

Man trouble

Andy Milroy considers the problems of men pacing women

The issue of male pacemakers in women's marathons was thrown into sharp relief by Paul Tergat's world marathon record in Berlin. This may seem a strange claim to make, but I will explain.

There were two designated pacemakers in the Berlin race. Sammy Korir had a personal best of 2:08:02 from 1997 and Titus Munji had run 2:16:58 in his marathon debut five months earlier in Zurich.

From 30km it was clear the pacemakers were going to try to race Tergat to the finish. Munji dropped off with approximately 5km to go, but Tergat only managed to hold off Korir to the finish line by a few metres - winning by a single second. The designated pacemaker, Korir, broke the old world record by 42 seconds.

Designated pacemakers actually winning races has been happening for years. Paul Pilkington won the 1994 Los Angeles Marathon. More recent examples include Simon Biwott in Berlin 2000, Josephus Ngolepus in Berlin 2001, and Ben Kimondiu in Chicago 2001.

It can be seen from these cases that a male pacemaker in a male race is an integral part of the race. Although he sets the pace for the lead runner/s, he is also part of the race dynamics - he has the potential to win and must be taken into account by the leading runners. A male pacemaker in a male race cannot distort the running of the race - because he is part of that race.

When looking at a so-called mixed race, we need to clarify exactly what it is. If it is one race, there can only be one winner. This is usually a man, although in some ultra races, and at least one marathon, a woman has won. The so-called mixed race is, in fact, two separate races, one for men and one for women, held at the same time. The problem with this is that the runners in the male race can - and do - distort the results in the women's race.

A male pacemaker in a female race is an alien intrusion; he is not an integral part of the event. The male runner cannot be part of the female race because he is not eligible to win it. The sole purpose of the male pacemaker is to aid the leading woman. The purpose of that aid is to enable her to run faster than she would have done without his assistance. Therefore the male pacemaker distorts the results of the



World Record pace for Paula Radcliffe in London, 2003

women's race, giving a false impression of what the leading female runner can achieve in open competition on her own.

When the International Association of Athletic Federations first recognised the 5000m and 10,000m world records for women on the track, they purposefully ignored the best marks on record. Loa Olafsson (Denmark) had run 15:08.8 and 31:45.35, but these times had been set in races against men. The IAAF instead chose the times of Paula Fudge (Britain, 15:41.51) and Yelena Sipatova (USSR, 32:17.19), which had both been achieved in all-women races.

IAAF Rule 148 (e) on World Records specifically states that "No performance set by an athlete will be recognised if it has been accomplished during a mixed competition." Clearly, the IAAF recognises the problems of women running with men in long-distance track races.

Aided performances are the curse of athletics. Performances aided by the use of drugs are ruled illegal. The primary reason for this is because such 'aided'

performances place every other athlete at a disadvantage. They give a false impression as to the ability of a runner - in results, in rankings and in records.

Pacing by persons "not participating in the race" is aid. This is why, according to IAAF rules on assistance, it is illegal. Male-paced performances by women are obviously aided by a runner who is "not participating in the race".

The use of male pacemakers is opportunistic and short-sighted, driven by the financial demands of race directors and runners' agents. The impact on the sport as a whole does not appear to have been considered. The inclusion of male pacemakers will work against the development of women's distance running.

It is much cheaper for a race organisation to pay for one or two elite women runners and a couple of male pacemakers than it is for them to attract a strong elite women's field. They get a good winning women's time with resultant favourable press coverage, without the cost of inviting a major women's field.

The fact there is no depth to the women's event can be glossed over in post-race reports and coverage.

A classic case of this was the 2001 Berlin Marathon where the pre-race publicity on the women's race focused on a duel between Naoko Takahashi and Tegla Loroupe. It was subsequently clear to unbiased observers that Loroupe was nowhere close to her "world record" fitness, as the results clearly demonstrated

Only a narrow group of elite women will receive invitations and appearance money. Therefore the number of international class women distance runners who can sustain a running career will be significantly reduced, and gradually the gap between those elite runners and the rest will widen. Without the underlying, supporting base of younger runners moving up, learning the event and competing internationally as the existing runners grow older, there will be no one to replace them.

The pool of elite women marathoners is already substantially smaller than it is for elite men marathoners, as evidenced by the many European marathons with strong men's fields but little more than local talent in the women's race. This is then used as a reason to offer substantially less prize money to women in these races.

Women runners colluding with this practice of using male pacemakers to better their own career, do so at the expense of other women performers - those who come after them.

They are setting aid-enhanced performances which will be much more difficult for non-aided runners to match in the future, and they are undermining the base of up-and-coming women athletes whose running careers will depend on invitations to world class road running events.

Why should the long-term interests of women's road running and the future well-being of the sport of road-racing be sacrificed for the financial benefit of a few individuals and organisations?

It is in the interests of the future health of the whole sport to do everything possible to widen the base and develop the enormous potential of women's road running. Men pacing women to aid-enhanced performances is a major threat to the future of the sport.

STREET LEGAL... Pacer Paul Pilkington won the 1994 L.A. Marathon

