

BOSTON INDOOR GAMES MEASURE UP TO THE BIG APPLE

By DON SIKORSKI
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Now in its 10th year, the Reebok Boston Indoor Games has developed into a world class Track and Field meet, drawing top athletes from all over the world. This year's January 28th event didn't disappoint, with some near world record efforts and a number of competitive distance running events. While our group has traditionally ventured to Manhattan the first February of the last 20+ years for the Millrose Games at New York's Madison Square Garden, higher ticket prices and diminishing crowds pushed us to consider a change in tradition. So the Reebok meet, which takes place a week prior to Millrose, was a worthy destination. Here's a look at how the two indoor Track and Field meets compared.

Logistics favored the Boston trip. A Saturday event was beneficial to those who struggled to escape from work on a Friday afternoon in past years, and the bus ride was only two hours tops with much less traffic (this and the earlier departure time meant an extra hour or two of sleep that night as well, not a bad thing at our age). Nobody missed the bus and we were successful in finding a tavern that could accommodate about two dozen thirsty runners for a pre-event pint of Guinness, so the trip was off to a good start. It was a Mexican-Irish pub (an odd combination to say the least) that was a decent hike up the street from the Reggie Lewis Center, but we prided ourselves on being in shape, so the walk was easily manageable for a group of aging distance runners.

It was evident that the two track meets each cater to a slightly different market. While the Millrose Games has always been about attracting Olympic sprinters, vaulters, and middle distance runners sprinkled amongst a number of high school and collegiate relay events, the Boston meet focuses on distance running. The venues each support this decision; Madison Square Garden seats over 23,000 spectators but requires a makeshift, banked wooden track of 11 laps to the mile to be constructed within its confines. The Reggie Lewis Center, located near the campus of Northeastern University, looks more like a high school gymnasium. But the 200 meter track surface is outstanding, tailor made for churning out world class efforts.

Most track meets are pretty boring with a lot of dead time between events. Meet promoters have recognized this fact and have begun to make the meet more entertaining for the fan. The Boston meet played music prior to and during the majority of most events and showed instant replays on the video screen, which drew positive responses from the sold out crowd in attendance. Millrose has also incorporated this philosophy in recent years, with a PA announcer focused on rallying the crowd (approximately 13,700 in New York for the February 3rd event). The bench-style seating at the Reggie Lewis Center made for some tight quarters in our general admission section, but for only a \$20 price tag (compared to about \$80 in the Big Apple) we weren't complaining. And the Boston meet was scheduled to last only 3 1/2 hours from start to finish (I probably could not have lasted another hour in those seats anyway) compared to Millrose, which begins late afternoon with corporate and collegiate relay races and concludes sometime after 11:00pm on a Friday evening.

Both events market their athletes well. Millrose featured race is the Wannamaker Mile, which carries with it a long-standing tradition of distance running excellence. Television coverage kicks in, the national anthem is sung, the house lights go down, and the fireworks begin. Legendary milers like Eammon Coghlan, Steve Scott, and Marcus O'Sullivan have graced the Millrose track in the past. This year's Wannamaker Mile featured two of the world's best in Kenya's Bernard Lagat and Ethiopia's Kenenisa Bekele, so the race was highly anticipated. The crowds have always risen to their feet to offer a standing ovation over the race's final laps, a welcomed support by the runners. The Boston crowd was just as supportive.

The Reebok meet's strength was its quality of competition, and the races didn't disappoint. Australia's Craig Mottram sprinted past a talented group of runners in the final stretch of the Men's 2 Mile Run, the meet's featured race, to win in 8:26.54. Although the winning time was not as fast as anticipated, the next seven runners all finished within 2 ½ seconds of the winner. California's Michael Coe, the Footlocker National XC runner-up, blazed the field in the high school mile to win in 4:07.30 in his very first indoor race. By comparison, the Millrose High School mile was won in 4:17.18 on the much slower track. 3rd place finisher A.J. Acosta, the Footlocker champion also out of California, drew the loudest response when he donned a homemade t-shirt with negative statements about the Yankees and their new centerfielder Johnny Damon handwritten on the front and back. He immediately became a crowd favorite. In other men's races, American record holder David Krummyer looked good in winning the 1,000 (ahead of former UConn standout Eliot Blount in 5th), while Kenya's Elkanah Angwenyi fended off a talented field to win the mile in 3:55.95. The Ethiopians were the stars of the show in the women's races, with Meseret Defar running 8:30.94 for 3,000 meters (27 seconds up on the field) and Tirunesh Dibaba hammering out a brisk 14:35.46 for 5,000 meters, lapping all but one of her competitors. Both just missed world record marks.

The negatives were minimal. The meets each struggled to get the rabbit (a runner compensated to set a specific early pace for the field) in sync with the proper pace for the race. In both the Wannamaker Mile and the 2 Mile Run in Boston, the rabbit was out front too fast and the field never followed. The Wannamaker duel never materialized, with Lagat winning comfortably by nearly a 5 second margin over Bekele in 3:56.85. Millrose also struggled with a problem in disassembling and reassembling the track (done to allow for the sprinting events to run down the center of the Garden floor), which caused a lengthy delay. The Reebok meet in Boston was opposite, maintaining a level of noise and energy and moving briskly from event to event.

The Millrose Games still held some advantages over the Reebok Games. Boston didn't offer the pole vault (the low ceilings and the basketball hoops certainly didn't help), an event that spectators in the Garden have always enjoyed. Millrose plays up its long standing tradition by offering trivia questions to break the silence between events. Meet officials also dress formal in black tuxedos, a nice touch. And although I have always favored the city of Boston (and its baseball team) to New York, we did miss the hustle and bustle of downtown Manhattan on a Friday night just a bit. But overall, the Reebok Boston Indoor Games did a terrific job in hosting a quality, world class event that should continue to flourish. Scrap the karaoke in the Mexican-Irish bar and a return trip in 2007 is almost a guarantee.

Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at www.moheganstriders.org. He can also be reached by e-mail at kdcsikorski@netzero.net.