

Out of the void

There can be few race start locations quite as exclusive as that of the Half Marathon of Portugal. Apart from a steady trickle of Sunday morning traffic along one lane of the road, nothing else can be seen that does not directly relate to the race.

This is not surprising; apart from the other three lanes of the road, scores of buses delivering runners to the start, the race gantry, vehicles and officials, nothing else is visible at all. We are on the Vasco da

Gama Bridge, 17.2km long, which stretches across an inland sea that forms part of the extended estuary of the River Tagus.

The flat, marshy eastern side is seldom visible, but morning mist envelopes the bridge so that even the Lisbon skyline, little over 5km distant, cannot be seen. Ten thousand runners make up the field of the Half Marathon and the Fun Run, but it is otherwise a scene of rare isolation. Performing their pre-race stretches against the handrails

of the bridge parapet, runners stare into a blue-grey void in which water and sky are not separately distinguishable.

The Bridge was built 10 years ago, and makes landfall on the western side near the large dockside area on the outskirts of Lisbon that was developed as the site for Expo '98. It was from here, where the race finishes, that runners were packed into a flotilla of 120 Lisbon Metropolitan Transport buses to deliver them to the start. It is only about 8km distant, but the journey involves a full transit of the Bridge to the east side before doubling back through service areas, ducking under the Bridge and joining the westbound carriageway. It takes time, and the buses are continually loaded up from 07.30 to 09.30 for the 10.30 start.

To the motorists heading east from the city across the bridge at around 10.40 on this late summer Sunday morning the hordes of runners heading towards them must have appeared as the monster from the deep. After a kilometre of flat causeway, the course rises up a long slope to span the deepwater channel. It then drops back down from the 98m high summit towards the western shore. In profile the first few kilometres of the course outline the tail and body of a

sleeping dragon, while the runners scaling the slope appear as an endless, heaving mass.

A select group of elite runners spearheaded the charge. Bringing up the tail end was a small army of rubbish collectors, wheelie bins as their chariots, who restored the Bridge to working condition in as short a time as possible. After 3km a group of nineteen runners were together but at 5km, passed in 14.49, the dragon's back had broken them up. Descending from the Bridge onto slip roads a group of eight were clear, with Olympic Marathon Champion Stefano Baldini chasing from a distance.

A little further behind another group crested the Bridge with Bizunesh Bekele and Tigist Tufa among them. In the early stages the Ethiopian duo led from a group of Kenyan women, kept company by Portugal's 1996 Olympic 10,000m Champion Fernanda Ribeiro.

The second 5km were on land, but with few distinguishing sights to mark out the passage of distance. Few spectators made it across the industrial parks to station themselves along the crash barriers of the highway heading north up the Tagus Valley. Runners have no distractions and can concentrate fully on their own race or size up

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the opposition. But there was little chance for Baldini to do so, as the group of eight were fast disappearing from his sight.

At 10km he was 34 seconds in arrears, as the group passed through in 29.08. Still, he caught a glimpse of them as runners then double back the way they came, using the same road. Approaching 15km runners pass under the roadway of the Bridge and for a while run beside participants in the 8km fun run. Now there is no shortage of spectators, and occasionally they try to keep pace alongside. The lead in the men's race remained unchanged right through to 19km, apart from Wesley Ochoro dropping back, but by 15km Bizunesh Bekele had built up a commanding lead at the head of the women's race. The diminutive Ethiopian continued to press hard, and never gave Salina Kosgei any hope of catching her.

Shortly after passing under the Bridge the course finally makes it into recognisably urban streets, and the last 6km is run on three parallel roads. At 17km the course passes very close to the finish line, which

lies just the other side of a shopping centre. From here it is 2km back to a roundabout from which the final run-in to the finish starts.

Robert Cheruiyot left it until here to make his move. He surged and of the six runners accompanying him up to that point it seemed that Jaouad Gharib, the lone non-Kenyan, was the only one able to match his effort. Gradually, as they charged down the tree-lined streets of the Expo site, Cheruiyot edged ahead. But behind him, seemingly out of a void, came Emmanuel Mutai. Patiently awaiting his chance to strike, he slipped past Gharib and then into the lead. Cheruiyot reacted, but could not hold Mutai off as he kicked hard towards the line.

Stefano Baldini had spent the last 6km of the race assiduously chasing Ochoro down but although he passed him as they neared the finish, Ochoro came back again in the final few metres. The women's race had no such drama, as Bekele finished strongly to take a convincing win and string out the rest of the field behind her.

MEN:			
1	Emmanuel MUTAI	KEN	1:01:54
2	Robert CHERUIYOT	KEN	1:02:01
3	Jaouad GHARIB	MAR	1:02:05
4	Francis KIPROP	KEN	1:02:11
5	Wilberforce TALEL	KEN	1:02:15
6	Paul KOSGEI	KEN	1:02:20
7	Silas SANG	KEN	1:02:39
8	Wesley OCHORO	KEN	1:03:53
9	Stefano BALDINI	ITA	1:03:54
10	Jose ROCHA	POR	1:04:09
WOMEN:			
1	Bizunesh BEKELE	ETH	1:10:20
2	Salina KOSGEI	KEN	1:11:08
3	Mary PTIKANY	KEN	1:11:36
4	Ruth KUTOL	KEN	1:12:56
5	Irene JEROTICH	KEN	1:13:34
6	Tigist TUFA	ETH	1:14:09
7	Fernanda RIBEIRO	POR	1:14:15
8	Magdalene CHEMJOR	KEN	1:14:41
9	Justyna BAK	POL	1:15:49
10	Ayelech WORKU	ETH	1:15:50

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RACE CONTACT DETAILS
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Full race contact listings start on page ??

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