

More than a monster

Baxters Loch Ness Marathon, Great Britain. 2 October 2005

By Caroline Sutherland

The magic, mystery and legend of Loch Ness and its famous monster have captured the imagination of generations, and it is now capturing the imagination of runners worldwide too.

The fabled monster is only part of what attracts participants to the Scottish Highlands each October to race in a marathon that has earned itself a reputation as one of the most popular in Britain. After only four years the race now attracts a field from across the world, and has grown 122% from 2002-2005. The warm Highland welcome, first class organisation and scenic beauty are all experienced well before any Nessie spotting.

The Baxters Loch Ness Marathon & Festival of Running is based out of Inverness, the Highland capital, just a short distance from Loch Ness. Although the first impression of Inverness is that of a modern town with few signs of antiquity, in ancient days it was a place of conflict. Clan Donald is said to have burned the town at least seven times, while Bonnie Prince Charlie's forces destroyed the fort here in 1745. The visitor centre at Culloden Moor, scene of the last major

battle fought on mainland Britain in 1746, vividly tells the story of the defeat of the Jacobite forces led by Bonnie Prince Charlie. His army was crushed by Government forces under the Duke of Cumberland in less than an hour – the time it takes to walk around the battlefield. With its suspension bridges across the River Ness, old stone buildings, cathedral and castle, dating from the 1830s, it is a pretty place to visit.

Romantic, rugged, dramatic yet welcoming – no single phrase can describe the Highlands, as there is so much variety within this unspoilt land. Loch Ness is an area of stunning scenery with magnificent mountains towering over glorious glens, stimulating a sense of discovery where a rich heritage comes alive and the landscape inspires.

There is much to visit and much to do: Castles, whisky distilleries, nature cruises to view dolphins, seals and whales, golf, salmon fishing, water sports, walking - and running.

The Loch Ness Marathon is run on a point-to-point course. The bus ride to the start is an unexpected highlight. The fleet of buses is given a police escort, and they snake south through rolling farmland to the marathon's remote but spectacular start

location. At this early hour the only traffic is the passage of deer and red squirrels, with kites and eagles soaring high above.

The start is on the high ground between Fort Augustus and Foyers on the south side of Loch Ness – the less-visited side of the Loch largely bypassed by the hordes of tourists who make the pilgrimage to Loch Ness each year.

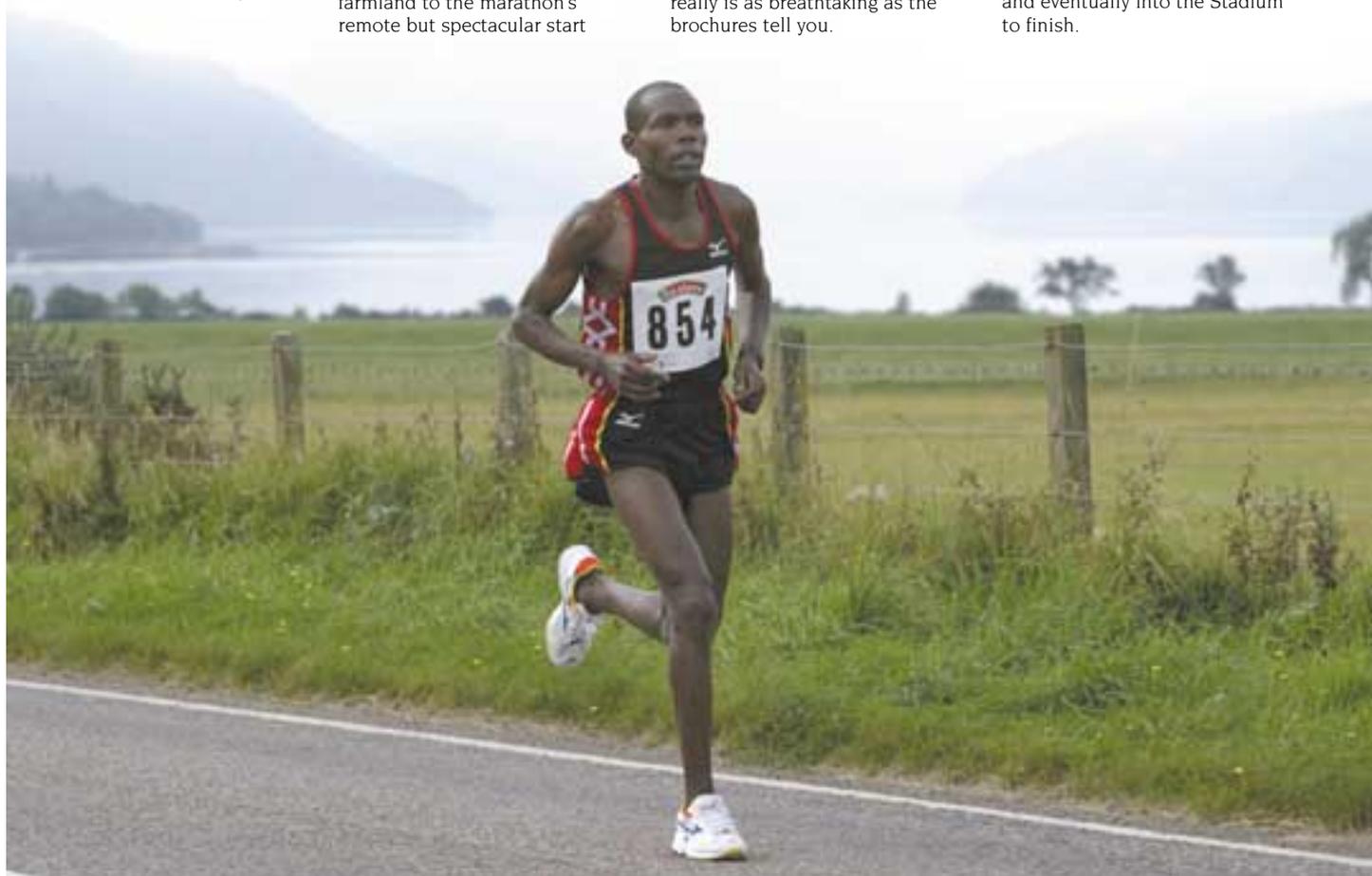
On a beautiful clear autumnal morning 1164 runners lined up at the start against a backdrop of purple heather moors contrasting with the craggy mountains towering behind and the autumn colours coming into play.

After the aerobics warm-up – a surreal experience given the setting – the field set off to the skirl of pipes and drums. With the course descending to the Loch side, runners were warned to take the first few miles at a steady pace. The first couple of miles soon leave the rugged hills behind and pass into a softer rolling landscape of small farming settlements, green fields and meandering burns. Sheep, horses and cows look up in surprise as the pack moves through their pristine environment. At mile five, runners are rewarded with their first glimpse of the famous Loch and it really is as breathtaking as the brochures tell you.



The route now follows right along the Loch side for the next 10 miles, passing through villages with unpronounceable names and their Gaelic equivalents. Crowds of welcoming locals and the drink stations provide a distraction from Nessie spotting.

At mile 17 a lone piper heralds the departure from Loch Ness. The route now heads towards the historic city of Inverness. Crowds of spectators greet runners as they wind their way alongside the River Ness, which flows out from the Loch into the Moray Firth and eventually the North Sea. Runners pass under the impressive shadow of Inverness Castle, across the town bridge, past St Andrews Cathedral and eventually into the Stadium to finish.



Former world 100km champion, Scotland's Simon Pride defended his title but was made to work hard for the top prize, as local club runner Andrew Farquharson (2.31.04) was in contention for most of the 26.2 miles. Pride finally broke clear over the final eight miles and went on to win by 250m. Switzerland's Patrick Ruedi was a distant third. Former Seville and Belfast Marathon champion Julia Myatt was 63 seconds outside the course record when winning the women's race.

While marathon runners are heading towards Inverness a further two races are getting underway – the Baxters River Ness 10km and 5km Fun Runs.

Following the success of the first marathon in 2002, organisers were keen to offer a weekend of races and festivities and thus the Festival of Running was born. The 10km is a fast point-to-point route. With a downhill section for the first four kilometres it has seen many personal best times broken over its two-year history.



Kenya's Zac Kihara, winner of the Edinburgh Marathon, defeated 1286 rivals in the 10km to win in 30:45. Kihara's compatriot Cathy Mutwa won the women's race for second year in a row and smashed her own course record by 71 seconds in a time of 33:47. Mutwa's impressive time was beaten by just seven men in the race.

With a world-renowned food producer as sponsor – Baxters Food Group – it is not surprising that the pre-race Pasta Party has earned a great reputation. Another highlight for runners and spectators was the Monster Highland BBQ, which is an integral part of the annual Highland Food & Drink Festival, and open to the general public. A total Highland food experience, runners were given a complimentary BBQ ticket as part of their race entry. There was plenty of entertainment on offer too. Live ceilidh music, massed pipes and drums and entertainment made sure all participants including non-runners and families were well catered for. What better way to finish a marathon?

MEN

1	Simon PRIDE	2:30:17
2	Andrew FARQUHARSON	2:31:04
3	Patrick RUEDI	2:38:03
4	Ruairidh CAMPBELL	2:38:12
5	Sean COTTER	2:39:06
6	James SNODGRASS	2:39:45
7	Adam BREAKS	2:39:49
8	Christopher WILSON	2:41:38
9	Stevie OGG	2:41:44
10	John J DUFFY	2:42:14

WOMEN

1	Julia MYATT	2:51:56
2	Fiona MATHESON	2:53:24
3	Susan MCCANN	3:07:00
4	Fari SHAMS	3:08:53
5	Alison CAMPBELL	3:13:37
6	Erica CHRISTIE	3:13:48
7	Angela JONES	3:14:07
8	Margaret ANDERSON	3:16:57
9	Pauline WALKER	3:17:21
10	Niamh MOONEY	3:17:31

10km

MEN

1	Zac KIHARA	KEN	30:45
2	Martin WILLIAMS	GBR	31:04
3	Graham BEE	GBR	31:38

WOMEN

1	Cathy MUTWA	KEN	33:47
2	Morag ROSS	GBR	37:41
3	Jane BARKER	GBR	38:17

A trip to the Baxters Loch Ness Marathon & Festival of Running won't disappoint in terms of scenery, clean air, history, myth and legend – it also offers an unbeatable running experience. What cannot be guaranteed is a glimpse of the famously shy monster... maybe Nessie will reveal herself next year?