

# LONDON, BOSTON BOTH CLAIM THEIR MARKET

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On Sunday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, over 30,000 runners are expected to compete in the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the London Marathon. A day later, a field of 10,000+ qualifiers will come to Massachusetts on Patriot's Day and toe the line in Hopkinton for the start of the 109<sup>th</sup> running of the Boston Marathon. One event touts tradition and reputation; the other lures runners with the promise of world records and personal bests. The London Marathon and the Boston Marathon are clearly two of the world's premiere 26.2 mile footraces, but the two events, strapped with dates just 1 day apart, have recently become competitors in the recruiting wars.

In recent years, the Boston and London Marathons have competed for their world class runners, hoping to lure the best athletes to their respective events. The underlying argument becomes how important a world class field of international runners is to the overall success of the event, what is the financial impact, and does the average runner even notice or care? In this respect, Boston and London are a true contrast in styles, some say races heading in different directions, yet each offers both the elite and the mid-pack marathoner something for their money and efforts. Running purists claim that the glory days of the Boston Marathon, like Notre Dame football and Indiana basketball, may never return to its previous form. Critics of the event claim that Boston, a race that one stood above the rest based on its strict qualifying standards and elite international field, has become an overhyped and overpriced charity event, with a focus on the bottom line rather than on the runners themselves. Charity events have paved the way for exemptions for runners raising enough money for their cause, and Boston has now relaxed their qualifying standards to allow these runners to be an official part of their field. Supporters point to the money raised for worthwhile causes; critics claim that this practice cheapens the accomplishment of running a qualifying time for what was once considered a prestigious event. Many elite marathoners have passed on the opportunity to race in Boston, instead choosing to race on flatter courses, hope to cash in with faster finishing times from race events with deeper pockets. London meets that description to a tee. Boston still attracts big names, predominately Kenyan athletes, but the focus has gradually shifted away from the race up front. And with many elites choosing London as their spring marathon of choice, how prestigious is a win at Boston if it comes against a depleted field? Many of the best marathoners are being attracted to London by the cash and the opportunity to race against many of the world's best.

While no marathon can rival Boston's storied 100+ year tradition, London counters with the opportunity for a fast race against a talented field. London Marathon Race Director David Bedford, himself a former world class distance runner, can boast of assembling potentially the best field ever to race 26.2-miles. His 2005 marathon field already includes some of the sport's biggest names. Paula Radcliffe recently announced that she will pass on Boston's offer to run in the London Marathon again. Radcliffe, 31, has earned marathon victories in London (2002 and 2003), Chicago (2003), and in New York City (2004). With a world best 2:15:25 to her credit, she is a national hero in her homeland and stand to earn over \$1 in prize money and incentives if she produces a world class effort in London. Ethiopia's Haile Gebrselassie, at age 33 and with 18 world records considered by many to be the greatest distance runner in history, has received his invitation to take part in the 25th anniversary running of the London Marathon and will confirm his participation if he is healthy enough to prepare at 100% effort (Gebrselassie is recovering from an Achilles tendon operation after the Athens Olympics, where, despite the injury, he finished 5<sup>th</sup> in the 10,000 meter final). In 2002, Gebrselassie led at London through 25 miles before falling to 3<sup>rd</sup> in 2:06:35. The London field will also include the 2004 Olympic gold and silver medalists Stefano Baldini of Italy and Meb Keflezighi of the United States, as well as defending London champion Evans Rutto, world record holder Paul Tergat of Kenya, and marathon world champion Jaouad Gharib of Morocco. In addition to Radcliffe, the London women's field also includes Kenya's Susan Chepkemei and Margaret Okayo and Ireland's Sonia O'Sullivan.

Still, the Boston tradition is unparalleled, and if an American were to ever win again (none have since Greg Meyer's 2:09:00 in 1983), it would mean a ton of prestige. What American wouldn't want to be the winner of the Boston Marathon, a race with such a storied history and place in the public mind? Winning Boston would put an American runner on the map. Win in Boston and join names like Kelley, Rodgers and Salazar in an elite circle. Would a 2:09 marathon run on London's pancake flat course have the same long-term impact? London counters Boston's traditions by rolling out the bucks in an attempt to attract many big names, but even at 25 years, it lacks Boston's history of excellence. Boston stands head and shoulders above all other marathons in terms of tradition and prestige and, because of this fact, should endure as one of the world's top marathons. Boston's qualifying standards also create an appreciation of the event itself; it is the hard work and extra effort and dedication required to qualify for acceptance at Boston that creates the appreciation of the actual race. The argument may lie in the fact that an American winning Boston in 2:11 would be more advantageous to the sport than a top 10 finish in 2:07 or 2:08 in London. The mainstream media would gush over an American citizen winning Boston; a fast time in London would go virtually unnoticed here. And while the Boston Athletic Association would be glad to attract a field like London has this year, they also are pleased to carry on the tradition of offering a highly competitive marathon for the amateur runner. By that comparison, the London Marathon isn't a threat.

## Racing Roundup

Waterford's Stephen Herrera and Mystic's Martha Merz have accumulated plenty of road race wins over the past few years, so it was no surprise to see Herrera and Merz the first arrivals at the finish line at the Kelley's Pace Frostbite 5 Miler on January 9th. Herrera cruised to a comfortable victory in 26:41 over his nearest competitors David Hurtado (27:41) and Brendan Cashman (27:43), while Merz ran 30:40, easily good enough for top lady honors and 9<sup>th</sup> place overall to claim victories in the area's first road race in 2005.....America's Dathan Ritzenheim claimed one of the most unexpected victories of the season at the Reebok International Cross-Country race in Belfast. The 22 year-old Ritzenheim, who left the University of Colorado to turn professional last year, ran away from a strong field to win the muddy 9K race at Stormont Castle by 10 seconds over Kenya's Ernest Meil and Barnabas Kosgei..... In what should be a true test of finding the time and energy to train at a national class level with children, U.S. 3000 and 5000 meter record holder Bob Kennedy and his wife Melina recently gave birth to twins. The 34 year-old Kennedy is a two-time Olympian and the only U.S. runner to go under 13 minutes for 5,000 meters. He dropped out in his marathon debut last November at the ING New York City Marathon.

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