

Marathon researchers have now delved back 70 years, finding the bare statistics that tell a history. Andy Milroy elaborates.

The Association of Road Racing Statisticians (ARRS) has made researching marathon performances of the past central to their mission. There are two interlinked initiatives underway at the moment in pursuit of this.

The Annual Marathon Rankings Project has now documented the last 70 years. The end result of this research are annual lists – usually going down as far as the 200th fastest performance – for the years from 1940 to 2009. These are posted on the ARRS website (http://www.arrs.net/YR_Mara.htm).

The parallel Yearly Marathons Project, co-ordinated by Ken Young, has now produced well developed draft lists for every known marathon held during the years 1940-2009 (see: <http://www.arrs.net/MaraList.htm>). Together these two projects take marathon research far beyond what has previously been attempted. The ARRS network of statisticians from around the World have pooled their research and knowledge to create the most complete picture of the event which has come to dominate long distance running in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

So how does marathon running way back in the 1940s compare with the present day? Back then, 70 years ago, the only marathon race held in many countries was the annual national championships. Even where marathons were more common, such events were relatively small – a field of 50 runners was a big marathon.

It was much tougher to finish a Marathon then than it is now. The conditions under which runners trained and competed were far less favourable. Light-weight canvas shoes with thin rubber soles offered very little protection against impact. Any runners who were not bio-mechanically sound – for example, if they pronated too much or too little – would very easily sustain knee or ankle problems and be unable to finish an event. High-tech running shoes, designed to minimise problems with foot strike, feet or ankles were completely unknown to those runners.

Many Marathon organisers did not provide drinks stations. Where they did, service was very restricted so that hot weather conditions caused major problems. Runners themselves were not fully aware of the importance of hydration.



JIM PETERS ENTERS THE STADIUM AT THE END OF THE POLYTECHNIC MARATHON FROM WINDSOR TO CHISWICK IN THE EARLY 1950S. IN ONE OF HIS THREE WORLD RECORD BREAKING RUNS ON THE COURSE (2:20:43 IN 1952, 2:18:35 IN 1953 AND 2:17:40 IN 1954)

Specific dietary preparation was limited to eating a hearty steak alarmingly close to the start of the race. The virtues of “carbo-loading” were yet to be discovered.

Marathon runners were a small, select group. Marathons were usually clustered geographically close to each other – in the United States, for example, most of the events took place on the East coast, and with such a small community of runners it was not uncommon for top runners to tackle three or four marathons a year.

Marathon courses were not measured to the same accuracy as today. Measurement by today’s approved calibrated bicycle method was unknown until the 1960s and did not come into widespread use until the 1980s. Despite this, it can be argued that within any particular era the variation between one course and another would be similar.

In the 1940s accurate measurement would have been by surveyor’s wheel. Arthur Newton measured

the Comrades Marathon course in the 1930s by that method. Just as today, courses which were obviously short or aided were flagged up and those events were investigated. This happened in the 1880s, the 1900s and, to judge from the information we have researched, ever since.

To some degree, marathon runners are a measuring device in their own right. Each runner knows, and perhaps more importantly their opponents know, the times that each runner can produce in a marathon. A notably faster result raises questions, particularly if numerous runners in the same event have significantly faster than expected times.

Using the excel program, I have entered all the marathon data for several years in the 1950s and then sorted according to individual cases. It was something of a surprise to find that there were none of the major variations that might have been expected. Only one race was thrown up as notably “faster” – and that was one which

had been queried at the time and reportedly re-measured.

What is even more surprising is the way that times by the same runner run on different courses were often very similar. It would seem there was a degree consistency in course measurement. However, Marathons were held in relatively few countries and it was in those countries without a long established tradition of marathon events that issues with short courses later emerged.

Using excel allows courses that produce faster performances to be identified. An average performance for a specific runner can be calculated and suspicion will fall on any race in which that runner significantly better his average (in those days there were almost no women running Marathons).

In the 1940s and earlier it was not unusual for a runner to run four or five marathons a year – some ran even more. Some were so consistent they could almost be used as standard candles – to use an astronomical term. A sudden improvement in their time raised questions about the race and its course.

The data which has been collected and posted on the ARRS website is an immense resource for those interested in analysing marathon, indeed sporting performance data and how it changes over time. It provides insight into how one of the most interesting grass roots sporting events – the big city marathon – evolved in terms of both performance level and participation. It offers sociologists and economists insight into how such a grass roots sport, not dependent on heavy infrastructure costs, was affected by social and economic factors, both nationally and internationally.

The intention is to extend the research back to 1900 and earlier, and excellent progress is already being made towards achieving this goal. The research is ongoing and earlier years will be added to the ARRS website as soon as they can be researched and processed.

In addition to the Marathons projects, the ARRS website also documents hundreds of long held marathons, road, and track and cross country races, including national and international championships. For further information see: www.arrs.net

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What keeps this man going on his epic ultramarathon quest, he can't really explain, but Alison Kay offers some insights

He might say it's faith. Others might add words like passion, courage and sheer determination to succeed. Whatever drives him, Paul Selby is something of a running legend in his adopted homeland of South Africa.

He runs for pleasure and for charity. His business is designing and producing finisher medals for marathon runners worldwide. He launched the 1000km Challenge to acknowledge those who run huge distances every year in training for the iconic Comrades Marathon in South Africa. This year he tackled his 25th consecutive Comrades Marathon – despite badly breaking his ankle on a casual training run last October.

Paul has come a long way from his 1983 invitation from workmates to participate in a company relay – he's come more than 100,000km in fact. Back then he didn't know what a relay was. Now he clocks up at least 2000km a year in official competitions, without counting the training runs.

Distance isn't an issue for this English expatriot. In 1999 he completed a 180km back-to-back Comrades Marathon, raising 200,000 rand for the Cancer Association of South Africa. The feat has never been repeated.

In 2003, he joined a team of five fellow Brits aiming to run 1000 miles in 1000 hours around the London Marathon route, raising money for charity. The idea was to re-enact the feat of Captain Robert Barclay in 1809, who completed the challenge to win a bet.

This time, competitors covered the London Marathon course 38 times in 1 mile hourly segments every day and night for six weeks. Despite sleep deprivation and the short bursts of exercise, the competition was timed so that immediately after completing 1000 miles, they then ran in the official London Marathon to determine the winner.

When Paul realised that he could overcome the sleep deprivation of about an hour maximum at any one time, he took to running greater distances in between each mile to tone up for the marathon. The tactic worked; he finished the race and returned to South Africa



PAUL SELBY (LEFT) WITH DISTANCE RUNNING COMRADES IN THE HANNOVER MARATHON 2009

with a share of the charity money to distribute in the homeland he adopted in 1973.

On 1 October last year, Paul sustained a triple ankle break during a training run - his first serious injury in 25 years of running. He focused on fully recovering in time for his 25th Comrades ultra-marathon this year – also his 640th all-time marathon.

Complications meant three months on crutches, after which Paul spent hours aqua-jogging and walking to rebuild muscle-tone around the ankle. In early April he completed a half marathon in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 2:29 in an attempt to get on track for a shot at Comrades. He followed this up with marathons in London (5:43) and Hannover (5:10).

Happily his ankle held up, but he says his body seemed to collapse around him and with only 150km of running in his legs in eight months, Comrades was always going to be a tough call.

Paul's 1000km in the 1000km Challenge was also under threat. The 1000km Challenge is a competition launched in 1990 by Paul and his wife Jenny, in memory of Jenny's late husband Johnny Kambouris, a keen Comrades and distance runner.

The idea is for runners to complete at least 1000km in recognised road

races in the year running from Comrades to Comrades. For this they receive a bronze medal, a t-shirt and recognition of the hours they have committed to distance running. A portion of their Challenge entry fee is donated to charity. Personalised silver, gold and platinum medals are presented to runners who cover 1000 miles, 1500 miles and 5023km (combined bronze, silver and gold distances) in a year.

Paul says 11 runners have completed all 19 years with one person holding the record of almost 9000km run in one year. Paul has completed almost 50,000km since inception and, despite his ankle injury, he scraped in with over 1000km this year.

The Comrades Marathon is the highlight of the year for distance runners in South Africa.

"It's a life-changing experience," says Paul. "It is so tough. You feel sorry for yourself. You hurt; you struggle and suffer; then you see the next runner and realise they are in the same plight. Comrades is a life adventure in one day. It motivates so many people."

Sadly, at Comrades this year, Paul was forced to throw in the towel and accept defeat in Pinetown, with just 2 hours and 20km of the 90km to go. While rejoicing that his ankle had held up, he had to accept that lack of regular distance

training had affected his strength in other ways. He says "with God's help" he will be back on the winning trail next year.

One of Paul's proudest achievements was receiving a Spirit of Comrades Award in 2007, acknowledging his support of the race, his back-to-back Comrades run, the 1000km Challenge and his penchant for helping struggling runners along the route.

Charitable causes are something Paul feels strongly about. In the country that has given him a home, a wife, a family and a living, he believes it is important to give something back.

The marathon medal business grew out of his engineering company, when Paul discovered a flair for design combined well with his engineering skills. He has supplied medals to the London Marathon since 1996 and the Berlin Marathon since 1997. Also in the production collection are New York, Two Oceans and, of course, Comrades marathons.

These days he produces more than 2 million finisher medals annually for marathon runners worldwide.

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