

The 10 Most Important Marathons in History

BY HAL HIGDON

10x10=100

Humans have been running, if not racing, long distances probably since before the beginning of recorded time. But more often this was for survival rather than for fun. “Pedestrianism” (walking rather than running) began to become popular midway through the 19th century. And at the end of that century, the name “marathon” became attached to races run over distances of about 25 miles, such as at the first Olympic Games in 1896. What are the 10 most important marathons in history? Consider the following list.

Marathon to Athens 490 BC

In identifying important, historic marathons, how can we overlook that first marathon: not the Olympic Marathon won by Spiridon Louis but the legendary run by Pheidippides? Pheidippides was the warrior messenger who, in 490 BC, ran from the plains of Marathon into Athens with news of the Greek victory over the Persians. “Rejoice, we conquer!” Pheidippides announced, and then died. Revisionists now tell us that fatal run probably never did happen—at least not as reported by Plutarch five centuries after the Battle of Marathon. But the tales told by Homer in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* seem specious, too. Consider that without the Pheidippides legend, there never would have been a first Olympic Marathon for Louis to win. Our success as marathoners, thus, hangs by a slender historical thread. Do not complain: be thankful that the Persians chose Marathon and not the port city of Piraeus for their invasion. Not only is the name “Piraeus” less melodious than that of “Marathon” (would you like to be called a pirate instead of a marathoner?), but the distance for Pheidippides’s run would have been only 12 kilometers—hardly worth a legend.



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▲ The start of the 1908 Olympic Marathon in London, the first “26-mile, 385-yard” marathon.

London Olympics 1908

The first Olympic Games in Athens in 1896 amounted to little more than a show for locals with a few Europeans and wealthy Americans appearing to claim most of the track medals. In Paris in 1900, the two French marathoners who first crossed the finish line allegedly cut the course, and four years later the same was true of the declared winner in St. Louis (later disqualified). Leave it to the Brits to finally get it right at London in 1908. Supposedly they backed the start up to Windsor Castle so Queen Victoria’s grandchildren could see the race. For reasons still unclear, this eventually locked the distance we cover into 26 miles, 385 yards. There is a certain quirkiness about that distance that cannot be discounted when you consider the marathon’s appeal. Regardless, car window decals boasting the owner has gone “26.2” are as ubiquitous as flies around a watermelon. Would “25” decals sell as well? Nah!

Alamosa Olympic Trials 1968

As for the 60-year gap between 1908 and 1968, did nothing historically relevant happen? Not much. Other than Boston and maybe the Poly in Britain (on the old Olympic course), marathoning existed as a shadow sport, failing to penetrate the public consciousness for more than a half century. Clarence DeMar won Boston seven times—impressive, but in an era when the race attracted mostly a hundred or so locals. Emil Zatopek’s Olympic marathon victory in 1952 serves mostly as a footnote to his more impressive 5,000 and 10,000 wins on the track. Fast forward

to the 1968 Trials in Colorado. David L. Costill, PhD, a young researcher whose athletic background was in swimming, showed up with a bag of plastic bottles. He had been doing research at the newly formed Human Performance Laboratory at Ball State University. His discovery: runners who drank water (or Gatorade) performed better than runners who did not. Ironically, officials honoring the outdated international rule book prevented Costill from handing out fluids before 15K, but his continuing research provided the scientific base that today allows all of us to race in safety in warm weather and skip blithely past The Wall. Also worth noting at Alamosa was the appearance of a Yale student vacationing in the area. More a track athlete, this was his first semiserious attempt at the marathon distance. He failed to make it past 20 miles. His name was Frank Shorter.

Honolulu 1973

In 1973, Duncan Macdonald won the first Honolulu Marathon in a time that seems middling by today's standards: 2:27:34. But Macdonald was a 5,000-meter runner, not a marathoner, one good enough to qualify for the US Olympic team. He would win Honolulu on two more occasions in faster times. Only 151 runners finished that first Honolulu Marathon, but the 1973 race was significant for two reasons. One: it was the first "destination marathon," important less for the competition and more for where the competition was held (in a scenic locale). Two: one of Honolulu's founding fathers, cardiologist Jack Scaff, MD, pioneered the idea that running marathons was safe, even for heart patients. More important, Dr. Scaff organized one of the first marathon training classes for beginning runners, held in Kapiolani Park each Sunday. If you showed up to class with some regularity



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▲ The start of the 1973 Honolulu Marathon. Honolulu pioneered start-in-the-dark running.

and listened to Dr. Scuff, you were almost certain to have one of the volunteers at the finish line hang a lei around your neck.

Eugene Olympic Trials 1976

Frank Shorter had won the Olympic Marathon in 1972, and who can ignore the historic significance of that fact or overlook Shorter's four victories in the Fukuoka Marathon in Japan? But Eugene was the first time that Frank faced off with the man who would become his successor: Bill Rodgers. Rather than cruising the course, the two raced elbow to elbow for 26 miles, Shorter prevailing in the final mile. The Dynamic Duo's final times: 2:11.51 and 2:11.58. Shorter also bested Rodgers in the 1976 Olympics, placing second while his rival had an uncharacteristic bad day, placing 40th. (Don Kardong missed winning the bronze medal by three seconds.) After that, it was all Bill for the rest of the decade, winning four New York City Marathons and four Boston Marathons. Frank rightfully has been given credit for igniting the first running boom, inspiring baby boomers just turned 30 to get off the couch and start jogging. But more than Frank, it was Frank and Bill who were the best marathoners of the decade, not merely in the United States but around the world.

New York City 1976

Later that same year, Bill bested Frank at New York, but less important historically than the race up front was the 26 miles and 385 yards of real estate beneath their feet. The course of the 1976 New York City Marathon became the true celebrity. Founded in 1970, the New York City Marathon originally utilized a multilap course in Central Park designed by entrepreneur Fred Lebow. That worked for the few runners early in the decade but not for the hordes that would follow. For 1976, Lebow repositioned the course so runners traversed all five boroughs from Staten Island to Brooklyn to the Bronx to Queens and Manhattan. New York burst all boundaries of how many runners could fit on a race course: 1,549 in 1976, peaking at 46,795 finishers in 2011. This was the first of the big-city marathons. Today, most of the major world cities have their own megaraces. New York now teams with Boston, London, Berlin, Chicago, and Tokyo plus the Olympic and World Championships for a Major Marathon circuit that awards \$1 million in prizes each year.

Avon Marathon, London 1980

Kathrine Switzer attained fame as one of the early women to run the Boston Marathon. More important historically, however, was her developing with the sponsorship of Avon Products a marathon for women only. The first two Avon International



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▲ The mass of runners in Brooklyn during the 1977 New York City Marathon. Fred's five-borough course caused the race to go viral.



Avon Running/Yellowdog Productions

Women's Marathons attracted some attention in Atlanta (1978) and Waldniel, Germany (1979), and then Switzer brashly turned her attention to London. The United Kingdom had long served as a bastion of road running, but the only London marathon (the Poly) was on the outskirts of town. At a reception before the Avon race in 1980, Chris Brasher (one of the runners who paced Roger Bannister to the first four-minute mile) told Switzer, "They said yes to you. They have to now say yes to us." Brasher was talking about persuading those who ruled the City of London to allow a marathon run in the shadow of Big Ben. Perhaps even more significant was the fact that by demonstrating the latent ability of women runners from nations throughout the world, Switzer was able to persuade a

◀ Lorraine Moeller won the 1980 Avon International Women's Marathon in London.

heel-dragging International Olympic Committee to add a marathon to the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. OK, it would have happened eventually (maybe by 1988 or 1992), but with Switzer being both pushy and charming, it happened in time for Joan Benoit to win her gold medal at Los Angeles.

Berlin 1990

Like many such events, the Berlin Marathon had humble beginnings: fewer than 250 runners in 1974, the winning time being 2:44:53 for Günter Hallas. Only 10 women entered, Jutta von Haase winning in 3:22:01. But the running boom had barely begun in the United States, and several years passed before that boom infected Europe with its focus as much on midpackers as fast elites. For the marathon's early years, Berlin remained a divided city, an ugly wall separating East Berlin and West Berlin. Leading into the 1990 race, the wall still stood, but reduced tensions between East and West had softened sufficiently to allow marathon planners to consider a course that, finally, would include both halves of the once-divided city. By race day, the wall was gone, and the 22,806 runners who strode purposefully for the first time through the Brandenburg Gate found that they had participated in no ordinary marathon, but one that symbolized the end of the Cold War. Three days after the marathon at midnight, those marathoners still in town watched fireworks light the sky above the gate as West Germany and East Germany became a single united country. And despite those early "slow" times, Berlin now maintains a reputation as fastest of the Marathon Majors, eight world records having been set on its course since 1977.



Courtesy of the Berlin Marathon

▲ After the wall crumbled, runners passed freely through the Brandenburg Gate during the 1990 Berlin Marathon.



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▲ Kenya's Patrick Makau set the current men's world record at the 2011 Berlin Marathon.

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| Men | 2011 — Patrick Makau Musyoki (KEN) 2:03:38 |
| | 2008 — Haile Gebrselassie (ETH) 2:03:59 |
| | 2007 — Haile Gebrselassie (ETH) 2:04:26 |
| | 2003 — Paul Tergat (KEN) 2:04:55 |
| | 1998 — Ronaldo da Costa (BRA) 2:06:05 |
| Women | 2001 — Naoko Takahashi (JPN) 2:19:46 |
| | 1999 — Tegla Loroupe (KEN) 2:20:43 |
| | 1977 — Christa Vahlensieck (GER) 2:34:48 |

Boston 1996

Leading into the last decade of the millennium, fields of 20,000 or more finishers had started to become common among major marathons, but for its 100th-anniversary celebration in 1996, Boston broke all boundaries, relaxing its qualifying standards to permit a lottery. Previously, if you wanted to run Boston, you needed to achieve a Boston qualifying time (BQ): 3:10 for men, 3:40 for women, the standards easing for runners in older age groups. Indeed, apart from its being the world's oldest continuously run marathon, the great appeal of Boston was that you had to post a qualifying time and demonstrate your ability. Opening the field and filling it by means of a lottery allowed many who never would have achieved a BQ to be part of this historic run. Despite the narrowness of the road, particularly in the early miles between Hopkinton and Framingham, the B.A.A. managed to wedge 36,000 runners onto the course. After a hundred years, the marathon truly had come of age.



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▲ Boston's 100th running in 1996 set a new standard for marathon race numbers.

Chicago 2007

The Chicago Marathon (originally called the Mayor Daley Marathon) got its start in 1976, the same year New York switched to its five-borough course. Actually, that year Chicago had even more finishers. But through the 1980s, Chicago seemed to stay a half step behind New York in its attractiveness to runners, including those at the front of the field. That changed in 1990, when Carey Pinkowski became race director. With the help of a sponsor with deep pockets (LaSalle Bank, now Bank of America) he lured to his flat and fast course runners who set world record times, including Khalid Khannouchi in 1999 (2:05:42) and Paula Radcliffe in 2002 (2:17:18). But Chicago deserves its place at the end of this top-10 list not because of its successes but because of its one failure. Our vulnerability as runners was exposed in 2007 when the race-day temperature peaked at 88. Ten thousand runners chose not to start, and 10,000 were not able to finish. Volunteers found themselves unable to keep up with the demand for water, causing the marathon to be stopped, runners still on the course aimed back to the finish line early. Understandably, this angered a lot of runners, but in the aftermath of the Chicago meltdown, race directors all over the world did some soul-searching to assure the safety of the runners under their charge. And if Chicago was embarrassed in 2007, New York was embarrassed in 2012, when the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy resulted in the race being canceled. Nobody was prepared for the bombs that exploded on Bolyston Street on April 15, 2013.

The sport of running 26 miles, 385 yards, which owes its origin to a legend more than 2,500 years old, endures, and the above races remain the 10 most important marathons in history. 