

Paris in the Spring

Marathon de Paris, France. 4 April 2004

There can be few more impressive sights in the running world than 30,000 people streaming down the Champs Elysées, with the Arc de Triomphe behind, in brilliant Spring sunshine.

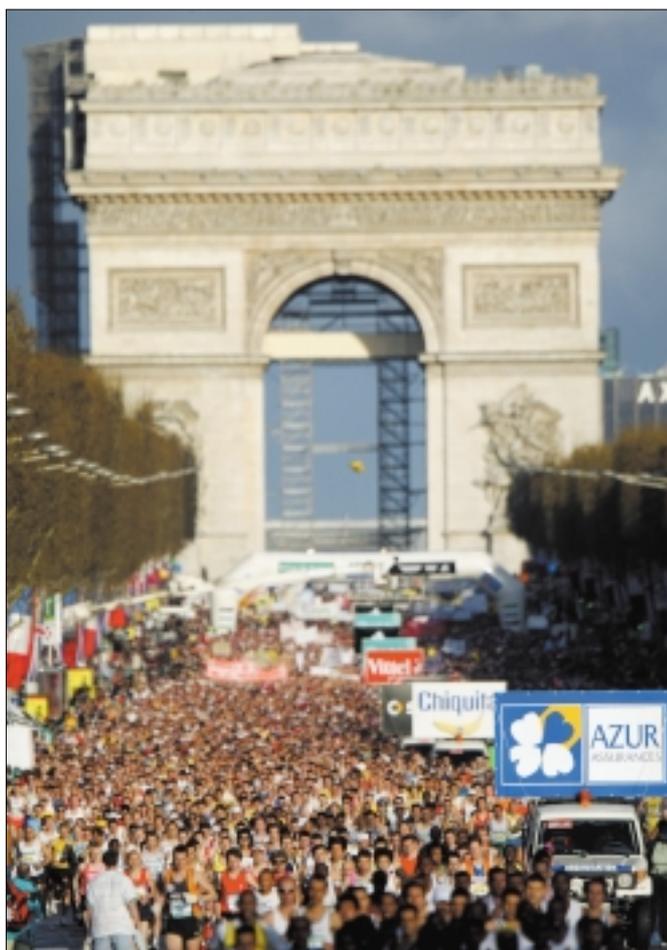
The 25m wide boulevard may have been built more with military parades in mind, but the human festival that the Paris Marathon provides is the perfect event for the setting. The only things on wheels that are moving are a few lead vehicles - and the racing wheelchairs.

With the downsweep of the road, the speed of the first kilometre is impressive. The wheelchair athletes keep their heads aerodynamically bent low as they push hard down on the rims of their chair wheels. They probably miss the grand perspective view of the Place de la Concorde, the Jardin des Tuilleries and the Musée du Louvre.

The runners, and particularly the mass runners, have more time to get a better look. It took them 22 minutes to file past the 1km point (the front runners reached there within 3 minutes).

A quarter of all the runners in this year's race were from outside France. Eighty countries were represented, but a quarter of all the foreign runners were from Britain. This year the Champs Elysées was lined every few metres with huge flags, British and French together, in honour of the impending centenary celebration of the Entente Cordiale.

Even without all the ceremony, running Paris in the Spring is a



great thing to do. For a long time the city had no footrace worthy of such a magnificent setting, even though this year was the 28th running of the Paris Marathon. It started off in 1977 with only 87 finishers. The early running boom years, 1979-81, saw numbers leap from 2000, to 5000, to 7000. Then they stabilised. In 1991 squabbling among the organisers led to cancellation of the marathon.

Over the last 10 years there has been renewed growth in participation. Now, under the management of the same event

organisation as the Tour de France, this race is right up there with the world leaders like London, Berlin, Chicago and New York. The Marathon expo grows year by year; the city sports marathon posters at every bus stop; the number of finishers is around the 30,000 mark; and world-leading performances are set on the scenic city centre course (four men ran under 2:07 in 2003).

With the start right in the centre of the city it is a simple business to walk there from any of a dozen metro stations within range. The finish lies only a kilometre away, the end point of a dumbbell-shaped circumnavigation of the City of Paris and the two parks to east and

west: the Bois de Vincennes and the Bois de Boulogne.

The two running corridors connecting the Parks, on which runners first go east, then return west, take in some of the best known sites in Paris. After sweeping through the Place de la Concorde runners file down the Rue de Rivoli, with the ritzy Place Vendôme on the left, and beyond it, the Opéra.

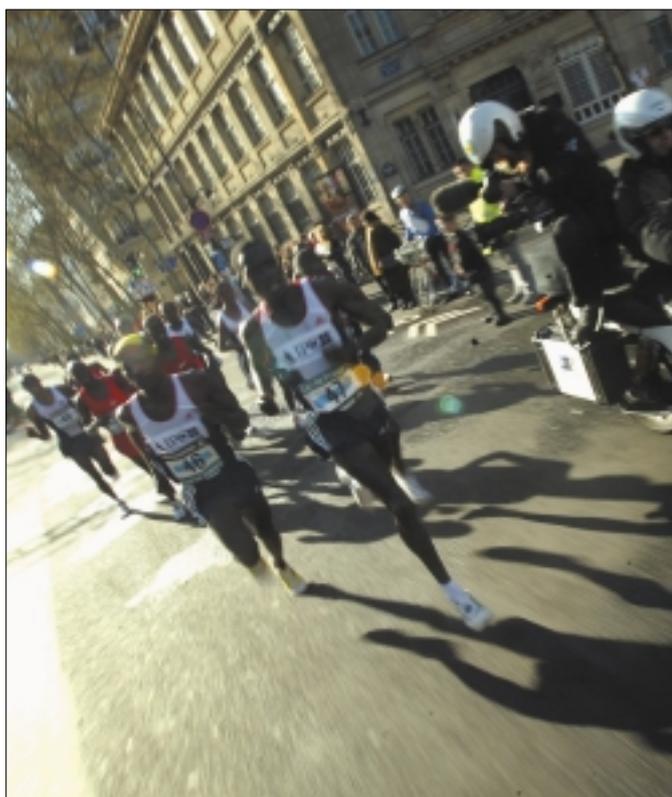
The ornate Hôtel de Ville lies on the right, just before 5km have elapsed. On through the Place de la Bastille, always eastward, the limits of the Ville de Paris are reached at 10km, on entering the Bois de Vincennes. A sign placed there helpfully announces: "*Courage: only 32km to go*".

A comprehensive zig-zagging tour of the Bois means that runners only emerge from it, now heading westward, at the halfway point. From here the route shows another side of the city as it passes through an industrial area on the way back to the Place de la Bastille.

Only a kilometre further on, at 25km, runners descend on to the roadway that runs right along the north bank of the River Seine. The course then follows the long, sweeping bend in the river that defines the artistically renowned Rive Gauche.

From the Cathedral of Notre Dame, along past the National Assembly building and the Eiffel Tower, the road ducks and dives under a succession of underpasses where bridges pass over the top. The continued small descents and ascents test runners continually, as does the westerly wind, until 32km. Then the route turns away from the river, further west, towards the Bois de Boulogne.

It took until this far for either race to shape up into a contest between



obvious contenders. Among the women, debutante Salina Kosgei strode away from Aisha Gigi after 31km, and looked like a comfortable winner all the way home. She reached there in 2:24:32 - impressive in comparison to the men's times.

Maybe because of the comparatively slower pace, the men's race took even longer to take shape. There were eight men still together at 31km, and four remained at 37km as they entered the Bois de Boulogne: race favourite Raymond Kipkoech, Ambesa Tolosa, Paul Biwott and Robert Cheruiyot.

Around the back of the Hippodrome d'Auteil, at 38km, Tolosa accelerated. Only Kipkoech could keep pace - but not for long. Tolosa was 30m clear by 39km; he had 100m by 40km, and led by nearly 400m at the finish line. It was an emphatic win.

The Bois de Boulogne provides an almost rural aspect to the final few kilometres. Bucolic woods, flower beds and ornamental ponds lie to either side, while

MEN:			
1	Ambesa TOLOSA	ETH	2:08:56
2	Raymond KIPKOECH	KEN	2:10:08
3	Paul BIWOTT	KEN	2:10:30
4	Gashaw MELESE	ETH	2:10:36
5	Robert CHERUIYOT	KEN	2:10:38
6	Marilson DOS SANTOS	BRA	2:12:22
7	Jacob LOSIAN	KEN	2:12:35
8	Hakim BAGY	FRA	2:13:12
9	Said BELHOUT		2:13:37
10	Henry TARUS	KEN	2:13:55
WOMEN:			
1	Salina KOSGEI	KEN	2:24:32
2	Asha GIGI	ETH	2:26:05
3	Corinne RAUX	FRA	2:29:19
4	Larisa ZYUSKO	RUS	2:29:30
5	Olga KOVPOTINA	RUS	2:29:56
6	Beata RAKONCZAI	HUN	2:30:36
7	Beatrice ROS	FRA	2:30:43
8	Yunilesh BEKELE	ETH	2:35:57
9	Nilli ABRAMSKI	ISR	2:36:36
10	Judit NAGY	HUN	2:38:51

spectators are comparatively sparse on the ground. It is almost a shock to take the turn around the *rond-point* at the Porte Dauphine, back into the Ville de Paris, and find yourself on the grandiloquent finishing straight of the Avenue Foch, with only 200m to run.

Further up the road, beyond the finish line, is the Arc de Triomphe. Its grandiose physical presence presides over the occasion as, behind the race leaders, many thousands of runners live out their own personal triumphs. For a great many of them, Spring is in their step as well as in the air.