

Mumbai dreams

Standard Chartered Mumbai International Marathon, India. 15 February 2004

By Richard Nerurkar

It could have been a nightmare: "I'm not a runner, I'm a sprinter" protested the great Michael Johnson after the marathon finish, as he was led, arm being gently twisted, to the start line of the 7km Dream Run. Such was the drive of the race organisers. They uncompromisingly sought maximum glitz and hype for India's first serious attempt at a big-city mass-participation running event.

No one could blame them: cricket, and in particular the prospect of India playing against Pakistan again, dominate the sports headlines in this city of 16 million souls. Only a huge splash

can divert attention, which is precisely what race promoters Procram International achieved. A profusion of big names from the world of sport, media and business signed up for the competition. Mumbai came to a halt for a running event which attracted more than 20,000 participants, competing over three race distances.

After Hong Kong, Singapore and Nairobi, Mumbai has now become the fourth big-city marathon sponsored by Standard Chartered, with the Hong Kong race taking place only one week earlier. The tie-up with Procram was a natural choice.

They had recently staged the Mr. Universe contest in Mumbai and have a knack for putting together big-hype events. No

fewer than thirteen other sponsors were involved, many of them keen to throw their own pre-race promotional events. ESPN Star had been running daily TV "Run Mumbai" commercials for 25 days prior to the competition.

The Times of India's countdown lasted twice that long. In the week before the race a nightly hour-long promotional laser display was projected onto the face of the Air India skyscraper, visible for miles around. On race day more than 1000 sponsors' billboards were spread along the course. Then there were the "thank you for running Mumbai" messages which went up within hours of the event finishing.

'Hype' does not best describe my appearance in Mumbai, but my father was born there and the organisers enthusiastically publicised my Indian roots. Many of my relatives still live here. I know the city mainly from a college vacation spent with family 20 years ago, which had been followed seven years later by a short 'victory tour' in Mumbai after I had won the 5000m at the 1991 New Delhi ITC track meet. On this trip I came from my present home in Addis Ababa with a posse of Ethiopian runners who were taking part in the marathon.

A long section of the course stretches along the impressive sweep of Marine Drive, known as the 'Queen's Necklace', which overlooks the Arabian Sea. In the weeks leading up to the race the numbers of locals out walking or jogging along the esplanade in preparation for the competition had swelled into their thousands.

I started race day by heading to the top of the Air India tower at one end of Marine Drive. We did the live TV commentary from there, and the breeze atop the 22-storey building disguised the high humidity faced by the 4,000 marathon and half-marathon runners, as they started out when darkness lifted soon after seven o'clock.

One of Mumbai's big parks, the Azad Maidan - which for most days of the year houses 22 cricket pitches - was the assembly area for race participants. The backdrop for the start itself was the magnificent Victorian Gothic building of the Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus, the headquarters of Mumbai's rail network. Formerly known as the Victoria Terminus, the name change is an example of how Mumbai is seeking to impose its own history on some of its grand colonial buildings.

An hour and a quarter later, the half-marathon runners were back

at the finish giving the spectators lots to cheer about, since this race was being staged primarily to foster home-grown talent. Judging by the determination shown by one young runner, who was lifted onto the shoulders of a TV commentator as he sprinted across the line, we may have to wait a few years to discover just how good that talent might become.

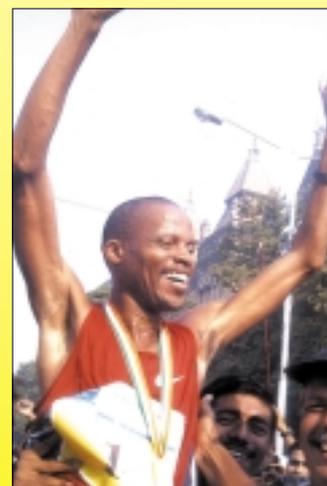
Around 40 overseas elite athletes, mainly from Africa, were the big draws in the marathon event - with \$210,000 prize money on offer, the race organisers were keen to boast that this was the biggest prize purse ever for a race in Asia. In the men's race, 32 year-old South African law graduate Hendrik Ramaala, who holds a marathon best of 2:08:58 and a 10km PB of 27:29, won his first international marathon.

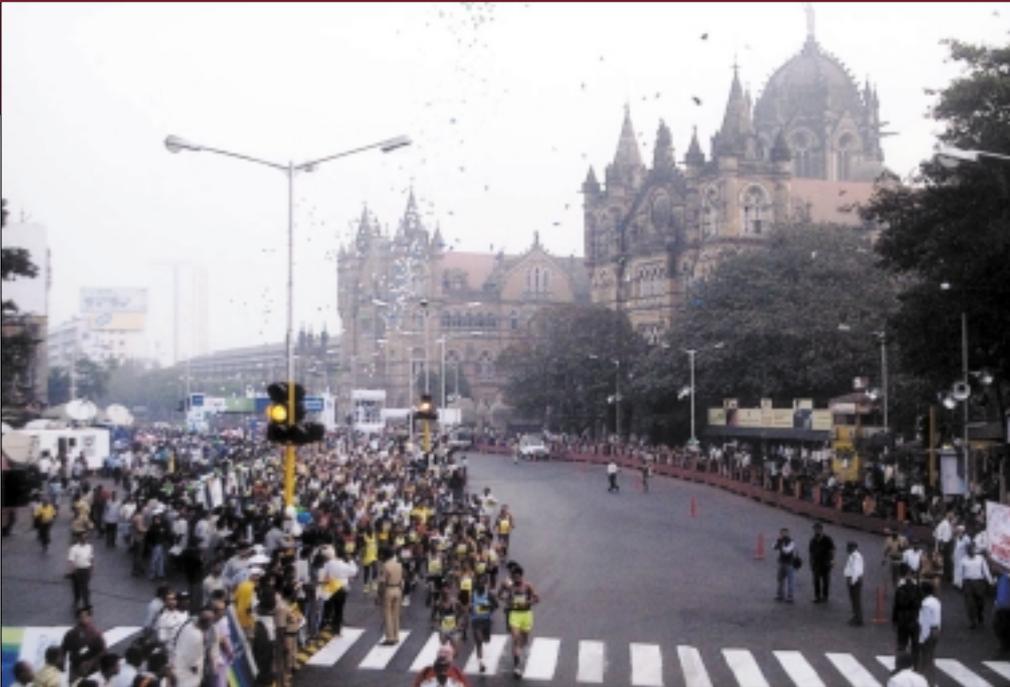
He waited until the final incline on the course, at 34km, to make his winning move. The modest finishing time hides the impressive nature of his victory - on a similar course and in conditions that runners are likely to encounter at the Athens Olympic Marathon in August.

Ramaala, who had already been selected for the Olympic team, confirmed his reason for wanting to run here: "the conditions were tough, and the course was not easy, so winning here is a great confidence boost for Athens," he said afterwards.

In the women's division, Violetta Uryga of Poland, running in her 28th marathon, took advantage of a marshalling error, when three African runners were leading, to claim the 11th title of her long career, coming home ahead of other eastern European opposition.

At the finish the main challenge both for the runners and the officials was finding a way of separating the faster-finishing





marathon runners from the slower half-marathon participants. The two-races-in-one format was designed more for the benefit of the large crowds of spectators around the two-lap course who were kept entertained throughout the entire morning.

As Ramaala led the procession of elite male athletes across the finish line, I jumped out of the commentary box and jogged down to the start area.

The 7km Dream Run was about to start itself, so great was the pressure of thousands of first-

time participants bearing down on the wall of officials near the start line. There was just time for photographers and cameramen to get a few more start line shots of the two Michaels, Johnson and Powell, before the horn went and the mass run got underway. I was too near to the front to see exactly

MEN:			
1	Hendrick RAMAALA	RSA	2:15:47
2	Julius SUGUT	KEN	2:16:36
3	Luician HAMBO	TAN	2:16:50
4	Benjamin MATOLO	KEN	2:17:01
5	John MUTAI	KEN	2:17:05
6	Getuli BAYO	ETH	2:17:42
7	Patrick CHUMBA	KEN	2:17:56
8	James KARANJA	KEN	2:19:07
9	Simon BIWOTT	KEN	2:19:09
10	Eshetu BEKELE	ETH	2:19:30
WOMEN:			
1	Wioletta URYGA	POL	2:47:53
2	Judit FOLDINGNE NAGY	HUN	2:49:50
3	Natalya GALUSHKO	BLR	2:50:24
4	Tausi SAID	TAN	2:50:40
5	Tatyana MIRONOVA	RUS	2:50:44
6	Angelina SEPHOOA	RSA	2:52:20
7	Olga LOGINOVA	RUS	2:52:54
8	Sara MAYA	TAN	2:53:47
9	Jennifer CHESINON	KEN	2:58:00
10	Sarah MAHLUNGU	RSA	2:58:41
HALF MARATHON:			
MEN:			
1	Raj KUMAR	IND	1:15:36
WOMEN:			
1	Srabjit KAUR	IND	1:24:39

how far down the road these two athletic giants reached. However far they got, their presence - and the participation of several Bollywood stars in India's first experiment in major league marathons created enough impact. Cricket was knocked for six; off the headlines for this particular Sunday in Mumbai. That's no small achievement in India.