

Madrid moves on

Maraton Popular de Madrid, Spain. 25 April 2004

"What took place in Madrid (on 11 March 2004) is almost impossible to come to terms with" wrote Madrid Marathon Director Mauricio Blanco Villen in the race magazine. Blanco was referring to the bombing atrocity at Madrid's Atocha station, and elsewhere nearby, in which 191 people lost their lives and many hundreds more were injured.

At the time he wrote those words, the outrage was much more recent: "It leaves us stunned, with a void in the stomach", he wrote. On race day, although the bombing had happened only 45 days previously, Madrid had moved on.

"This city has been transformed, exchanging its proverbial gaiety for a cloak of sadness." Blanco had continued. As the organiser of one of Madrid's largest public festivals, he had good cause for concern.

One element of his concern was that Madrilenos, other Spaniards and foreigners alike, would withdraw into private grief and sympathy to the detriment of public expression, for which the marathon provides such a spectacular vehicle.

Others, perhaps further from the epicentre of the tragedy, were less sanguine. Precisely because a marathon is an unrestricted, public, city-wide event it attracted unparalleled support in the wake of the March 11 tragedy. The city put away its cloak and became transformed once again.

Thousands tried to sign up, and the entry had to be capped at 13,000 so that there would be enough race paraphernalia (medals, T-shirts, water etc.) to go around. Anyone applying for a race entry after the limit had been reached had to wait, like theatregoing enthusiasts, for a "return" at the race expo



box office, so that the race number and chip could be reassigned. Of the 13,000 who entered in the preceding weeks and months, 12,758 crossed the start line.

"Together with music, sport is the best means of understanding between languages, races, cultures and ideologies," Blanco had written. "The Maraton Popular de Madrid and its participants perfectly represent human diversity with a unified purpose.

We will unite in remembering the victims and those affected by the tragedy without other motives. A minute's silence on the start line will be the only ceremony, together with the individual tributes of runners crossing the finish line, arms held aloft to the sky. Peace – and life!"

As it was written, so it came to pass. The night before the race was a normal Saturday night in Madrid. Tens of thousands thronged the city centre's streets on the first really warm evening of the year. To an outsider, there was no scent of threat or sadness in the air. The daily routine in Spain, of a late lunch and siesta, and a very late bite to eat in the evening, means that people are on the street until well into the early morning. Then

they probably sleep, which means that the pressure to keep roads open to vehicular traffic on a Sunday morning is not so great in Spanish cities as it may be elsewhere.

How else to explain the all-encompassing marathon route that threads its way around all sides of the city? The start line lies at one of the main city intersections, the Cibeles Fountain, and finishes at a similarly crucial nerve centre, the Neptune Fountain beside the Prado Museum.

The nerves may have been agitated at the start, but a succession of parachute jumpers, landing directly in front of the gathered runners provided distraction before the signal sent them on their way. In fact there were

many signals. With runners engaged in ritual pre-race banter, the assigned minute took some time to descend into absolute silence. When it did, it had a powerful impact. It was broken by the sound of doves' wings flapping, as they flew skyward from in front of the start line. No one could count, but anyone would guess that there were 191 of them.

There was no gun. As if by common agreement – unity among diversity – the record number of starters headed north up – gently up, but up nonetheless - the grand Paseo de Recoletos and Paseo de la Castellana. This first section is a 5km pilgrimage, and after slight bends in





the road in the first 2km the 5km point becomes tauntingly visible, marked by twin leaning tower blocks on the far side of the Plaza Castilla. Any impatience runners may have in putting this first landmark behind them is likely, at 700m altitude, to rebound upon their efforts later in the race.

Doubling back just beyond the 5km point, runners complete a short loop to the west to reach the 10km point as they pass back over the Paseo de la Castellana on an overpass. They complete a loop to the east next, which incorporates several

intricate turns and ups and downs, testing to any runner's rhythm. The 16km point lies on the north side of Retiro Park, only a stone's throw from the start. Runners then turn north again, parallel to the first kilometre of the course, and cross back, westward, over the Paseo de la Castellana for a second time at 17km - heading towards the heart of the city.

A few long, wide straights between 18-20km left runners exposed to the growing strength of the sun. Following that balmy first night of summer the day had dawned fresh, but as the sun rose and strengthened it correspondingly weakened the runners.



City centres like to show their age, and they wear their cobbled streets with pride. Leading up to the 20km point, just before crossing Madrid's central artery, Gran Via, the road narrows and the surface becomes cobbled. Cheering spectators packed in close on either side. Across Gran Via the route continues down to burst into the Plaza of the Puerta del Sol before again channelling into the narrow, cobbled Calle Mayor. This is the halfway point, with the Plaza Mayor lies just a block away to the left.

Leaving the densest crowds behind, a little further on the course turns north past the imposing façade of the Palacio Real and the palace gardens. Near-complete laps remain to be run to the north west (22-29km) and on the other side of the Manzanares River (29-33km). Finally departing the banks of the River after 37km, it is a long hard battle to crest the high ground upon which the centre of Madrid stands. By-passing it slightly, to the south of the Plaza Mayor, brings runners swooping down a final slope to pass in front of Atocha Station.

There was no time to think of what had passed here a few short weeks before, and which has since been marked by individual, informal tributes

MEN:

1	Joseph KAHUGU	KEN	2:15:14
2	My Tahar ECHCHADLI	MAR	2:18:41
3	Elias CHEBET	KEN	2:20:12
4	Isaac MACHARIA	KEN	2:20:30
5	John MURTO	KEN	2:21:57
6	Jose Ramon PEANILLA	ESP	2:24:19
7	Jose Antonio ABREJAS	ESP	2:28:11
8	Javier BARRANTES	CRC	2:28:53
9	Francisco OLMO MORA	ESP	2:29:10
10	Manuel ANTA MIGUEL	ESP	2:29:39

WOMEN:

1	Florence BARSOSIO	KEN	2:34:10
2	Luna GARCIA MIGUEL	ESP	3:02:08
3	Piedad RODRIGUEZ	ESP	3:05:46
4	Elena Maria ESPESO	ESP	3:07:00
5	Noelia MANSILLA	ESP	3:07:41

posted around a temple-like structure serving as the entrance hall to the Metro.

Runners were now within 800m of their goal. With the Botanical Gardens to their right, then the Prado Museum, they pushed up the Paseo del Prado between the tall avenue of trees, and through the sponsors' inflatable arches that spanned the roadway.

First to finish was Joseph Kahugu, a 2.07 performer who looked easy all the way around while others fell further and further behind him in the second half of the race. Even more isolated from her competition was Florence Barsosio. Last seen in Europe finishing a close second in the 2001 Paris Marathon to Ruth Kutol, she has subsequently given birth, and this was her first serious competition since. She celebrated the new life in style, by breaking Kutol's course record of last year with 2:34:10, under trying conditions.

Behind her - she finished 15th overall - runners came home in increasing number. As they approached the finish line in the final metres many of them made those personal gestures of satisfaction and celebration. Here they had added significance. They were a celebration of the resilience of human life under testing circumstances. Madrid had moved on.

