

Kenyan Cherokony wins Mystic Places

By Don Sikorski

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EAST LYME, CT - The expression that claims “slow and steady wins the race” doesn’t apply to road racing. But Kenya’s Simon Cherokony had the steady part mastered, and he used that strategy to pull away from Ethiopia’s Kawiso Kassahun just after 24 miles to claim the win at the 2nd Annual Mystic Places Marathon in a course record 2:22:04. Tatyana Maslova of Russia led the women’s race wire to wire to finish first in 2:45:17, also a course record, and good enough for 11th place overall. Both Cherokony and Maslova earned \$3,000 for their efforts.

This year’s Mystic Places Marathon, a collaborative effort between the former East Lyme Marathon Race Committee, the Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut, and the Mystic Places Travel and Leisure Council, offered runners the opportunity to view the Shoreline communities of East Lyme and made a number of improvements from last year’s debut event, according to Race Director John Bysiewicz. The race also dodged a bullet with the weekend’s weather, with Saturday’s day-long rainstorm gone and clear skies, a slight breeze, and cool, crisp temperatures greeting the runners tackling the 26.2 mile distance.

The race up front was a chess match from the start. A pack of 10 runners, including Cromwell’s Stephen Swift and Waterford’s Stephen Herrera, lead the way through the scenic first mile in Rocky Neck State Park. By mile 2, the group was already whittled down to Cherokony, Kawiso Kassahun of Ethiopia, Kenyans’ James Kuria Karanja and Andrew Eyapan, Swift, and Luiz Ramos of Brazil. Swift was next to go, as the five leaders clicked off splits of 5:15, 5:16, 5:20, and 5:25 from 4 to 8 miles to separate themselves from the field. By 10 miles (53:04), both Eyapan and Ramos, who last year had finished 2nd in both the Hartford and Mystic Places Marathons within a two week span, had both dropped back 30 yards and looked to be out of the picture. But near the 20K mark, Eyapan was back running with the lead group, who hit their halfway split in 1:09:19. By 16 miles, the 19 year-old Kassahun, who two weeks prior had been outkicked in the final 800 meters of the Hartford Marathon despite running 2:16:55, began to force the pace through the twists and turns of Black Point, with only Kuria Karanja able to stay close. But Cherokony remained within striking distance, and by 21 miles, it was a 3 man race. “I run good on corners,” Cherokony later explained, and near the end of Fairhaven Road just after 23 ½ miles, Cherokony made one final push. Both Kuria Karanja and Kassahun were gone a mile later. “I was scared because I knew they had run 2:14,” Cherokony confessed. “At 10 miles, I felt strong but at 22 miles, I was uncomfortable. I just stayed in range and then started my kick.” Cherokony, a Policeman back in his native Kenya and who’s credentials include a 3rd place finish in the Houston Marathon and a 2:16 marathon best, had slowed to mile splits of 5:52, 5:57, 5:49, and 6:06 from 22 to 26, but it hardly mattered. He cruised home to hit the tape comfortably ahead of his nearest challengers in 2:22:04, with Kuria Karanja getting by Kassahun for 2nd in 2:23:46. Ramos hung in for 4th (2:27:41), while Eyapan claimed 5th in 2:28:39. Cherokony, who had also competed in Hartford two weeks ago (4th in 2:20:33), was pleased to have avenged his loss to Kassahun. “I feel that I am in good shape now,” assessed Cherokony. He plans on running the Motorola Marathon in Houston next February, with a goal of sub 2:16.

Herrera, who two years earlier had led the East Lyme Marathon for more than 20 miles in his debut attempt at the distance only to slow to a walk and eventually finish 3rd in a disappointing 2:52, finished a very strong 6th place overall in 2:29:57 to claim top American honors despite running alone for the last 10 miles. “I went out a little brisk,” Herrera confessed, but hey, it’s a race. And I didn’t walk today,” he joked, referring back to his East Lyme race.” “I felt good through about 16 or 17, but then I started fighting a few twinges here and there and I thought, oh no, here we go again. But to run under 2:30, yeah, I’m happy with that.”

Swift, who had been hurting since about 10 miles and surrendered his position to Herrera near 16, dropped back to 8th overall in 2:41:22. “I didn’t run as well as I wanted,” Swift explained. “I was looking to go 2:20’s, but at 8 to 10 miles, I struggled. Even when I fell of the pace earlier, I still thought I was OK because I was running in the 2:20 to 2:23 range. I guess I’ll go back to the drawing board and consider a spring marathon”.

The women’s race provided no such drama. Maslova, who had finished 4th at the Pittsburgh Marathon this past May, led from the gun, and continued to build a solid lead on Kolpakova, the defending champion, with each mile. “I felt good but it was windy,” explained the 36 year-old Russian who lives and trains with Kolpakova in Rockville, Maryland. Maslova’s time of 2:45:17 was good enough for a course record as well, but just missed the bonus money for being under the 2:45 standard. “My time was a bit slow because of the wind,” said Maslova. “But I felt very good and I liked the course and the views”.

A total of 719 runners completed the 26.2 miles distance, in addition to over 100 5 person relay teams. The race’s organization was top notch, and the runners seemed generally pleased with the event in just its sophomore year. “We had a nice turnout today,” said Way Hedding, the former East Lyme Marathon Race Director and Mystic Places Course Marshall. “The State and Local Police, the Lions Club, all the volunteers; the race just keeps getting better and better. It was a very busy course out there, but things were excellent.”

Although most of the competitors looked to be struggling with the aches and pains of running 26.2 miles, the spectators continued to cheer for every last competitor that crossed the finish line. The marathon race course is also arguably one of the most scenic in the country. The Mystic Places Marathon has clearly accomplished its goal of becoming a prime tourism event with a true New England feel.