

Beach life

Meia Maratona de Rio de Janeiro. 5 September 2004.

Contrary to every foreigner's exotic image of Rio de Janeiro, race day dawned grey, cool and cloudy. Then 10 minutes before the women's start the clouds were split wide open by brilliant sunshine. Course records and fast times were pushed off the agenda, but the race backdrop of Rio's glorious coastline and forested hills was framed to greatest advantage.

Brazil is one of the few places that habitually features elite women's races in front of the elite men and mass field. The women's race, for TV, for spectators and for the women themselves, is much more clear-cut. Every runner can see their competitors and there is no chance to 'hide' among the mass of male runners.

Up front the women may have been keeping a wary eye on each other, but further back runners cannot fail to be struck by the scenery.

The race starts in the outlying centre of Sao Conrado, to the north west of the city. Runners



lined up along the road just above the broad, windswept beach. Early on Sunday morning there was little life about except for the crowd of runners massing on the esplanade.

Before the first kilometre ends the course begins to rise, in order to navigate its way around the rocky promontory that separates Sao Conrado from the better-known beach neighbourhoods closer to the centre.

The highest point of the course

comes after only two kilometres, as the road wriggles around the headland. The deep blue of the South Atlantic Ocean, dotted with a few small islets, lies to the right and a steep cliff face is on the left. After four kilometres the road descends towards the esplanade at Leblon, the first of Rio's sweep of grand beaches.

Here the lie of the land is very different. The beach at Sao Conrado, a convenient backdrop for the start of the race, had little other life evident.

But from Leblon onwards there seemed to be little life that was not beach-centred. The settlement consists of blocks of high-rises that have been fitted around the beach. The race comes between the two, and it appeared as if this was how the locals saw it.

As the lead runners thundered along the wide road backing on to the beach, with a flotilla of vehicles alongside them, freelance runners, skaters, cyclists and ordinary pedestrians clogged the road. Somehow, with sirens blaring and lights flashing, the lead vehicles cut a path through the throng, and the runners followed.

In Leblon the crowds were more dedicated to doing their own thing. A few kilometres further along the same sweep, once over the waterway that connects to an inland lagoon, Ipanema beach begins, and further along comes Copacabana.

It is not just the names that change, but also the character. These beach names are well known for a reason; they mean something. The Sunday crowds flocked to the beaches, just as they had in Leblon, but the Copacabana crowds stopped to watch the race.

They didn't just watch; they became as involved as any dedicated spectator would have been. Maybe they had arrived alongside the runners by chance,

but they offered them vociferous support - as if it was their only reason for being there.

While the women were still bunched together at the west end of Copacabana beach the 14,000-strong mass field set off in pursuit from Sao Conrado. Two-time winners John Gwako and Philip Rugut had returned to contest the half marathon.

After the first kilometre Rugut took up the pace. On reaching Leblon, Gwako, always previously near Rugut's shoulder, started to push. As they raced through Ipanema and Copacabana he regularly opened up small gaps on Rugut and Robert Cheruiyot.

It was a compelling spectacle for the roadside supporters. They were not supporting anyone in particular, but they clearly supported the race itself.

They cheered every move and counter-move made by the lead players. In one of these Cheruiyot lost contact and thereafter tracked the lead pair from 30m behind them.

The course is dead flat along the beaches, but the east end of Copacabana beach is blocked by a huge granite massif. Just before reaching it runners turn left, cutting through a tunnel to Botafogo.

The bay here is of a different character. There is a walkway and adjacent parkland, but no beach, and therefore fewer people around.

Sweeping around the bay in the shadow of the Sugar Loaf Mountain, Gwako got away. This was around the 14km point, but runners pass by the finish line still with 5km to run, out to the turning point and back.

The out and back section is on a broad highway cutting through the parkland that backs onto Flamengo beach. On Sundays the highway is closed, whether there is a race on or not, to better



Result

MEN:

1	John GWAKO	KEN	1:02:11
2	Robert CHERUIYOT	KEN	1:02:52
3	Philip RUGUT	KEN	1:03:15
4	Frank CALDEIRA ALMEIDA	BRA	1:03:40
5	Paulo ALVES DOS SANTOS	BRA	1:04:07
6	Valdenor P. DOS SANTOS	BRA	1:04:54
7	Claudir RODRIGUES	BRA	1:05:01
8	Willian SALGADO GOMES	BRA	1:05:11
9	Jose TELES DE SOUZA	BRA	1:05:18
10	Ubiratan J. DOS SANTOS	BRA	1:05:36

WOMEN:

1	Rita JEPTOO	KEN	1:14:25
2	Rose JUPCHUMBA	KEN	1:14:28
3	Adriana APARECIDA DA SILVA	BRA	1:14:32
4	Deborah MENGICH	KEN	1:14:53
5	Ednalva LAUREANO SILVA	BRA	1:15:19
6	Anne JELAGAT KIBOR	KEN	1:15:43
7	Maria do C. A. GUIMARAES	BRA	1:16:28
8	Selma CANDIDO DOS REIS	BRA	1:16:41
9	Marily DOS SANTOS	BRA	1:16:54
10	Rosa BARBOSA	BRA	1:16:56



facilitate use of the beach. The entire area becomes one big playground, and the runners are part of it, enjoying huge crowd support.

In the women's race the top three stayed together nearly all the way to the finish. Amid the crowds gathered on all sides Rita Jeptoo eased ahead of Rose Jupchumba and Adriana Aparecida da Silva in the final few hundred metres. Deborah Mengich followed 100m behind.

It was now up to 28C, on this winter's day in Rio, but Gwako kept the pace fast to finish only 23 seconds short of his own course record. Cheruiyot came back to pass Rugut at 18.5km, just past the turn.

For hours afterwards, the flow continued. After the elite came the mass, and after the mass came the stragglers. The busy activity of the well-organised finish area gradually subsided. Apart from the clearing-up operation, action on the road ebbed. Life, including many weary but fulfilled runners, migrated back towards the beach.

