

Running into the heart of Africa

Standard Chartered Nairobi Marathon, Kenya. 23 October 2005

By Darius Kenyatta Ellis and Evelyn Mung'au

Comparing the map of Africa to a human body – and Africa is where humans came from – Nairobi is located where the heart is. The Kenyan capital is unquestionably the hub of East Africa (though Addis Ababa is a close second). It is also the epicentre of world running talent. Since the days of Kip Keino, Kenyan runners have spilled out onto the world scene, dominating races in all corners of the globe. A bit like their East African ancestors did in the original settlement of the world.

So it was not surprising that the third edition of the Standard Chartered Nairobi Marathon had a record turnout and met with a rapturous reception from the city's residents. Locals greeted runners enthusiastically, and really captured the essence of marathon running in Africa. As part of Standard Chartered Bank's Greatest Race on Earth series (Nairobi, Singapore, Mumbai and Hong Kong) solid advertising weeks before the race was

standard. The corporate double helix and blue and green colors of the Standard Chartered Bank Group could be seen everywhere and sponsors came out to lend their support. In this nation of elite marathoners who dominate podium places in city marathons from Boston to Bangkok, expectations for such an event run high.

There were five races to choose from, each of which encapsulated some of the very different reasons why over 12,000 participants woke up early on a Sunday morning and chose to run. At over 1,800m of altitude, the race is not a cakewalk for those coming from lower altitudes. Fortunately, the runners were welcomed with an overcast sky, a cool breeze, and the warmth of both the October African sun and the residents of Nairobi.

Thousands of runners congregated at the Kenyatta International Conference Center (KICC). In front of the grandiose statue of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, lively music played and a positive atmosphere prevailed as young and old prepared to achieve their respective personal bests. As in running events around the world, the largest turnout of

4,500 was in the 5km family fun run. The 10km race was managed as two events; the usual 10km race competition and a corporate team challenge. Over 2,000 women and 3,000 men ran in the 10km race.

All participants, from fun run to marathon, contributed through their registration fees to charities assisting the sightless. The Bank's corporate social responsibility drive is to meet targets to restore vision established in association with the Vision 2020 campaign. The winners of the corporate team challenge were also able to donate 50,000 Kenyan shillings to a charity as a result of their collective efforts.

The 21km and 42km runs also drew large turnouts. These were the professional races, a unique opportunity to showcase and support local talent. They offer a chance for aspiring runners to gain invaluable big-race experience and win handsome prize money. There were 1,800 competitors in the half and just over 1,000 runners in the full 42.195km. Runners came from far and wide; 150 foreign runners came from 50 countries, accepting the challenge of a high-altitude

course. Several dozen inspiring wheelchair racers also contributed to the diversity of those out struggling to complete the course.

This marathon is also where new stars are born. Like Chemokil Chilapong, a housewife and mother of four living in a remote part of the country who sold some of her family's livestock in order to pay her bus fare to come to run in Nairobi last year. She won the race, and today Chemokil Chilapong is a serious athlete with prospects overseas.

World record holder Paul Tergat was at the start along with other dignitaries. The marathon started with an early adrenalin surge as we clocked even the middle pack of runners at 15km per hour (we used two Garmin GPS units to document the course and altitude variations over 42km). Runners left the KICC and turned first onto Moi and then Kenyatta Avenue, running through the central business district and passing sites honoring World War Two soldiers. Making a right turn onto Uhuru Highway ("freedom" in Kiswahili), we covered several kilometres on this main thoroughfare before heading to the highest point of the course at 1872m.





As we ran along Uhuru Highway, we could see the elite runners disappear into the morning mist.

We headed towards Waiyaki Way, along the same road which takes visitors to the famed Maasai Mara and Nakuru Parks. Then we turned and took the Ngong Road. At around 20km we made another U-turn and ran down gently sloping hills to Mbagathi Way where we caught a glimpse of Wilson Airport, the gateway for flights to Kenya's national parks and wildlife reserves.

We met with other runners along the way who had their own inspiring stories to tell, such as

Wambui, a grandmother who really wanted to know whether she had it in her to go the full distance.

There was Elkanah, also running his first marathon, in his late twenties and an avid football and rugby player and fan who became inspired to run after a dare from his workmates. Known for his regular Wednesday and Friday night beer drinking and for eating roasted meat in huge portions, he cut back on his diet. He dedicated himself to finishing his first race after reading a brochure at the gym he joined which quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson: "What lies behind us and what lies before us

are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

What still lay before us was the road to Langata and then Mombasa Road for the last 10km. Here the course is flat and fast. A cyclist was giving runners bananas and oranges as we ran by and grateful runners asked, "are you for the banana group or for the orange team?" In an upcoming 21 November 2005 constitutional referendum, the banana is the official symbol for those in favor and the orange is the symbol of those opposed. The debate has polarised Ministers and politicians in the government and civil society and led to violent demonstrations nationwide. Some innocent lives have been lost, including a child at the time of writing. But in races all over the world, including here, these are the two fruits served by marathon organizers because of their inherent value to runners. We especially needed a boost after having run 32km.

From Mombasa Road we continued onto Uhuru Highway to the finish, cheers and admiration welcomed the thousands of finishers as we crossed the line adjacent to the KICC.

MEN			
1	Samson BARMAO	KEN	2:12:15
2	Benedict Muli	KEN	2:12:38
3	Elias KEMBOI	KEN	2:13:40
4	Yarasiya Lisoreng	KEN	2:14:02
5	Benjamin ITOK	KEN	2:14:21
6	Tuwei Korir KIPROP	KEN	2:15:06
7	Jeremiah CHEROMEI	KEN	2:15:17
8	Kimutai KIPLANGAT	KEN	2:15:19
9	Samson LOYWAPET	KEN	2:15:25
10	Julius MUTAI	KEN	2:15:30
WOMEN			
1	Caroline CHEPTANUI	KEN	2:36:08
2	Irene CHERUTICH	KEN	2:37:52
3	Pamela CHEPCHUMBA	KEN	2:41:12
4	Wandahi NYAMBURA	KEN	2:45:47
5	Monica KIBET	KEN	2:47:49
6	Delilah ASIAGO	KEN	2:48:01
7	Judy KIPLIMO	KEN	2:48:15
8	Elizabeth KIRKOR	KEN	2:48:55
9	Irene KEMUNTO	KEN	2:49:46
10	Xiaohuan LIU	CHN	2:50:11

The Nairobi Standard Chartered Marathon could not have been launched at a more appropriate moment; it has quickly become one of Kenya's tourist attractions. With the UNESCO World Heritage Site designations of old Lamu town on Kenya's coast, Mt. Kenya National Park and Lake Turkana in the north, and the country's renowned parks, there are ever more reasons to visit this great country.

Runners have an easy opportunity to see most of the city for themselves, while sharing the course with some of the best runners in the world and being accompanied on the road by ordinary people, in the homeland of running.

