

Keeping it real

Kenneth Lloyd observes at the marathon finish line and sees more than the usual signs of distress.

At the Maraton Popular de Madrid there were some spectacular jump-ins. Moments before the off, a dozen air force parachutists launched themselves from several hundred metres aloft and bore down onto the start line. They landed immaculately, to popular acclaim, a few metres in front of the 13,000 runners massed at the start line in front of the Biblioteca Nacional.

At the finish line there were far more than a dozen jump-ins. They were not so spectacular, but were still designed for public impact. Many runners finishing the marathon for real seemed to want their children to accompany them over the last few metres, so the kids could be snapped with them on the finish line - either by official photographers or by their own family and friends. Some runners finishing the race saw it as their right to do so hand in hand with their children - and there seemed to be no lower age limit.

The accompanying kids over about five years of age stood a good chance of getting in before the securely-fenced finish straight, 300m long, and none of the security personnel seemed inclined to challenge them. But, in reality, some of the kids weren't quite up to the challenge. Many looked obviously reluctant, bored or distressed. Clearly this was not the way in which they wished to participate in their dad's (for there was a very low proportion of women running) moment of triumph. The dads gesticulated towards the finish: "surely you can get there, can't you?" The dad's moment of triumph could equally well become the kid's moment of failure. Real life is more complicated than contrived souvenir photo opportunities.

It wasn't entirely the dad's fault. As they went over to the side of the course, often within the area restricted to invitees, it was the mums who thrust their young children and even babies into their arms, to share their moment of glory a hundred metres or more further down the finishing straight.

A hundred metres, when carrying a baby and pulling two other young children along, is a very long way. Each step is dangerous territory. The babes-in-arms did not seem

very securely locked in arms. How could it be otherwise? Runners have completed 42.1km through exhausting use of their limbs and have little energy spare. Suddenly they are diverted from single-mindedly looking after their own forward motion to shepherding a troupe of tiny kids over a relatively short distance, but a distance for which they may not be prepared. There are crowds staring at them. Many of the children seemed reluctant - even stage-struck - as reality hit home. But the demands of the moment required them to press on through the finish. What seeds of future recrimination were being sowed in those few metres of painful, embarrassed progress?

There other kinds of more individualistic jump-ins. These seem to be an inevitable addition to big city marathons, like plastic water bottles in the gutter, though thankfully less numerous.

They didn't take long to get in on the act. In the 1981 New York City Marathon an anonymous fruitcake ran alongside Briton John Graham, as he ambitiously led Alberto Salazar past the halfway point. The jump-in attempted to stuff a "lucky" dollar bill down Graham's vest. And they are ever with us. Everyone will remember the defrocked priest at the 2004 Olympic Marathon in Athens, who took out the leader Vanderlei de Lima.

The highest profile marathons - those televised to millions - are the most likely targets of this kind of jump-in. The London Marathon has borne various displays of self-aggrandising intrusion over the years. Back in 1985 a potential assailant of winner Steve Jones was taken out by security within peripheral view of the finish line TV cameras. Subsequently a naked "Flora Man", wearing only a sunflower head dress and green body paint, successfully jogged through the finish. In 2001 someone tried to rush at the women's winner, Derartu Tulu, out of the VIP stand, while making those fool-behind-the-news-reporter gestures to the cameras. All these incidents happened despite the best efforts of the long-established team of "Bandit Catchers" stationed just down the course from the finish line, who are responsible for stopping would-be intruders. Between them and the finish line the job is done by non-specialist security personnel.



Any passing politico can use the attention focussed upon the marathon finish line to project their cause. In Paris this year a student protester joined the race in the last 500m with a fake number bearing the slogan 'Non! CPE', which was flavour of that particular month in that particular place.

Whether political, idiotic or exhibitionist these types of intruders have no right to be on the course. People who jump in to run alongside a friend while screaming personal trainer-speak at them are losers who should shut up - and next time run it themselves. Those with political aspirations should understand it is not the time or the place; easy as it is to gatecrash a race, the message will be lost in the crowd. Those who idiotically jump in to obstruct should be tackled mercilessly, like those impeding Steve Jones and Derartu Tulu were.

The child-carrying phenomenon poses more delicate questions. These intrusions come with the complicity of runners. Some of those babes-in-arms lolled dangerously to one side or the other, and sometimes swayed in both directions. What if one of them had keeled over, out of dad's desperate grasp? Falling onto concrete from a height of 1.5m is a likely death sentence for a baby - but who would then get the blame?

It would be the race organisers, of course. They would be found negligent in not preventing this indulgent behaviour by their race participants. Yet those race organisers who forcibly stop them are often faced with belligerence from the race finishers. They regard it as a right not just to finish, but to do so while bearing any junior relative along with them.

Looking at it from the legal perspective, and assuming the worst will happen, would clarify confused thinking. Legal costs that would arise, and increased insurance costs organisers would face as a result, means that there is little choice but to stop everyone other than real marathon participants (who have signed the waiver on the entry form) from getting on to the course. Participants, spectators and security alike need to know why interlopers have to be kept out, and marathon running kept real.

