

## Stories of marathon centenary



It was in the summer of 1924 that Vojtech Braun Bukovský, Košice sports enthusiast, organizer, and journalist in one person, went to see the Olympic Games in Paris. The enthusiasm he returned home with was channelled into his decision to organize a marathon race, as it was this particular discipline which thrilled him the most in Paris. And so it happened that just a few weeks later, on 28th October, the day of the 6th anniversary of the establishment of Czechoslovakia, eight brave pioneers lined up for the start below the ruins of Turňa Castle and then set off in the direction of Košice, towards a then still unsuspected adventure. The first winner, local runner Karol Halla, tried defending his first place another nine times altogether, but the growing competition was against this. The very second edition already had an international line-up, and the winners' laurels from the third were carried off to Germany around the neck of Paul Hempel. He was sent here by the Charlottenburg Sports Club, which still exists to this day and stands, as it has always stood, behind the Berlin Marathon.

The Marathon quickly made itself at home in Eastern Slovakia and started getting a response from the rest of the world as well. One persistently memorable year was 1931, when the 20-year-old Argentinian new boy Juan Carlos Zabala shocked everyone with his course record of 2:33:19. Many doubting voices were raised, but they were all silenced a year later by Zabala's victory at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. It must be stressed that the performances achieved in Košice always had the hallmark of credibility, because since 1924 the course has been remeasured every year exactly in accordance with the rules to ensure it conforms with the now generally acknowledged 42,195 kilometres. This has not always been as self-evident as it might seem, when even as late as 1956 for example the Boston Marathon was run over a course of only 40.6 km.

Not even the torments of war could stop the Marathon, and its continuity was preserved. The early snowfall in 1946 was a kind of premonition that the era of the Northerners was beginning. In the ten years following that snowfall, runners from Norway, Sweden and Finland won a total of eight times, with the Swede Thomas Nilsson finally setting a new course record of 2:22:06 in 1956.

During that period the Košice Marathon had a superb reputation in Scandinavia. *"May Boston forgive us, but the greatest marathon contests in the world are being played out in Košice,"* wrote the daily Göteborg Posten. And the leader of the Swedish team announced: *"If I could, I would declare the Košice Marathon the official championships of Europe – it is unofficially so today in any case."*

A great shift in the course record was achieved in 1959 by the Russian Sergej Popov, who not only won in Košice with a time of 2:17:45, but also climbed by the end of that year to first place in the world marathon rankings. And in one more parameter Košice was number one in the world, namely in the number of participants. It may seem laughable in terms of today's marathon mass starts, but in 1946 and 1947 Košice had the most runners finishing

the race in comparison with the rest of the world, 74 in both years. Nowhere in the world could outdo Košice in this regard in 1951 either, when there were 69 finishers.

In 1960 Košice acquired its own artistic symbol, a 3,5-metre high, bronze statue of a marathon runner, on the plinth below which everyone could admire the names of the winners. Just a year later the name of one of the greatest was added there. He came, he saw, he conquered. We are referring to Abebe Bikila, Olympic champion in Rome and later in Tokyo as well. The population of the city at that time was no more than 80 000, but nearly 30 000 people were crammed into the stadium to see the finish, and several thousands more plentifully lined the course too.

The next few Marathons were graced with other fine-sounding names, world record-holder, American Leonard Edelen won in 1963, and brilliant runners from Great Britain and the Commonwealth took turns lining up at the start, such as Bill Adcocks, John Farrington, Derek Clayton, and Ron Hill.

To run in Košice meant meeting a quite demanding qualification time limit. This became history in 1980, when the Košice marathon was opened to women as well. For many years the women's event was ruled by the German Christa Vahlensieck. Back in 1977 she had set the world record of 2:34:48 in Berlin, and in Košice between 1981 and 1988 she won five times altogether. Her countryman, double Olympic winner Waldemar Cierpinski, tried repeatedly for victory in Košice, but none of his five starts here brought him that honour. He started his marathon career with his debut in Košice in 1974 and completed it here as well with his start in 1985.

The year 1989 brought great changes in more than one sense. Less than two months before the Velvet Revolution, it looked like the Marathon itself was anticipating the changes in society. The traditional course going out to Seňa and back, which had awaited the runners from 1926 onwards, was replaced with a city circuit. This attracted the attention of the whole world in 1997, when the IAAF World Half-marathon Championships were held in Košice. Records were broken, with three men finishing with times under 60 minutes. The race was controlled by Kenya, and the titles were taken by Shem Kororia and Tegla Loroupe.

Just two years later Košice gained another honour. The city hosted the 12th AIMS World Congress, getting the chance to present its rich marathon history and organizational abilities once again. At that time, but many times later as well, it was declared that Košice is the place continually organizing the oldest marathon in Europe. The only place with a greater tradition in the world is Boston. Attentive statisticians will surely have noticed that these marathons both have two common winners. They are the Swede Karl Leanderson (Boston 1949, Košice 1948 and 1950) and the Belgian Aurel Vandenhessche (Boston 1963 and 1964, Košice 1965).

Today the Košice Marathon is a colourful festival of sport and fun, attracting roughly 10 000 participants from all over the world. All those running around the extensive historical centre of this city, the first in Europe to acquire its own coat of arms from King Louis the Great in 1369, must surely admire the Gothic St. Elizabeth's Cathedral from the 14th century and a great many other architectural gems in this metropolis. It was also thanks to this heritage and its programme of creative transformation that Košice gained the title of European Capital of Culture for the year 2013.

This Marathon is attractive not only due to its tradition and precise organization, and the olden-day charm of the city, but also for the fast course it offers. This has not changed essentially since the World Championships in 1997, and it has kept its epithets: flat and fast. This is witnessed by the many personal best records which the hobby runners in Košice improve on every year, as well as course records, reflecting the gradually increasing level of the event.

The past few years have shown that the Košice Peace Marathon can overcome even the most difficult of obstacles. It managed to preserve its continuity even in the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. And in the midst of this difficult period yet another major award arrived, this time in the form of a World Athletics Heritage Plaque. This is great encouragement before a unique milestone to come; the year 2024 will be the 100th anniversary of the founding and start of the first marathon run in Košice.

If you ask the runners what they see as exceptional in the Košice Marathon, their answers often match. The unusual atmosphere, streets full of runners and spectators, and positive energy which everyone recharges themselves with mutually. This is an image which reflects almost 100 years of existence of the marathon phenomenon in this city. The people understand this marathon, live with it, and are rightly proud of it.