

## Ode to the marathon

**Kenneth Lloyd is entertained by a tour around the marathon world**

Switzer and Robinson's account of the marathon phenomenon is an interesting mixture of history, photography and entertaining trivia. Written as 26.2 Marathon Stories (i.e. in 27 chapters) the book covers many diverse aspects of the marathon in personal, social and cultural contexts. It is an engaging non-academic work. The subject matter is not treated in depth, which would in any case demand many volumes. 26.2 is instead a highly readable, all-encompassing ode to the "Marathon".

It appeals to the widest possible readership; the hundreds of thousands of men and women who run or aspire to run marathons. The book answers many practical questions for those outside the field, such as the mystery of the official distance or the ChampionChip timing system.

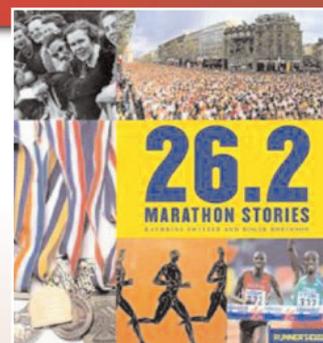
It explores some of the eccentricities involved in Marathon running, like the sentimental value of race t-shirts or the pecking order surrounding personal best times ("PBs").

The authors' main intention is to inspire people. They do so by including their readers within the elite but not exclusive club. This is evident in chapters like "Motivations" – which is devoted entirely to inspirational quotes.

Visually the book is excellent. It features many photos from AIMS member races around the world. There are also images documenting the ancient games and photos from the beginnings of the organised event in the 19th century, including extracts from Alf Shrubs' famous training manual Running and Cross-Country Running.

The coffee table style of the book means it can be picked up and read from virtually any page. Along the 26.2 chapter course the sections I found particularly interesting were those on cheating, the early days and the heroes of the marathon. Switzer and Robinson succinctly profile the characters involved in marathon running at the turn of the century, and capture the romantic appeal of distance running in its infancy. In this book there is bound to be something of interest to everyone. Equally, there will be other parts of lesser interest, although the style consistently engages.

Switzer and Robinson celebrate the evolution of the event from the legend of Pheidippides to the advent of the international race. The book's broad demographic precludes in-depth treatment of the



subject material. It will not appeal to the athletics historians, but instead offers a fascinating introduction to the marathon movement that will provoke any reader's curiosity and inspire them to further enquiry. It is a well put-together title that sets the personal achievement of the average marathoner into a global and historical context.

**Katherine Switzer & Roger Robinson (2006) 26.2 Marathon Stories**

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