

Talk of the town

By Akemi Nakamura, staff writer for Japan Times

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It was a long time brewing, but the expected whirlwind finally swept through the city of Tokyo on 18 February 2007. More than 30,000 people from around the world ran through the Shinjuku, Ginza and Asakusa districts in the realisation of a long-prepared plan to bring mass marathon running to the streets of the Japanese capital.

For decades Japan has been a leading light in the marathon world. Olympic victories stretch from 1936 through to the last two occasions, 2000 and 2004. The restricted-field elite races run through the streets of Tokyo had long attracted hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic flag-waving locals onto the streets, and television viewership of such spectacles has always been the envy of TV sports producers elsewhere in the world.

So why did it take so long for the inevitable to happen? Japan had become used to the marathon model with which the entire world grew up for three-quarters of the last century. The great changes that were wrought by the popular running revolution of the late 1970s and early 1980s took place at a time when Japan was experiencing unrivalled economic growth. Although Marathons have never been taken anything less than seriously in Japan, allowing them to bring cities to a virtual standstill for the best part of a day was never seriously countenanced.

Races staged in relatively rural locations, without such great pressure on road use, were able to increase their size significantly, but for a true "Big City" marathon experience most Japanese mass runners migrated to Honolulu. The

Honolulu Marathon's resounding success was built upon Japanese participation. Japanese mass runners gradually found other races to participate in, even further afield.

Over the last five years interested parties from Japan – the athletic authorities, the City government and the police – have sent sizeable delegations to observe the big city marathons in action. New York, Berlin, London have all been visited several times, among other places. Watching, learning and planning, the various co-operating parties had pieced together this event with great care.

The first indication of success came when the organisers received 95,000 applications for the 25,000 places available (the other 5000 places were for a supporting 10km race). Over two thousand of those who ran were from overseas, compared to the handful of invited athletes that used to come to the elite-only events. They came from 49 countries, and given the relative distance they had to travel to get to Japan, this figure compares favourably with the 3,200 foreign runners from 46 countries attracted by an established event like the London Marathon [2003 figures].

At 09.05 Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara fired the start gun outside the Tokyo Metropolitan Government building in Shinjuku ward, to set off 31 wheelchair athletes, who were competing in either the 10km race or the full marathon. Soon afterwards the world-class competitive runners and the masses of amateur athletes were set off after them, as the rain poured down.

After passing the Yasukuni Shrine and the Imperial Palace, the mass runners reached Hibiya Park in Chiyoda ward at around 10.00, about 20 minutes behind the leading group. This was something new. Street support for elite



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marathon runners has always been strong, but as the clock ticked on and the rain continued to fall, the cheers from the crowd along Hibiya Boulevard grew noticeably louder.

"This weather is the worst possible for the runners and for us," said Masaaki Hashimoto, a member of Takahama Jogging Club in Chiba who had come out to see two fellow joggers take part. "It's very unusual [in Japan] for a full marathon to have a (maximum) time limit of seven hours. I wish I could run."

Tokyo is promoting itself as Japan's candidate for the 2016 Olympic Games, and this inaugural mass race provided an opportunity for the city powers to show their ability to handle large scale sporting events. Hosting a mass race in central Tokyo is no easy task, all the more so because it has not been seriously attempted before. On some of the streets which are

normally Tokyo's busiest, traffic was stopped for more than six hours. Police officers were everywhere along the course and medical support teams were stationed at strategic points. More than 10,000 volunteers were used to staff the refreshment stations and act as course marshals to control spectators.

Yoshie Gonda, a housewife from Koto ward came to the Ginza district in Chuo ward for lunch. She said that she had to get out of her taxi before arriving at Asakusa Station due to the traffic controls put in place because of the Marathon. "I had to walk in the rain for a while," said Gonda, who is 70 years old. "But it's good to have a marathon once a year. People looked so happy while they were cheering for the runners."

Despite the large number of spectators, businesses along the course appeared to have a tough





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time. Hiroki Ishikawa, manager of the eel restaurant Tamai in the Nihonbashi district, said the event seemed to have hurt his trade. "On Sunday, our restaurant usually becomes full as soon as we open at 11.30," Ishikawa said. This was at noon, and only one customer was seated there. He said he hoped that people would come in after the race was over and the traffic restrictions were lifted at around 15.00. "I want the course to be changed (next time)," he grumbled.

Exactly 92 minutes and 21 seconds after the race had started,

Masazumi Soejima, 36, crossed the finish line at Tokyo Big Site in Koto ward to win the wheelchair category. Daniel Njenga, a 30-year old Kenyan who had already won the 2004 Tokyo International Marathon, was the first runner to finish, beating a field of invited elite runners. In the women's race no international runners had been invited and it was a marathon debutante, 18-year old Hitomi Miya from Okayama Prefecture, who was the first woman home with a very respectable time of 2:31:01. Two-time Olympic

medallist Yuko Arimori, another special guest, came in fifth.

Television viewership figures were another measure of the race's success. At 23.6% this was Fuji TV's

best rating for the week. But the last word should go to a citizen of Tokyo, who stood in the rain on that historic day: "I was moved by watching people with physical or mental disabilities running alongside other people," said Oriko Nishimori.

| MEN: | | | |
|---------------|----------------------|------------|----------------|
| 1 | Daniel NJENGA | KEN | 2:09:45 |
| 2 | Tomoyuki SATO | JPN | 2:11:22 |
| 3 | Satoshi IRIFUNE | JPN | 2:12:44 |
| 4 | Masashi HAYASHI | JPN | 2:15:28 |
| 5 | Kazuyoshi TOKUMOTO | JPN | 2:15:55 |
| 6 | Vanderlei DE LIMA | BRA | 2:16:08 |
| 7 | Seiji KOBAYASHI | JPN | 2:17:13 |
| 8 | Monabu ITAYAMA | JPN | 2:17:29 |
| 9 | Koji KANNAN | JPN | 2:18:03 |
| 10 | Moges TAYE | ETH | 2:18:20 |
| WOMEN: | | | |
| 1 | Hitomi NIHYA | JPN | 2:31:02 |
| 2 | Mari TANIGAWA | JPN | 2:49:54 |
| 5 | Yuko ARIMORI | JPN | 2:52:45 |

RACE CONTACT DETAILS

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Full race contact listings start on page 70