

A hero's welcome

Kaiser's-Plus Budapest Marathon, Hungary. 28 September 2003

By György Muladi

The Budapest Marathon was born under the old socialist system and, despite change all around, it has been a constant in the city's sporting calendar ever since.

Its success is based upon good organisation and traditional Hungarian hospitality for foreigners. It became a full AIMS member in the third year. Since then the course has shifted occasionally, but it now takes centre stage through the middle of both Buda and Pest.

On 14 April 1984 the Budapest Marathon started out in life from beside the Népstadium (People's Stadium). It was the first time that a marathon was run through the Hungarian capital. Before then there was no mass marathon in Hungary, where 'amateurs' pitted themselves against 'professionals'. The sponsor was IBUSZ, the Hungarian state travel agency, and 18 foreign runners lined up for that first race.

In 1986 the Budapest Marathon became the first AIMS race in Eastern Europe – and almost 1000 runners entered, from 22 countries. This was also the first time that the pasta party was organised on the day before the marathon.

The Budapest Sport Office, formed in 1989, took over organisation of the race, and has since grown to handle a dozen other races in Budapest and elsewhere in Hungary. In 1990, a major turning point in the political system allowed events to set an entry fee for the first time.

The race changed both its main sponsor and its location in 1993, and welcomed a special hero: Fred Lebow. The organiser of the New York Marathon, and a founder member of AIMS, was of Hungarian origin, and took a nostalgic trip around the 21km course. The combined entry in marathon, half marathon and 5km fun run that year was 11,000 - from 29 countries.

In 1996 the Budapest Marathon was reborn, thanks to the support of a German food distribution company (KAISER'S and PLUS). The most important change was that the race shifted from spring to early autumn – a very pleasant time of year in Budapest. Another milestone was passed in 1998, when the city authorities declared the race to be a special event, and the start and finish area was moved to the city's most beautiful park, Városliget.

Fred Lebow's Hungarian dream



Passing under Szabadsághíd (Liberty Bridge)



The Parliament seen from the Buda side

became reality when 1500 runners, a third of them from 30 foreign countries, started and finished the race at Heroes' Square – the equivalent of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. The colonnaded Square is lined by statuary commemorating the heroes of 1000 years of Hungarian history and forms a most imposing backdrop.

The course was also modified to its present form: one smaller and one larger lap on both sides of the Danube, along the river embankments. This way the route is almost perfectly flat and goes past the finest attractions of Budapest - considered one of the most beautiful cities in Europe.

Only the bridges present gradients, but they are easily overlooked in comparison to the unique sights they offer (the Lánchíd or 'Chain Bridge' is more than 100 years old), and the views to be had along the entire length of the course.

The Millennium year edition of KAISER'S-PLUS Budapest Marathon surpassed all previous records. There were 2100 Hungarian runners and 800 foreigners from 33 countries who entered this 15th race.

Germans presented the majority (124), but apart from the United States (28) runners also came from Canada, Mexico, Brazil, New Zealand, Kenya and Japan (9). The following year fewer people came from overseas because of the September 11 attacks, but this did not affect attendance for the Police World Championships hosted by Budapest in 2001, and won by the Ethiopian policemen ahead of their Saudi colleagues.

Budapest's Day of Running this year attracted 15000 runners, including participants of varied ages running over shorter courses from 800m upwards. The great weather, the cheerful feeling and the well-practised organisation did the job yet again.

For the first time there was a 5km Breakfast Run held on

Margaret Island – a wooded haven and the favourite spot for training in the metropolis. Many of the 800 foreign runners came from France, Holland or Sweden, and as many as 85 of them from Iceland.

There was the usual pasta party on Saturday afternoon, then on Sunday, 4000 marathon runners started in bright sunshine and perfect conditions. The relay runs have even become a favourite variation since last year. In the baton run, three people share 12km/21km/8km stages, with both exchanges taking place at the eastern end of the Lánchíd (Chain Bridge). Five runners take part in Ekiden Relay, further dividing the middle 21km section among themselves.

The course of the marathon is now fixed: it passes through Pest on the broad tree-lined Andrassy ut, part of the World Heritage Site linked with the Opera House, then to the fine old Lánchíd across the Danube to Buda.

It then turns south on the lower embankment, passing the ramparts of Buda Castle, Fisherman's Bastion, and the Buda Hills. At Lágymányosi Bridge, the newest Danube crossing in Budapest, runners turn back towards a more historical bridge, Szabadsághíd (Freedom Bridge),

by which they cross back to Pest.

Margaret Bridge, Margaret Island, and Árpád Bridge follow up, with lots of sights in between, including the Hungarian Parliament and the Academy of Sciences. Throughout the route great panoramic views greet the runners; sometimes particular architectural sights but always against the beautiful natural backdrop of the Buda Hills.

The second lap is similar but smaller, and eventually the heroes of the marathon return to Heroes' Square, and a hero's welcome. While they rest spectators can find various programmes, concerts and goods at the finishing area, where a big stage, a wellness-expo and other exhibitions offer something for everybody.

Result

MEN:

1	László NAGY	HUN	2:24:39
2	Lajos BÉRECZ	HUN	2:26:34
3	Béla HORVATH	HUN	2:27:15
4	Zsolt ZSODER	HUN	2:29:11
5	Roland ADOK	HUN	2:29:17
6	Gábor SZABO	HUN	2:30:37

WOMEN:

1	Judit FOLDINGNE NAGY	HUN	2:41:56
2	Gabriella BENKO	HUN	2:59:10
3	Katalin FARKAS	HUN	3:04:24
4	Yolanda MOOS	SUI	3:05:13
5	Ágnes CZIBOK	HUN	3:06:42
6	Krisztina MIKE	HUN	3:08:55

Around the back of Heroes Square

