

Fireworks, indoors and out

Messe Frankfurt Marathon, Germany. 30 October 2005

By Pat Butcher

Running a marathon is infernal enough for most people; running it indoors would be like a modern version of Dante's Circles of Hell. Yet indoor marathons were all the rage a century ago. The nearest thing to it nowadays is the Messe Frankfurt Marathon, where the last 100m of the race takes the runners off the pavement and into the 'Gut Stubb,' the city centre Festival Hall. A fireworks display and brass band await them, along with 10,000 rowdy spectators lubricated (since this is Germany) by the inevitable steins of beer.

In the 1908 Olympic Marathon in London, Dorando Pietri collapsed in the stadium, was assisted over the line and then disqualified. Johnny Hayes was declared the winner, but Dorando became famous. And they both made a fortune from a series of subsequent races in New York, which were held indoors, to entice paying spectators. When they retired, indoor marathoning effectively died with them. But it has had a minor resurrection in Frankfurt, where

the title sponsor is the Expo venue in which the indoor finish is located. Until this year the race was known as the Eurocity Marathon but, in Europe's biggest 'expo' city, the organisers have bowed to all-round pressure to rename it the Messe Frankfurt Marathon. The noisy indoor haven of the finish line creates new opportunities for race spectators who generate an entirely different atmosphere to that in the usual outdoor locations.

But that is at the finish. The race runs 42.1km through the streets of Frankfurt before it goes indoors. It

got off its mark with a bang this year, with a simulated murder on the start line.

The German TV channel ARD has a long running show, Tatort which anticipated the US popular series Crime Scene Investigation. The producers of the popular weekly series chose the start of the marathon as the scene of the latest crime. A fictional detective named Fritz Dellwo, wants to run the Messe Frankfurt Marathon, but doesn't know that, following a gaol-break, a man he put inside intends to kill him. Unfortunately, a poor Swedish fun-runner, standing beside Fritz on the start-line gets it instead. Perhaps it's not the best way to encourage foreign runners to your race, but a few years ago the Swedes themselves played out a similar scenario in a film called "Stockholm Marathon".

The Frankfurt race starts with Fritz ignorant of the killing and that the killer is still intent on plugging him. The police try to persuade the organisers to abandon the race, and one of his colleagues keeps missing him at various checkpoints – the show takes place in real time, like the series "24".

The elite athletes in the real race were not hampered by the filming, since the crew waited until the

wave of four-hour marathoners began before the cameras started rolling. For extra shots, and in case of errors – getting several thousand people to turn round a do a retake being difficult - ARD has advertised in the local papers for a thousand extras to turn up again in a few weeks' time to re-shoot the start. The rest of the show will be filmed at leisure, but it will be a while before we find out what happens. The show will not be broadcast until next year, on the evening of the 25th anniversary Messe Frankfurt Marathon.

In the real race the action was more conventional, if not particularly predictable. There were course records and personal bests for Wilfred Kigen of Kenya and Alvetina Biktimirova of Russia, but for a long time, things looked very different. When Leonid Shvetsov of Russia accelerated away from the pacemakers with less than 10km to run, it looked briefly as if a non-Kenyan man might win a big-city marathon. In the women's race, Marleen Renders of Belgium had a lead close to four minutes at one stage.

Shvetsov's dream lasted less than five minutes. The Kenyans regrouped, attacked, and left Shvetsov behind - but he did



Result

MEN

1	Wilfred KIGEN	KEN	2:08:29
2	Jason MBOTE	KEN	2:08:30
3	Wilson KIGEN	KEN	2:08:34
4	Charles KIBIWOT	KEN	2:08:36
5	Leonid SHVETSOV	RUS	2:10:05
6	Tesfaye DEREJE	ETH	2:11:47
7	Philip TARUS	KEN	2:12:33
8	Matthew BIRIR	KEN	2:12:41
9	Abraham TANDOI	KEN	2:13:04
10	Peter KORIR	KEN	2:14:22

WOMEN

1	Alevtina BIKTIMIROVA	RUS	2:25:12
2	Marleen RENDERS	BEL	2:26:26
3	Tola ROBA	ETH	2:29:30
4	Mary PITKANY	KEN	2:29:45
5	Svetlana PONOMARENKO	RUS	2:31:26
6	Mindaye GESHU	ETH	2:33:05
7	Tatyana ZHIRKOVA	RUS	2:37:06
8	Olga GLOK	RUS	2:38:06
9	Tanith MAXWELL	RSA	2:41:03
10	Veronika ULRICH	GER	2:51:07

contribute considerably to the third successive course record. Charles Kibiwot made a similar bid for glory with five kilometres to go, but a sprint which took him rapidly away from the others looked suicidal, and so it proved. Brothers Wilfred and Wilson Kigen, along with compatriot, Jason Mbote pulled him back. It was Wilfred who won the sprint as the race went off the road, to end in the 'Gut Stubb'.

"I only knew I had it when we came into the hall with about 100m to run," said Wilfred. The first four all broke the course record of 2:09:10, set last year by Boaz Kimaiyo, who dropped out at 33km with hamstring problems.

Russia's Alevtina Biktimirova was the race revelation. She knocked six minutes off her personal best, and was understandably elated at the finish. "I wanted to break 2:30 but I never expected anything like this. I knew I was a long way behind Renders at halfway, but when I began to see her at 30km, I felt stronger than I did at the start. I knew I could catch her at that point".

The Russian flew past the Belgian at 36km, and won by over a minute. Renders, 37, and having her first marathon in three years, after two hamstring operations, denied that she had begun too quickly. She had certainly made good her promise to attack the record of 2:26:01, from Luminita Zaituc in 2001. Renders was on 2:24 pace for long periods. "I would have been OK, I think, but I started to have hamstring problems at 30km," she said, "and when Biktimirova came past she went so quickly I could do nothing". Even wilting badly at the end she acquitted herself well.

The race begins late for a European marathon, 11.00, but the weather was not as warm as anticipated - 12C at the start, and 18C at the finish. There was a record entry of 17,000 for all races, with another record of 11,000 starters in the marathon. Germany is the country where the second wave of mass-running really took hold at the turn of the century, and Frankfurt, with its unconventional finish, is benefiting as much as anywhere.



Left: Finishers applauded to the finish line inside the Gut Stubb - the only indoor finish to any world-rated marathon