

Go find it on the mountain

Kilimanjaro Marathon, Tanzania. 27 February 2005

By Larry Lombaard

Imagine being up in the clouds one day, summiting Africa's highest peak in sub-zero temperatures, and next day coming right down to earth to run a marathon on the Tanzanian plains. Mike Forshaw scaled the snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro in a mercurial three days, then after a day's rest won the veteran's title in the gruelling Kilimanjaro Marathon.

Climbers normally take six days to do the return trip up Mount Kilimanjaro (5895m). Forshaw took the toughest route over Arrow Glacier to summit in three days, with one more day to descend. After a day's rest he ran 3:23 to finish first veteran in what must rate as one of the toughest marathons in Africa.

A measure of the testing course was John Chichir's winning time of over 2:20. Like Forshaw, Chichir saved his best for last in an extremely fast finish on the rollercoaster downhill over the final 10km that ripped the pack apart and broke compatriot Robert Komeni's challenge as he followed in 100m behind.

The "Kili" Marathon is run mostly on the dusty plain that spreads out beneath the treeline of Africa's greatest mountain. The route returns after 8km on the busy Dar es Salaam road into the little town Moshi, which nestles in a bowl-like valley. Then comes a gruelling 18km climb straight into the dramatic upward thrust of the snow-capped mountain against the blue of the African sky. The route was lined with quick laughter and friendly local encouragement as temperatures soared into the high 30s. Here the marathon leaders mingled with the half marathon stragglers on the downward journey to the finish.

Tanzania's Thomas Ngulu put in a courageous attempt to win his country's major marathon, but a group of four Kenyans dominated in the early stages and Ngulu excelled to come through for third



place. Fellow countryman Francis Naali followed him in.

"It was a hard race," said Chichir afterwards. "The same effort on a flat sea-level course would be six or seven minutes faster, but that's what is great about this race. It's beneath Mount Kilimanjaro, so it must have its own character. It mustn't be easy."

The Tanzanians showed that they are cast from the same Rift Valley mould as their Kenyan and Ethiopian running counterparts despite the fact that they don't enjoy the same athletic infrastructure. Local potential shone in Alex Baha, sixth, and Peter Bura, eighth. Tanzanian women filled the top placings behind the Kenyan winner Emily Cheptuya.

"You can only imagine how good these Tanzanians could be if they had the same track and cross country background as that enjoyed by the Kenyans and Ethiopians," said Willie Davids of Cape Town who has been the technical co-ordinator of the

Kilimanjaro Marathon for three years. Tanzania has a dusty track in Dar Es Salaam and another rock-hard oval at the Co-operative College in Moshi, the start and finish venue for the "Kili" marathon, half marathon and 5km fun run. "Tanzanian runners come straight onto the road, so there is very little in terms of developing young distance runners with track speed," said Davids.

While the challenge for the Tanzanians is to keep up with their neighbours, other participants came for different reasons. Daniel Head was on a mission to discover why people from different cultures run marathons. He had run in Australia, Athens, Egypt and Denmark in the past few months - and now Tanzania. He linked up with marathon novice Serena Simonson five kilometres into the run, while I ran alongside eavesdropping. Beneath the snow-capped majesty of Mount Kilimanjaro we slogged our way uphill through the searing heat as the road wound through bright green coffee plantations.

Both American university graduates, Daniel and Serena discovered much to chat about but Daniel couldn't yet explain the secret of why people run marathons. The closest explanation that I have heard came many years ago, from a serial ultrarunner. When asked "why?" by someone with wide eyes and gaping jaw he simply guffawed: "Cos I can!" Heading for 26km, Daniel was saving his talking breath for running. Serena

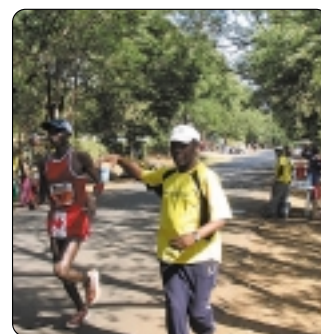
still had spring in her step, but confessed that the furthest she had run before race day was 20km.

Spectators formed a massive horseshoe at the 32km turning point. I tapped into old-time muscle memory for the downhill and at 34km Serena was right there, toe-running her maiden marathon and already 16km into her very own no-man's land. At 36km she let out a squeal and lurched as the bear suddenly grabbed at her heels. I urged her to gulp Coke at the drinks table because she'd only been taking water the whole way. Her family and friends had been along the route, flushed as much with excitement as the heat, egging their 24-year-old novice heroine on. At 40km she felt the wind beneath her wings. By the time she hit the dusty track in Moshi it had become her own personal Olympic stadium as she ran into the excited embrace of family and friends.

Daniel followed soon after, and I had the cheek to ask him: "So why do people run the marathon?" "He leaned over in pain and shook his head. "No idea," he said. "I think I know," said Serena. Her eyes glistened with tears as she swallowed at a lump in her throat.

Climbing Mount Kilimanjaro

Many runners remained in Tanzania to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, as part of the Wild Frontiers expedition.



Results:

MEN:

1	Tubia John CHIRCHIR	KEN	2:20:23
2	Robert KOMENI	KEN	2:20:48
3	Thomas NGULU	TAN	2:21:57
4	Francis NAAI	TAN	2:23:29
5	John CHERUTICH	KEN	2:23:54
6	Alex BAH	TAN	2:24:24
7	Wilson PKORKOR	KEN	2:25:45
8	Peter BURA	TAN	2:26:38
9	Luka KIPTOO	KEN	2:26:57
10	Onesma ORANDI	TAN	2:27:33

WOMEN:

1	Emily CHEPTUYA	KEN	2:52:11
2	Sara MARJA	TAN	2:54:52
3	Monika SAWILA	TAN	2:59:05
4	Fatuma NINGA	TAN	3:18:17
5	Flora KAGAZI	TAN	3:20:16

