

Journey of many thousand steps

Great Wall Marathon, China. 22 May 2004

By Alison Kay

Confucius could have said that every journey ends with a single step. The best thing about a marathon is very often that final step across the finish line.

In the Great Wall Marathon the relief felt on completing one of the toughest marathons in the world may be less intense than the experiences to be had en route. No other marathon offers a course that includes all surfaces from paved road to goat track - and includes 3760 steps in each direction.

This is an adventure marathon - the highlight of a package tour that has become a speciality of Danish company, Albatros Travel. It begins and ends by the small village of Huangyaguan in China's Tianjin province, a couple of hours drive from Beijing.

Five hundred runners from 30 countries travelled here for the fifth edition of the race, about half of them opting for the full marathon.

Runners visit the main parts of the course a few days before the event. This includes a leisurely walk on the 3.2km section of wall that they will soon be running over. For the moment runners can take their time to enjoy the breathtaking valley views and marvel at the engineering feat that is the Wall.

They can also mentally prepare themselves for the run itself: the step heights which vary from a few centimetres to knee-height; the roughly paved surfaces on the wall; and the goat track pathways as they come off the wall.

There are places where it is impossible to overtake. Finishing times cannot be compared with other marathons.

Runners receive a detailed description of the marathon route. This is one of Albatros Travel's specialties. The company's course description makes entertaining reading even to an armchair runner, as it was for last year's Great Tibetan Marathon.

The marathon starts and finishes at Yin Yang Square, inside a Great Wall fort at Huangyaguan. The climb up to the Wall begins after a mere 800m of flat road. The next stretch is 4.5km uphill on a steep - but sealed - mountain road.

The Wall in this region was built during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and some 629km have been restored and opened to visitors.

On the 3.2km stretch crossed by runners (5km, 10km and half marathon runners do this in one direction, marathon runners in both directions), there are 10 watchtowers, with another five around the fort. Construction is of cut-stone exterior shells filled with packed earth and gravel.

The battlements are topped with brick. The ground is paved stone with rain furrows cut across for drainage. (Runners are warned to watch their ankles and organisers mark the drainage channels with white paint).

While most towers are simply numbered, some have names. No explanation is given in the runners' description, but it is possible to guess why the Widow Tower is so named.

It lies near the highest point of the marathon with the ground dropping sharply away on both sides.

The course description advises: "Runners must cross this stretch in single file. Therefore, no overtaking! For quite a while there will be no wall on your left hand side - that means a free fall."

Further on runners find themselves again in single file on a narrow goat path. "Even though the route is swept, there is still a risk of stumbling over loose pebbles - so watch out carefully but be sure to also enjoy the magnificent view.

"From here you can see a river, which you will pass later on and you will also be able to see the finishing area of the fort, so there is something to look forward to. The goat path changes from dirt and clay back to the Wall path made of bricks."

Once down off the wall, runners pass around the top of the fort, above Yin Yang Square and past a Chinese maze and garden, eventually reaching a T-junction on the Wall.

They turn right here: "We probably won't see you later today if you go left, as this stretch on the Wall runs back towards Beijing for the next 55km."

On completing the circuit of the fort, runners return to the section of flat road on which they started out. This time they branch off on an unpaved road to pass through villages, farmland and around a dam before returning to the wall for the second assault.

"You are running along quite close to an irrigation canal. Allow yourself a moment to look at this interesting means of agricultural improvement.

"Later on you will be running along the river and you might see a lot of people and tractors in the riverbed. They look as if they are dredging the river but in fact they are gathering the local building materials, gravel and sand, from the riverbed."

Crossing the river, runners pass through Duanzhuang village heading towards Xiaying village. Roads are dirt and dust and pass very close to village homes where residents don't see many foreigners, let alone a whole bunch of foreign runners.

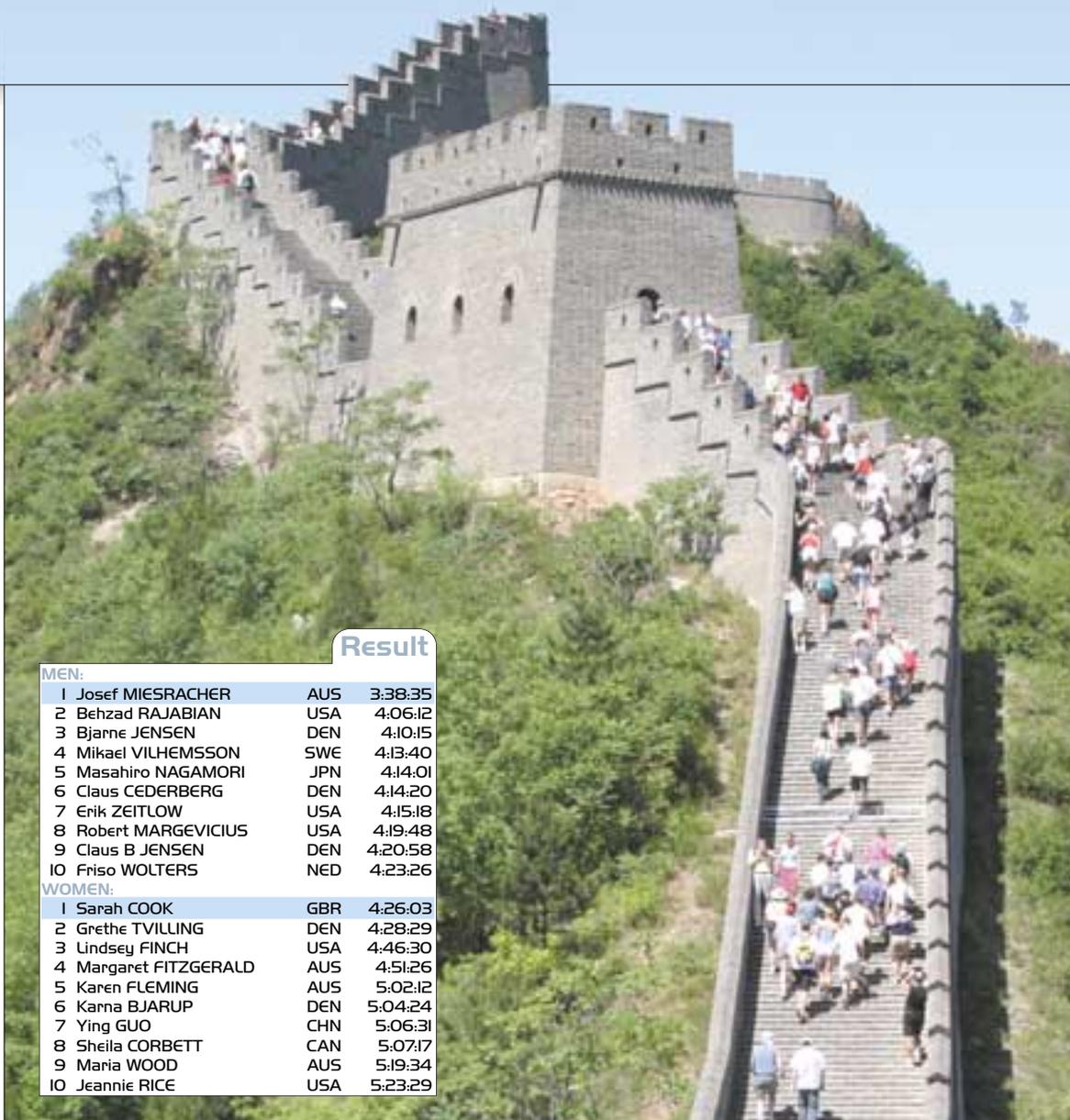


From Xiaying runners rejoin the main road and can appreciate how easy it is to take steps upon its smooth surface. Poplar trees on both sides provide shade and the view is of orchards and fields with mountains in the distance to the north. Despite the heat, this is pleasant running.

Next focus is the dam, which stores the area's water, and Qingshanling village where many farmers supplement their income with agro-tourism. Small hostels with colourful signs welcome tourists from Beijing and Tianjin. Solar panels on the roofs provide people with some of their electricity and all of their hot water.

By now marathon runners are over half way and heading for Chedaoyu village, on the way back to Duanzhuang. "As we pass the greenhouses and run along the vineyards, the going gets a bit tougher. Watch your step as this section of dirt road does not see much traffic and is very uneven with lots of holes, rocks and loose stones. It can only be driven by tractor, motorcycle or jeep."

From Duanzhuang, the route becomes familiar to runners. They return along the main road back to Huangyaguan, around the Great Wall fort, and back up to the Wall. Then come those 3,760 steps, again, back along the Wall. Descending the steep mountain road, the final step is taken over the finish line at Yin Yang Square.



Result

MEN:			
1	Josef MIESRACHER	AUS	3:38:35
2	Behzad RAJABIAN	USA	4:06:12
3	Bjarne JENSEN	DEN	4:10:15
4	Mikael VILHEMSSON	SWE	4:13:40
5	Masahiro NAGAMORI	JPN	4:14:01
6	Claus CEDERBERG	DEN	4:14:20
7	Erik ZEITLOW	USA	4:15:18
8	Robert MARGEVICIUS	USA	4:19:48
9	Claus B JENSEN	DEN	4:20:58
10	Friso WOLTERS	NED	4:23:26
WOMEN:			
1	Sarah COOK	GBR	4:26:03
2	Grethe TVILLING	DEN	4:28:29
3	Lindsey FINCH	USA	4:46:30
4	Margaret FITZGERALD	AUS	4:51:26
5	Karen FLEMING	AUS	5:02:12
6	Karna BJARUP	DEN	5:04:24
7	Ying GUO	CHN	5:06:31
8	Sheila CORBETT	CAN	5:07:17
9	Maria WOOD	AUS	5:19:34
10	Jeannie RICE	USA	5:23:29

