

# The spirit of Christmas Pass

African University Int'l Peace Marathon, Mutare, Zimbabwe. 25 September 2004.

By Norrie Williamson

The sun rose from behind the Christmas Pass in the mountains skirting the Zimbabwean city of Mutare.

In the centre of town runners congregated in Meikle Park. Zimbabwe's first mass participation international marathon starts from the palm-lined boulevard, in a project initiated by Augustine Dzathor of the African University.

Now in its third year, the Marathon personifies the culture and mission of this Pan African institution, which was established in 1992 and offers an MBA in Peace leadership and Governance. Peace in Africa and the world is a vision yet to be achieved, but it is one to which everyone can aspire.

With distances from 500m for "kids and grandparents" through to the challenge of the full marathon, there is something for everyone. Each event is focused around the challenge of the Christmas Pass; a 3.5km climb from the city over the protective mountain range to the University campus, which nestles in the Valley of Dreams.

The half marathon spends little time in the city, heading straight for the twisting, spectacular climb. The 10km wheelchair race capitalises on the steep downhill from just below the crest, to plummet down towards the campus. Only the out and back 5km, for the young and novice runners and walkers, fails to feel the impact of the 1350m high pass - but even that reaches the lower slopes.

Mutare is the country's fourth largest city located only 12km from the Mozambique border, and



Below, the purple jacarandas intermingled with multi-storey buildings of commerce in the basin of landscape stretching between the mountains. The splendour of Mutare was laid out for all to see.

The top climbers were dramatically challenged by the 5km of jarring downhill running which followed. Different attributes are required, and a change of leadership in the free-fall drop towards the finish was practically assured. Zimbabwe's Olympic marathoner, Abel Chimukoko, captured the crown before conceding to mine worker Christopher Kalunda, an experienced 10km athlete making his marathon debut.

An amazing array of stone carvings and detailed, brightly painted wooden scale replicas of farm vehicles lined the roads as runners descended towards the valley floor. Off the main highway, the road rolled out on a gradual downward slope into the distance, through a natural 'gate' made between two smaller hills. The gradual downhill kept the runners moving towards the finish. At the entrance to the campus runners crossed the Bridge of Dreams, which signalled the final 700m of their challenge and the start of a rapturous welcome.

In spite of the low altitude conditions (1000m), the heat of the Southern African spring day, and the demanding pull up the pass, times were impressive. Kalunda led the marathon field home in 2:26:17, taking the top four finishers under 2:27. The top four half marathoners broke 70 minutes, led by Kasirai Sita in 68:10. Little of this talent has ever had the opportunity to run outside the local community.

Visitors depart with lasting memories, above all the sharp contrast between international news broadcasts and the everyday reality of a warm, welcoming people sharing in the message of peace. There is clearly hope that each runner crossing the campus bridge will bring that dream of peace closer to reality.



a comfortable 3-hour drive from Harare International airport. Media coverage of economically challenged Zimbabwe does nothing to prepare international visitors for the spirited, vibrant welcome that greets them. The easy pace of daily life and the warmth and friendliness of local people stand in stark contrast to the world's received images.

The marathon prize list at first sounds overwhelming. Half a million Zimbabwean dollars for the first male and female to top of the pass. Age category winners carry away 100,000 dollars - but that is sufficient only for a month's food. The overall winner gets US\$2000. With the US Dollar being exchanged for around 6500 Zimbabwean, the rest of the prize list rapidly diminishes.

Not so the enthusiasm and performances of the athletes, who hurtled down Herbert Chipeto Street at a pace of under three minutes per kilometre. As the sun rose umbrellas were unfurled along the expansive palm lined boulevard, which stretches out to the city's suburbs.

The first 10km brings a steep, then a gradual downhill. With the early adrenalin surge runners started at a wildly unrealistic pace for the challenge they faced. After 5km the hustle and bustle of early morning city life changed to a

more leisurely rural weekend pace. The outlook changed along with the pace. Deep purple flowers of the Jacaranda tree contrasted sharply with lush green spring growth and the multi-shaded brown pallet of African farmland.

A crisp undercurrent of early spring soon melted away under bright sunlight as runners approached the half-way point. Spaza shops mixed with the multi-coloured blocks that typify the ethnic individuality of African residences as the field returned to the city centre. Knots of playful children enthused and motivated the runners with chants, whistles and waves.

Runners left the main street for the tree-lined shade of the upper residential area, in preparation for the Christmas Pass. This dual carriageway twists and climbs in ever-increasing panoramic views of the city and surroundings. There is little respite in this energy-sapping climb of 350m in 3.5km.

Aloes, cycads, bright bougainvilleas and stunning red poker flowers lined the roadside as runners left the floral "welcome to Mutare" sign behind. They ascended towards the crown of Christmas Pass in search of the titles of King and Queen of the pass.

## Result

### MEN:

1	Christopher KALUNDA	ZIM	2:26:17
2	Felix MHURWA	ZIM	2:26:36
3	Hatiwande NYAMANDE	ZIM	2:26:42
4	Moses NJODZI	ZIM	2:26:48
5	Nicholas MUGOMERI	ZIM	2:30:37
6	Sarimfina MUTOWA	ZIM	2:32:11
7	Lazarus MANGWENGWE	ZIM	2:33:10
8	Stephen SANGAZA	ZIM	2:34:25
9	Alan MAGWERE	ZIM	2:34:38
10	Abel CHIMUKOKO	ZIM	2:36:12

### WOMEN:

1	Chiedza CHOKORE	ZIM	2:58:34
2	Tawapo BHIRI	ZIM	2:59:38
3	Rabiya FILINA	ZIM	3:15:32
4	Simiso MAYELANE	ZIM	3:53:03
5	Sarah MAKAZA	ZIM	4:08:00

### 21.1km

### MEN:

1	Kasirai SITA	ZIM	1:08:10
2	Collen MAKAZA	ZIM	1:08:22
3	Tsungai MWENENGENI	ZIM	1:09:22

### WOMEN:

1	Lizzy CHOKORE	ZIM	1:23:53
2	Sikulile SIBANDA	ZIM	1:30:42
3	Hazvinei CHIGWAGWA	ZIM	1:55:02