

In the beginning

Athens Classic Marathon, Greece. 2 November 2003

By Pat Butcher

In the beginning – or at least in 490BC – there was Marathon. Then there was a Persian-Greek War; then there was a messenger sent on a myth-making mission to the Greek capital. The basis was laid for what, years later, became the beginnings of 'The Marathon' – not that sleepy seaboard settlement on an inlet of the Aegean, but a groundbreaking feat of endurance which issues a challenge to people all over the world.

This race was a rehearsal for the Olympic Marathon, over the course that gave the event its name. East African men – Kenyans, Ethiopians, Tanzanians – dominated the top placings, as they are expected to do in the Olympic race later this year.

The annual event can't yet compete with the big-city races of the international circuit (like New York, held on the same day), but it has something that no other marathon in the world can match – the original course.

With the course comes the history. Take your pick: 490BC,



when Philippides is supposed to have run to Athens to announce the famous victory over the invading Persians on the Plain of Marathon; or 1896 when half of the 18 original Olympic Marathon hopefuls finished the race. Either way, history resonates here.

In the first Olympic Marathon the road was little more than a dirt track. It has gradually been improved over the years, but the transformation since Athens was awarded the 2004 Olympic Games (in 1997) has been startling. The whole road is being upgraded, and there is a new stadium at the exit from Marathon, which serves as the warm-up area. The finish is still in the impressive marble Panathanaïkon Stadium (a replica of the original Olympic Games stadium at Olympia), which was built for the 1896 Games.

There was a record entry of 3,500 runners from over 30 countries for this 21st birthday edition of the Athens Classic Marathon. Alpha Bank, one of the Olympic Games' biggest sponsors, helped re-vamp the historic race by pouring in over a million Euros.

Defending champion Mark Saina faced a challenge from Alehmayu Simretu of Ethiopia and Tanzania's Zebedayo Bayo, with bests of 2:07:45 and 2:08:51. Sonia

Krolik of Germany, the bronze medallist from the 2002 European Championships, was going for her third consecutive victory in the women's event, but pulled out a couple of days before the race.

The race inspires respect and caution, as it is one of the toughest marathons in the world. All runners, whether selected for the Olympic race, or brave enough to attempt the original marathon course purely from self-motivation, should listen to Nikos Polias, for he knows of which he speaks.

"You have to start slowly," said Polias, who has won the race four times in ten starts, and won the national title here six times. "Because you still need to be alive when you get to 30km". The course rises gradually between 11km and 30km, so: "you have to be very patient, so that you can take advantage of the last 10km, which drops down to the finish".

A measure of the course's difficulty is that Polias' best time is 2:13:53, but his best on the Athens course is 2:18:38. "A lot depends on the weather conditions too," he advised, "it's good when the wind is coming from the north. When Bill Adcocks ran 2:11:07 (the course record) in 1969, I'm told there was a typhoon behind him. I think the best run



on this course is Abel Anton's 2:13:06, when he won the World Championships title in 1997. The temperature was 36C".

Stephen Rugut ran the Athens Classic Marathon in 2001, when there was a flash flood at the start, and he dropped out shortly afterwards. The Kenyan lasted the whole course this time, leading most of the way. But Zebedayo Bayo's pace in the last kilometre proved too much for him.

The temperature rose to 25C at the finish, but it is likely to be a lot hotter in the Olympic race next August. "It's a very tough course," said Bayo, "the toughest I've ever run." Testament to the difficulty of the course – a warning to Olympic Marathon runners – is that Bayo's time is eight minutes slower than his best.

Christos Vardzakis, aged 93, won two Balkan and four Greek marathon titles back in the 1930s. He was due to run the 10km race, but after an injury had to be content just to watch his protégé, Nikos Polias, win his seventh national marathon title, in 2:23:16. "I'll be back to run the 10km next year," promised Vardzakis.

Nadja Wijenberg set out on a hard training run, and ended up winning the race. Wijenberg, 39, wants to run for the Netherlands





in the Olympic Games Marathon next year, so she came to Athens to reconnoitre the course. "She was going to do a hard training run to 32km," explained her husband Ger, "but then she passed the race leader".

That was race favourite,

Margaret Karie of Kenya, who was beginning to suffer from the heat and humidity, as well as the brutal hills between Marathon and Athens. "I felt good, so I decided to keep going," said Nadja in heavily accented English, for she is originally Russian. She ran here for Russia in the 1995 World Cup,

and finished eighth.

Marathon marked the beginning in 490BC, and in 1896. This year the historic course is the ultimate end for many an elite marathon performer. But for the Marathon itself it will be yet another beginning.



Result

MEN:			
1	Zebedayo BAYO	TAN	2:16.59
2	Stephen RUGUT	KEN	2:17.06
3	Elias CHEBET	KEN	2:18.22
4	Frederick CHUMBA	KEN	2:18.33
5	Paul ATUDONYANG	KEN	2:19.30
6	John MOIBEN	KEN	2:19.49
7	David BUSIENEI	KEN	2:21.54
8	Nikos POLIAS	GRE	2:23.16
9	Gerasimos KOKOTOS	GRE	2:26.02
10	Wesley CHELULE	KEN	2:28.18
WOMEN:			
1	Nadja WIJENBERG	NED	2:43.18
2	Georgia APATZIDOU	GRE	2:46.47
3	Margaret KARIE	KEN	2:48.48
4	Magda KARIMALI	GRE	2:55.25
5	Magdalini GAZEIA	GRE	2:55.50
6	Chiemi OANA	JPN	2:58.29
7	Modesta DRUNGLIENE	LIT	3:12.02
8	Panagiota NIKOLAKOPOULOU	GRE	3:12.15
9	Hana HAROKOVA	CZE	3:14.02
10	Eleni DONTA	GRE	3:15.53

