



## British experts talk about 2 hours marathon about 6 years ago.

Just before the London Marathon this year there was programme on BBC radio speculating on the possibility of the two hour marathon being run. The consensus seemed to be that the feat is possible but it may take quite a few years until this is achieved. In fact the now ex holder of the world's fastest time, Haile Gebrselassie said "It might take another twenty five years but it will happen". There have been 'barriers' to performances before and the most famous one was the four minute mile. Before Roger Bannister first achieved this at Oxford in 1954 many pundits had come to the conclusion that this was impossible to achieve. Since then over a thousand athletes have broken the sub four minute mile and greater numbers have achieved the 1500m equivalent of about 3 minutes 42 secs. However, the sub two barrier for the marathon may well prove to be a formidable one.

In the 2011 London Marathon Emmanuel Mutai won in a London record of 2 hours 4 minutes 40 secs. He looked pretty good doing it puts him 5th on the world all time list. (See Table 1) To beat two hours an athlete would need to run nearly 11 seconds per mile faster than Mutai. The two hour marathon would be run at a speed of 4 minutes 35 secs per mile or to put it another way, not a long way outside 14 minutes for each 5km split

It is very easy to criticise British distance running performances and many have. It is a curious point that numbers competing in the London marathon have increased to well over 30,000. In addition, the number of sports science graduates has also increased in the last thirty years. This is not matched by an improvement at the top end of performances.

It is certainly not a case that the greater number of competitors results in a higher standard. Of the top British performances of all time only Steinlie's performance has happened in the last decade and some of the top 10 performances go back 40 years!

Charlie Spedding is the last British athlete to win an Olympic medal in the event in 1984. John Brown has finished 4th in two Olympic marathons. It is also fair to say that the trend in the last twenty years at least has been for the Olympic event to be held in quite hot conditions that are not conducive to fast times anyway. Is it about time that there were some more recent additions to the British top ten? Clearly the sub 2 hour marathon would be an absolutely phenomenal performance. It would have to be achieved with excellent pace making, but come to think of it there still aren't a great number of sub 60 minutes half marathoners around. It would have to be on a flat, fast course and venues such as Berlin, Rotterdam and Chicago come to mind. The weather conditions would have to be perfect with a temperature in the region of 12 - 14 degrees. The athlete would probably have been capable of a sub 12 minutes 50 secs 5000m. Of course there would also be a big financial incentive for the athlete concerned too.

The women's marathon is a different matter. It first appeared in the Olympic programme as recently as 1984. Paula Radcliffe set the standard with the three fastest times in history. It would seem that her time in London of 2 hours 15 minutes 25 secs set in 2003 is proving difficult for other athletes to approach at present. Despite this being a relatively new event for women some of the best British performances go back to the 1980's.

Paul Evans has been one of Britain's fastest marathon runners and has some interesting views on the current state of marathon running in Britain. He is still 4th on the all time British list and finished 3rd, 4th and 5th in the London Marathon. He also ran 27 minutes 46 secs for 10,000m and ran under 28 minutes on six occasions. In 1992 he finished 5th in the London marathon in 2hrs 10 minutes 36 secs and was only picked as non travelling reserve for the Olympic games in Barcelona. "Today I would have been picked for the Olympics straight away with a time like that". He was actually picked for the 10,000m and made the final. Yes, there were heats for the event in Barcelona.

Why aren't we getting better performances? "Too many athletes are running in their comfort zones", Evans feels. With reference to the huge number of runners in the London Marathon and events such as the Great North Run he says "We are becoming a nation of recreational runners". As part of his job working for Active Norfolk he visits a number of running clubs and feels that athletes are not training hard enough or fast enough. "They are not doing enough tempo running" Evans maintains.

Interestingly he feels that we are not making use of the experiences and achievements of

the runners who have been successful in the past. "We have a tradition of successful distance runners and this includes Brendan Foster, Dave Bedford and Mick McLeod. Many of the athletes in the top ten marathon list are not being made use of and they have a huge amount to offer". These are interesting points that Evans makes.