

In ancient footsteps

Tiberias Marathon, Israel. 5 January 2006



By Prof. Uri Goldbourt

The Tiberias marathon began life on the last day of 1977 as the "Sea of Galilee Marathon". Before that there was no framework for marathon running in Israel. The few races which had been organized had been of a haphazard nature. Coach Ilya Bar-Zeev and few collaborators launched that first international event. It drew 99 participants, and was won by the German Werner Dorrenbacher.

The first Israeli home in that race was a converted middle distance runner, Yair Karni. He ran out of muscle glycogen in the final stages but later developed from a 2:29 to a 2:17:34 runner. He broke multiple national records over a 16-year period, earned a spot in the Israeli team entered in the World Championships in 1983, and built a name for himself in sports nutrition and coaching.

For several years, while sponsors changed, the Israeli Athletics Association (IAA) and the local council of the Valley of Jordan shared the organization. The Municipality of Tiberias then moved in and together with the IAA, established a race with a permanent starting point on the outskirts of Tiberias. The race was, and remains, the world's lowest marathon with the route lying about 200m below sea level.

The ancient biblical towns of Hammat and Rakkath provided the foundation of Tiberias and their ruins provide its present environment. Named after the Roman emperor Tiberius, it was built in the first century AD. The destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD led to a search for a spiritual centre further to the north. Tiberias then began to play an increased role.

The Great Court (Sanhedrin) met there and renowned scholars and Rabbis completed important work on Talmud. This process would lead, over the years, to the recognition of Tiberias as one of the four holy cities in the land of Israel. The area around Tiberias contains several spots known from the time of Jesus and his tribulations, and several cited as of religious significance in the development Christianity can be found within 20-25 minutes of the town, notoriously Tabha and Capernaum.

By the sixth century the area had long embraced Christianity, but in 636 Tiberias and the Galilee were conquered by the Arabs, who named the town capital of the Galilee. After a period of thriving commerce and arts, an earthquake in the year 748 ruined the town. It was only rebuilt at the time of the crusades, but Salah-a-ddin's victory in 1187 restored Tiberias to Islamic rule which lasted right up until the end of the First World War. The League of Nations then established the British mandate of Palestine.

The city lay in half-ruin for centuries. It became a part of independent Israel in 1948, absorbing thousands of migrant families. The majority of its current population of 45,000 is engaged in tourist or related industry, deriving from its location on the coast of the Sea of Galilee. It lies close to places holy for both Christianity and Judaism and to the famous spas (the hot springs of Tiberias and Hammat Gadder).

Tiberias is geographically positioned as a stepping stone to the heights of the Galilee and the Golan.

Hotels and restaurants came and went in Tiberias, but the past two decades have seen a significant increase in tourist services and opportunities from which the marathon has benefitted.

The route of the Tiberias marathon takes in the Southern coast of the Sea of Galilee. In European or American terms it appears as a small lake. The race starts at the City's Moriya Sheraton Hotel, and encircles the lake to approach the Kibbutz Ein-Gev. The turning point is a few hundred metres before the completion of half the distance.

The weather is not entirely predictable: in early January an easterly wind occasionally hampers runners over a stretch to the east of the lake. Most years provide near-ideal conditions for running with temperatures between 12-18C.

After several years during which the number of participants remained the same, the race began to grow. This year's 30th edition, with some 750 starters, marked a new record of participation. The main growth stemmed from a significant increase in recreational runners.

As in previous years, the battle for victory was focused on runners from the two African strongholds of long distance running, Ethiopia



and Kenya. This year a close battle developed during the first half of the race. The first 10km was passed in 31:24. Windy conditions developed around the turn which slowed the leading group of nine runners to 1:08:22 at halfway. Then at around 30km the Kenyan John Rotich began to open up a gap that gradually widened. He finished in 2:15:43, the ninth fastest time ever posted in this Marathon.

Habtamu Bekele from Ethiopia, winner of the two previous editions, was denied his hat-trick. This feat has been achieved by Lindsay Robertson (GBR) in the 8th, 9th and 11th editions, and Ahmed Hussein (ETH) who won the 14th, 17th and 18th ones. Bekele followed Rotich in ahead of Kenya's Reuben Torotich and Israel's 2004 Olympic representative Haile Satayin. Satayin was himself an immigrant

from Ethiopia and at a reported age of 50, ran 2:16:59.

The absence of female elite runners this year, facilitated an easy victory by Israel's other Olympic runner Nili Abramski. The 36-year old won her seventh victory in what was for her a slow time. She first won a decade ago and has taken six wins in the last seven editions. The course records belong to Taye Moges of Kenya

MEN:			
1	John ROTICH	KEN	2:15:43
2	Habtamu BEKELE	ETH	2:16:23
3	Reuben TOROTICH	KEN	2:16:37
4	Ayale SATENG	ISR	2:16:59
5	Opnesmus MUTISYA	KEN	2:18:34
6	Philemon BOIT	KEN	2:18:57
7	Asaf BIMRO	ISR	2:19:18
8	Geoffrey TERER	KEN	2:22:10
9	Isiah KOSGEI	KEN	2:23:38
10	Destao SEWONACH	ISR	2:23:40
WOMEN:			
1	Nili ABRAMSKI	ISR	2:54:49
2	Orna BELOW	ISR	2:56:47
3	Seraaw MENICHEL	ETH	3:02:43
4	Loris MENDELOVICH	ISR	3:07:52
5	Maya KARMI	ISR	3:11:28
6	Ronit YUDASHKIN	ISR	3:20:19
7	Mirit MISRACHI	ISR	3:24:23
8	Sintya ITZCHAKI	ISR	3:24:28
9	Galya AMDOR	ISR	3:26:53
10	Lila FRENKEL	ISR	3:32:31

who ran 2:12:45 in 2003 and The Czech Maria Starowska, who won both the 13th and 15th editions of the race and in the latter (1992) ran 2:34:17.

For the last 12 years a 12km race has been added, attracting many runners. With the prospects of a more peaceful atmosphere in the mid-east and increased international involvement this unique sporting event, the Marathon of Tiberias, is eyeing the near future with hope.

The next Tiberias Marathon will be held on 4 January, 2007.