back start section, runners sweep right after the start line to pass the Padang on their right before sprinting past City Hall up St Andrew's Road to the finish line – all 15,000 of them.

Foremost among them this year were world champion athletes Luke Kibet and Edith Masai. Kibet set a new event record of 2:13:01, but Masai could not match the performance of Salina Kosgei, back in 2006, when she set the course record of 2:31:53.

No matter: as Singaporeans know very well, the trend in the marathon - and in life in general - is upward. The standard is rising.



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Full race contact listings start on page ??