

The Beirut Marathon provides Lebanon with an opportunity for moving on, argues Norrie Williamson

Ties generated on the field of play, through the shared experience of participating in an event, extend above and beyond differences in culture, religion and politics. The bonds of friendship that emerge frequently over-shadow political arguments and resolve differences in direct emotional terms, where concern for others becomes paramount.

So it is with running. People run for health, for enjoyment and for social reasons. As such it may be just a means of relaxation from the challenges of work - but there is a far greater potential.

The 34 days of war in Lebanon earlier this year changed people's perspectives. The networks that race organisations take for granted - simply as a means to get the job done on race day - suddenly assumed huge significance as a potential healing power.

In July the world was gripped by the renewed images of devastation in Lebanon and Israel. Terrorism was answered with indiscriminate force, jacking up death tolls from dozens on one side to hundreds on the other. Lebanon and its citizenry got blasted: in boxing terms the referee should have stopped the fight. Diplomats procrastinated while Beirut burned and the spiralling impact on innocent lives was overlooked. On the ground, non-government organisations, including the Beirut Marathon Association, (BMA) hastily re-grouped to deal with the realities of a wounded nation.

BMA's example shone through the devastation. It was a natural extension of the original purpose. BMA President May El-Khalil founded the race in 2003 to help rebuild national unity and pride following the 17 years of civil war that had ceased in 1992.

The Beirut Marathon was born in 2003. There were only a few hundred habitual runners in the entire country, but in that first year 5000 people participated in 5km, 10km and full marathon races. From that promising start El-Khalil and her team guided the race to encompass 17,000 starters in 2005, from all walks of life, religions, cultures, ages and abilities.

This achievement gave rise to feeder events: in North Lebanon, the Tripoli 10km, and in South Lebanon, the Tyre Half Marathon. These events attracted 20,000 and 15,000 respectively. They were vehicles for displaying the pride of being Lebanese. Everyone wanted



to be in on it. Beirut had grown back into its role of a melting point of cultures where tolerance was a way of life.

On 12 July all that changed. The marathon was planning for 20,000 runners on race weekend, but retaliatory strikes and blockades then hit southern Lebanon and Beirut. All was in disarray. The marathon route became punctured with craters and multi-storey blocks were razed to the ground. All this was in retribution for the terrorist activity of a few, hiding themselves behind a civilian shield.

The search for safety scattered the marathon staff across the countryside. Many took to the mountains simply because they lived in an area deemed to be aligned to a particular segment of society. So too with the rest of the population: soon 20% of the Lebanese population were forced from their homes. The term 'displaced' became a euphemism that concealed the trauma of helpless families who had lost all their belongings in the rubble that used to be home - because it lay within a designated target zone. After 14 days 800,000 people had nowhere to go and Lebanon teetered on the brink of a humanitarian disaster.

Amidst the anxiety and anguish the BMA redirected their focus. They quickly appreciated that the resources they had garnered as a sporting organisation offered huge potential. These resources were human connections. The marathon network and database embraced schools, clubs and communities - the building blocks of a home-grown relief agency.

As families crowded into schools the need to provide children with

some form of diversion from the reality of war was pressing. Tapping into their contact base the BMA co-ordinated transport, catering and sports venues to provide daily excursions and distractions for the children. "There was no conscious decision: it was a simple an obvious way forward for us" said Mark Dickinson, race director of the Beirut Marathon. "The marathon started as a nation-building project, and this was simply an extension of the same concept".

Simple exercise - a game of basketball or soccer - followed by the opportunity to shower and a meal, created an acceptable normality for the children. It also gave distraught parents invaluable relief. They had a chance to assimilate thoughts and determine new direction for a life that had been upended.

The beauty of the project was its simplicity, but its impact was complex. It gave physiological, psychological and trauma relief to thousands. The BMA staff daily deployed to "safe" regions to pursue these ends. "It would have been easy for staff to opt out, but everyone could see the benefit and I am proud of how the staff took to the challenge. I am proud of what we achieved" said Dickinson. "It would have been criminal to have wasted these resources, with so many compatriots in need".

Word spread. Working in tandem with other NGOs and relief agencies, donations of toys and sports goods accumulated and were distributed from the BMA offices. A project like this cannot ever be labelled successful. Such projects should never be required. We can only measure the effort, and how it impacted on over 100,000 people in

250 schools: figures that say as much about the devastation as they do of the effort of the BMA.

The war stopped as abruptly as it began, as tardy, stage-managed diplomacy kicked in. With a resilience built from a heritage of conflict, the Lebanese returned home and started the process of reconstruction. Would that include the Marathon? For Dickinson there was no question, and within a week it was resolved: 26 November was still race day.

The race's main charitable beneficiaries will be the victims of cluster bombs. "These bombs have claimed 14 lives and injured 91 others since the war stopped on 14 August" said May El-Khalil.

A few sponsorships became financially impossible, but the emotional support and energy generated more than compensated for this. Working to catch up for the loss of six weeks preparation time, and changing the marketing orientation, took an intense effort but by 5 September the marathon was ready to meet the challenge. The 2006 event was to be run under the banner 'For the love of Lebanon'.

A week before the race was due to be held Pierre Gemayal, a prominent Government Minister, was assassinated. The Marathon was postponed as a mark of respect. But it will return. The race has found its role as a necessary player in securing the future of Lebanon within a world context.

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