

A bridge to cross

EDP Meia Maratona de Lisboa, Portugal. 28 March 2004

The 25 de Abril Bridge, majestically spanning the Tagus estuary, is the talismanic symbol of this magnificent race. The race date was only a month short of Portugal's 30th anniversary of modern democracy, after which the bridge is named.

It is like the Verazzano Narrows Bridge in New York, Tower Bridge in London – or even Berlin's Brandenburger Tor and the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Yet only 17 days before the race this touristic asset turned into a millstone which threatened to drag the event down. That was on March 11, when 200 people lost their lives in Madrid's Atocha railway station. Could something like that possibly happen again, so soon afterwards? So close?

Probably not, but no-one responsible for anything significant (like an internationally prestigious half marathon with a cast of thousands) can afford to take chances. Race director Carlos Moia, who has staged this race to great acclaim each year since 1991, would be the last person to gamble the future of his baby. The route to continued existence lies in total submission to the new world security order.



Portugal will be host to the European Cup (in Football/Soccer) this summer, so there was already a security regime in operation to monitor such issues. Carlos Moia himself confessed: "Even after 11 September, we didn't make security a really big issue. The bridge was always open until the last minute, and trains continued to run [on a tier just below the roadway] while the race went on. It wasn't like in London or [in the last few years] New York."

Moia had other concerns on the night before the race: it had rained relentlessly that day, and one of his honoured guests, the mayoress of a town upriver, had to pass up the invitation to attend in order to deal with the flood damage (another honoured invitee, Paul Tergat, had to pull out for completely unrelated reasons – a niggling calf injury). The heavens relented that night, and race day dawned bright and clear, yet still with some downpours.

Grey clouds banked up to the south of the race start, but the high-level Bridge was only hit by low-level sun. Even so, it was cold. Some of the elite runners were jogging around relentlessly for over an hour, others were content with a prolonged rest in the bus and a brief foray as a warm-up. All of them lined up right after the wheelchair athletes were sent on their way at 10:26.

The mass runners were brought forward behind them in perfect order. The scheduled start time was 10:30, but everyone had to wait on the word of Security. For those shivering runners, it was a long time in coming, and they were only released from their holding position at 10:39.

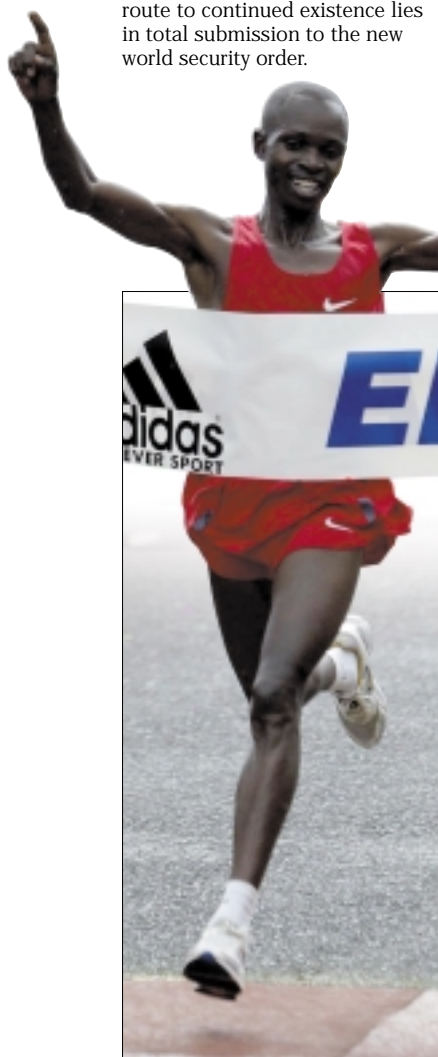
From the cosseted view of the lead car, it seemed as if the elite runners were slow to shake off their start-line lethargy. They passed 3km in a conservative 9:17 – but it was the warm-up to a windfall descent from bridge level to river level (a drop of 69m in 2km), and the lead group splits testified to the power of gravity:

2:47 followed by 2:29. Passing 5km in 14:26, a group of 25 or 30 runners were still intact. They turned upriver on the north bank of the Tagus, towards Lisbon's centre.

At the waterfront Praça de Comercio, just after 8km, runners are treated to a 2km diversion through the 'Baixa', the downtown grid of streets reconstructed in baroque style after Lisbon's catastrophic earthquake of 1755.

They get back to the Praça de Comercio at 10km, which the leaders – now a group of 18 – passed in 28:53. Continuing eastward, upriver, the turnaround comes just after 12km – wedged between the Santa Apollonia railway station on the inland side and the naval dockyard riverwards.

Retracing their steps back past Praça de Comercio, without the downtown diversion this time around, the leaders passed 14km in a group of 11 (40:13). From the eastern turnaround there had been a tailwind, but the pace was still impressive: consistently just under 2:50/km.





By 16km this punishment had left a group of seven, led by Rogers Rop's insistent pace.

At 18km the field passed back under the roadway of the 25 Abril Bridge, which now towered above. Still there were seven of them upfront, clicking along at 2:46/km. Past the pylons of the bridge, the leaders were now running alongside the 8km fun runners, who gave them fulsomely appreciative encouragement: they needed it, at this level of physical exertion.

The endgame was in sight as everyone chased westward: past

the Presidential Palace at Belem; past the ultimate finish line on the right, in front of the Emmanueline magnificence of the Jeronimos Monastery. They went on, past the monument honoring the heroic maritime Discoverers of 500 years ago. The second about-turn was taken right in front of the modernist Belem Cultural Centre, and the remaining three contenders screamed around the 180-degree turn and headed back towards their denouement.

Rogers Rop strode ahead to a well-deserved win. World Half Marathon champion Martin Lel



(who won his title here in Portugal) unfortunately collided with barricades in taking the final left-hand turn into the finish straight. Robert Cheruiyot followed him up in close contention, while World Marathon Champion Jaouad Gharib failed to make the podium.

The women's race was buried within the men's field but, perhaps because of that, it was more strategically contested. Margaret Okayo, winner in New York, was the race favourite - but she experienced back problems from the outset. Leah Malot took

MEN:

1	Rodgers ROP	KEN	59:49
2	Martin LEL	KEN	59:51
3	Robert CHERUIYOT	KEN	59:54
4	Jaouad GHARIB	MAR	59:56
5	Paul KOSGEI	KEN	59:58
6	Luke KIBET	KEN	1:00:00
7	Sammy KORIR	KEN	1:00:19
8	Charles KAMATHI	KEN	1:00:28
9	Richard YATICH	KEN	1:00:31
10	Tesfaye TOLA	ETH	1:00:52

WOMEN:

1	Joyce CHEPCHUMBA	KEN	1:08:09
2	Leah MALOT	KEN	1:09:35
3	Merima DENBOBA	ETH	1:09:36
4	Susan KURUI	KEN	1:11:10
5	Margaret OKAYO	KEN	1:12:19
6	Malgorzata SZOBANSKA	POL	1:13:39
7	Fatima SILVA	POR	1:13:54
8	Olga MACHADO	POR	1:14:46
9	Marisa BARROS	POR	1:14:50
10	Filipa COELHO	POR	1:15:11

up the running, along with Merima Denboba, while seasoned campaigner Joyce Chepchumba viewed the contest from behind. Only at 15km did she move forward, and then breezed past her opposition to gain 400m on her rivals by the race finish. Okayo bravely stayed the course to finish fifth, but was afterwards treated in hospital. Susan Korui improved her personal best by two minutes to take fourth place.

The races had been contested, and won. More important: the bridge had been successfully crossed, once again.