

KENYANS DOMINATE 108TH BOSTON MARATHON

By DON SIKORSKI
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The Boston Marathon has truly become a full blown event, so much more than the original footrace that saw 18 starters and 10 finishers make the trek from Hopkinton to Boston. First contested in 1897, the Boston Marathon has since grown into the world's premier running event; a true New England party. At 108 years old, Boston is the world's oldest marathon. And despite a reputation for maintaining tradition (stubbornly to a fault at times), a new twist was even unveiled for the first time at Boston this year. A female was the first competitor to cross the finish line on Boylston Street, due to the fact that Boston Athletic Association officials allowed approximately 25-30 of the top female runners in the world to be granted a head start. The decision for the new 11:31am starting time (wheelchair racers began 4 minutes prior to that) was based on a number of factors, ranging from increased safety to better media coverage. Marathons like London and New York City have already implemented this procedure with good success, and now Boston was able to showcase the Ladies race more effectively than ever. Not bad for an event that didn't even allow women to compete officially until 1972.

The city of Boston always prepares like no other for its marathon, taking ownership of their cherished event. Preparations are numerous in the small town of Hopkinton, a place unfamiliar with seeing 10,000+ people on it's streets but once a year. Kenya, a country that is always a presence at the front pack of the Boston race, was again loaded with some of their best athletes, looking to sort out the best before their Olympic selection process begins. There's was the all-new BAA Kids Relay Challenge, consisting of a series of Saturday afternoon relay races in Copley Square. The ever-popular John Hancock Sports and Fitness Expo boasted 150+ exhibitors. The traditional pre-race pasta dinner was a success. There was the heat, an unexpected blast that hovered some 40+ degrees warmer than most New Englander's training conditions, slowing the pace up front and wrecking havoc of those unwilling to change their marathon game plan. And then of course there was the Red Sox, posting a 5 run comeback against their hated New York rivals, taking 3 of 4 while making billionaire third baseman Alex Rodriguez look like a little leaguer. Usually a close game keeps the 34,000+ fans in Fenway until the final pitch; a blowout would have allowed fans to hit the streets in time for the leaders to pass by. With a Game 7 Bruins/Canadians matchup and the announcement that Corey Dillion would be wearing a Patriots uniform in 2004, Marathon Monday was a big sports day in the city of Boston.

Locally, Kevin Gallerani of Uncasville led all qualifiers by virtue of his 3:01:27 22nd place effort at last fall's Mystic Places Marathon. Gallerani always looks forward to competing at Boston, "the pinnacle of marathons", he claims, and applauds the support that the runners receive along the course each year. "There's the bikers at miles 6 and 7, the girls at Wellesley College. There's the million people along the course giving encouragement; the different types of people along the way, and you can almost count on them being there every year," said Gallerani. His high school coach and mentor, Doug Sharples, was stationed at Cleveland Circle (22 ½ miles) as always. His support crew: Lynne, Claire, and Darlene, were waiting with Way Hedding and a group of local runners, at the "1 Mile To Go" mark, as is tradition every year.

With the heat a big factor, Gallerani still managed a very respectable time of 3:15:28. "I went out as planned," explained Gallerani, "and I was taking all the water and Gatorade right from the beginning. After about 10 or 11 miles, I slowed to 7:20 pace just to survive." With the experience of 19th previous Boston Marathons under his belt (and a Boston best of 2:50:18), Gallerani knew the course as well as anyone, yet admits that despite a solid foundation of training miles, anything can happen in the marathon. Only once did Gallerani not finish the 26.2-mile footrace. He reached to grab an orange slice offered by a child spectator near the 22-mile mark and pulled a muscle in his back. Things like that can turn a runner like Gallerani, with a 2:44 marathon best, into a pedestrian in a hurry. This year's effort also has a special meaning to Gallerani, who was running for the honor of his close friend and long time training partner Stephen Hancock, who has been battling cancer. "He was and still is in my corner after all these years even when not running the marathon himself; in spite of his problems, he still finds time for others," says Gallerani. It's those challenges, the disciplined training sacrifices, and the camaraderie of his support staff along the route, are the reasons Gallerani looks forward to tackling the Boston Marathon each April.

Uncasville's Annette Barbay was attempting Monday's race from a slightly different perspective. It was her first Boston and her biggest marathon to date. Barbay, who competed in her 4th marathon in Boston on Monday, had shown steady improvement since her sub 4-hour debut at the 2002 Mystic Places Marathon. She returned to Mystic last fall to run 3:26:18, a personal best by 8 minutes despite less than ideal weather conditions. Since Boston is the only marathon other than the Olympic Trials which requires a qualifying time to earn an official starting number (with the exception of runners participating for charitable causes), Barbay accomplished a goal many runners only dream about. "Qualifying for Boston has been my goal every since I finished my first marathon," said Barbay, 33. Her training has continued to progress, and she took a methodical approach to her Boston race strategy. "I based my splits on a computer program that alters the miles based on the terrain", Barbay explained. Boston's infamous Heartbreak Hill and deceptively easy downhill start has wrecked havoc on inexperienced marathoners thrown off their game plan, and Barbay took measures to insure that wasn't the case for her Boston debut. With a problem-free training buildup and a steady diet of long runs, Barbay was anxious to toe the line in Hopkinton in top shape despite some nervousness about competing in her largest marathon to date. But again the conditions proved to be the biggest concern. "I was disappointed when I heard the weather forecast, but I tried to make the best of it," Barbay explained. "Instead of worrying about pace and time, I just tried to run consistently. Barbay finished in 3:40:28, not a personal best but a strong effort given the conditions. Her afterthought on her first Boston experience? "Well, Heartbreak Hill was not as bad as I had heard, and the crowd support was unlike any other marathon I had run".

Timothy Cherigat, 27, led a top seven contingent of Kenyan runners (who have now claimed 13 of the last 14 individual titles) to the finish and showed the television viewers just how grueling racing 26.2 miles can be, vomiting immediately after crossing the finish line in 2:10:37. Kenya's Catherine Ndereba, who despite a win at Boston in 2000 was passed over for Kenya's Olympic marathon team, left no doubt in 2004, winning by a 16-second margin in 2:24:27. Matt Karatewicz of Middlefield was the top Connecticut finisher in 2:41:07, good enough for 55th overall. Marathon veteran Harry Lepp of Danielson overtook Gallerani in the late miles to earn top area honors in 3:14:58. Mystic's Heather Panciera was the top area female in 3:37:17. Being an Olympic year, no one expected to see an American contingent of racers up front, since both the Men's and Women's U.S. Trials races were contested recently (not sure what our excuse had been in the years prior). But Christopher Zieman of Felton, California obviously less bothered by the heat than most, posted a 13th place finish in 2:25:45, impressive considering he owned only a 2:24 best and failed to qualifying for the Trials race.

Cosmas Ndeti still owns the course record at Boston; his wind aided 2:07:15 in 1994 was a classic lesson in negative split marathon racing. Kenya's Margaret Okayo set the women's mark of 2:20:43 in 2002. All in all, the 108th Boston Marathon offered a bit of everything, and the city of Boston was certainly the place on Patriot's Day.

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