

Getting better all the time

By Kenneth Lloyd

On a cool, crisp Sunday morning 25,694 runners lined up at the National Olympic Sport centre in Beijing. The giant flags and banners of various universities and businesses pierced the sea of runners snaking their way out to the sound of 'Malason', a 1960s-sounding Chinese marathon anthem.

Run over a fast, flat out and back course, the start and finish of this year's race were changed from their traditional location at Tiananmen Square to the renovated Olympic sports centre in the north of Beijing. The date of the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, held in the Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square, was only fixed in August and happened to coincide with race day.

Beijing's pollution is an oft-cited problem for sporting events held in the city. It is one of the principal concerns for both the organisers and the participating teams in the upcoming Olympics. For the Marathon conditions were good despite the day not being classed as one of Beijing's sporadic Qingtian or "Blue Sky" days. The north of the city was much less hazy throughout the day than the centre, which recorded a particularly high air particle count. This was aided by a "car-free day initiative" which although by no means obligatory, in conjunction with the road closures seemed to have reduced car use.

The new course enjoyed cleaner air but lost much of the scenic quality of touristic old Beijing for which it was famous. Beijing is a vast sprawling city with many famous sites both old and new. The distance between them, or in the case of the Forbidden City the immense size of the site itself, present their own problems. The old marathon route led runners



through the three Beijings of the Imperial age, the communist architecture of the mid 20th century, and the modernity of 21st century China. The new route is a clear move towards the latter.

What it does offer is a sneak peek at the new Olympic sites, including the main Olympic stadium or the "Bird's Nest" and the aquatic centre or "Water Cube." Next year's race, however, is set to return to Tiananmen Square.

Beijing is one of the international marathon calendar's veterans. Run as an elite event in the early days, Beijing's course record of 2:07:35 was set in 1986 by the Japanese runner Taisuke Kodama, and runners on schedule for a time of more than two and a half hours would be "retired" from the race. Over the last 20 years the race has consistently moved towards mass participation with the addition of several shorter events, including a half-marathon, 10km and a 4.2km fun run. These events have created a diverse, inclusive event. The Marathon manages to attract a predominantly domestic field, a true representation of "local flavour".

Beijing's running population are an inconspicuous group. Although many people can be seen jogging laps around the communal gardens of housing estates and the tracks present on every university campus, runners are not a common site on the streets of Beijing. If anything those running in China for the first time will see sights unseen at the average big-city marathon and perhaps learn a few truths about



Beijing culture. Don't be surprised if you see people running in dress shoes or runners leaving the finish area to immediately light up a cigarette. From the older gentlemen who run in slacks and plimsolls,

seemingly running 42.2km out of habit, to the sub-3 hour club athletes, Chinese runners seem to share an extraordinary hardness, strong sense of camaraderie and a straightforward love of running.



Support for the runners was strong throughout most of the course with many of the finishers from the shorter events staying to support the marathon finishers. Access to the stadium complex and movement to and from different points of the course was difficult. Hundreds of army, police and security personnel were also on hand to secure the course and enforce the road closures, which did at times restrict the movement of those who had come to cheer on friends or family.

The start arrangements, which may have been down to the last minute re-location of the course, presented some problems. The elite men started 15 minutes prior to the rest of the field. The elite women were placed a few metres ahead of the main marathon field, followed respectively by the half marathon, 10km and fun runners. This inevitably led to the elite women being instantly swallowed by the main field and the front runners from the shorter races having to weave their way through the 6,700 marathon runners.

Any visiting runner should be aware of the 5-hour time limit – double what it once was. Runners set to complete the course in over

five hours are asked to board the broom-wagons which drop them at the finish to collect their belongings. Marathon runners receive their medals before the race and those finishing within the time limit also receive a certificate of completion at the finish.

The men's race saw Kenya's Nephath Kinyanjui win in a sprint, pulling away from China's Ren Longyu inside the stadium to win by eight seconds. Both men broke their personal bests; Kinyanjui improving by over three minutes on his previous best time of 2:11.18, set when he won the 2006 Nagano marathon. Ren set a new Chinese national record of 2:08.16. The small elite women's field saw a Chinese sweep of the podium places. Chen Rong led a close race finishing in 2:27:05, 15 seconds ahead of Zhang Yingying and a further 26 seconds clear of third-placer Bai Xue.

The Beijing marathon is progressively refining its organisation, community-interaction and the quality of running experience it offers. The total field of approximately 26,000 within the four races, is already at capacity. This year's race saw the introduction of



several new initiatives to broaden the scope of the marathon, including, a food festival, a photography competition and a partnership with the Red Cross of

China. The ANA Beijing International Marathon looks set to increase its stature within both the international marathon and Beijing cultural calendars.

MEN:

1	Nephath KINYANJUI	KEN	2:08:09
2	Ren LONGYUN	CHN	2:08:15
3	Han GANG	CHN	2:08:56
4	David Kipkorir MANDAGO	KEN	2:09:59
5	Luka CHELIMO	KEN	2:10:47
6	Kataoka YUSUKE	JPN	2:12:28
7	Kiprotich KENEI	KEN	2:14:30
8	Chen GUOQIANG	CHN	2:14:39
9	John MALUNI	KEN	2:14:51
10	Su WEI	CHN	2:14:53

WOMEN:

1	Chen RONG	CHN	2:27:05
2	Zhang YINGYING	CHN	2:27:20
3	Bai XUE	CHN	2:27:46
4	Zhu YINGYING	CHN	2:28:47
5	Jo Pun HUI	PRK	2:29:16
6	Zhang XIN	CHN	2:31:29
7	Jong Yong OK	PRK	2:32:28
8	Yang FENGXIA	CHN	2:33:11
9	An Un SUK	PRK	2:33:12
10	Kim Kurn OK	PRK	2:33:58

RACE CONTACT DETAILS

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Full race contact listings start on page 78