

A summer city symphony

Helsinki City Marathon, Finland. 21 August 2004

By Arja Kangasharju

The sun is shining and the sky is bright and almost cloudless. You can hear music enveloping Helsinki's Olympic stadium. A symphony of movement is about to begin. Every now and then resounds the voice of a well-known Finnish sports commentator.

It is the prelude. He gently encourages the runners and gives out advice and instructions. Those assembled here are preparing to triumph over themselves, by running around the extremely beautiful summer-city of Helsinki. Ahead of them is a route which will try both their physical and mental power - the route of the marathon.

Some runners take some steps on the stage of the 1952 Olympic stadium. Some of them take part in guided stretching routines. The pulse begins to rise, though the race hasn't yet started. At least part of it is our nerves: this has been the target; this is what we've so eagerly awaited.

The movement begins in earnest, as almost 7000 runners flow away from the start. The audience is wildly encouraging. The route turns beside the park area towards the Finnish National Opera house.

The sun is dimly visible through the light-green leaves of the limes. The tower of the National Museum is faintly seen on the horizon in the front of us when we wander in thick mass along the Mannerhemintie, the main street of Helsinki. Applause, shouting and drumming follow our progress. Even amateurs feel themselves heroes because of those encouraging yells.

In the light of the late afternoon sun we pass by green parks on our way to the 6.5km drinks station. The coast of the Baltic Sea greets us with its



deep blueness. From the sea comes a gentle movement of wind, which accompanies us on our way through the most beautiful parts of Helsinki: Munkkiniemi, Kuusisaari and Lehtisaari. The audience sits in picnic groups, and greets us by raising their glasses and drinking to our health. Already 10km of the course lies behind us.

The boats are sailing in the sea, which glitters in the sun. You can feel the peace of the Northern summer all around you, as we progress around an archipelago of connected islands in the bay. Running through the island of Lautaasaari we arrive at the halfway point. Refreshments and drinks are offered again. It's time to meet the eager audience of Kaivopuisto seaside park.

We crest the highest point of a hill at 23km, and can enjoy a wonderful view of the Baltic Sea. The fortress of the Finnish Castle, guarding the city of Helsinki, stands proud from the old days. The white painted ferries ply in the blue sea side by side with the

sailing boats.

From this idyll we plunge into the rumble of the Esplanade. The park boulevard is filled by a rowdy audience. The atmosphere is dizzying. The race festival has taken hold of the citizens of Helsinki.

We now begin our way back to the stadium, but the return route is a little different. Our steps are already tired, and our numbers have thinned out by the time we pass over the Lautaasaari bridge at 30km. Only a few have strength enough to enjoy the gallant armada of motor boats on the seashore of the Baltic Sea. The wooden bridge of Kaskisaari island rumbles under our feet. We pass by an area of luxurious housing before plunging into the parks of Lehtisaari island. The sandy path feels good under our feet after the hard asphalt.

Only 10 km to the finale! Our steps gather new spirit. Not even the uphill feel bad, because the stadium is so near. Only a fluttering variation through the modern suburbs of Pikku

Huopalahti, diverts us for a while. Then we are back in Mannerhemintie and before long the white tower of the Olympic Stadium stands ahead of us. We are no longer tired. "Go on", screams the audience. There's no better feeling than running through the Marathon gate and into the stadium.

Behind us and in our memories lie the most beautiful views of Helsinki; the gardens and parks and the lustrous Baltic Sea, which has kept continuous company with us throughout our progress. It was music to our souls.

Next year the Helsinki City Marathon takes place 5 August 2005, the day before the IAAF World Championships in Athletics starts in Helsinki.

■ For more information about Helsinki City Marathon:
www.helsinki2005.fi

■ For information about IAAF World Championships in Athletics Helsinki 2005:
www.helsinki2005.fi

Result

MEN

1	Dmitry KONDRASHOV	RUS	2:21:24
2	Vener KASHEYEV	RUS	2:21:28
3	Alexey VESELOV	RUS	2:22:12
4	Mostafa ERREBAH	ITA	2:23:19
5	Giorgio CALCATERRA	ITA	2:29:05
6	Lauri FRIARI	FIN	2:32:16
7	Daniel KIPCHERU	KEN	2:36:11
8	Urs JENZER	SUI	2:38:45
9	Uzun BULENT	TUR	2:40:36
10	Joseph MUTINDA	KEN	2:41:19

WOMEN

1	Jennifer LOTIYWO	KEN	2:57:26
2	Martina SALOMONSSON	SWE	2:57:50
3	Pauliina TOMMOLA	FIN	2:59:26
4	Minna KAINLAURI	FIN	3:01:53
5	Maija ANTILA	FIN	3:05:57
6	Marietta KIIIO	KEN	3:12:53
7	Heidi HAAPASALO	FIN	3:13:24
8	Gerrie GROBLER	FIN	3:19:01
9	Ira SIPPONEN	FIN	3:19:38
10	Hanna JARVINEN	FIN	3:19:41

