



# MASSACCELERATION

It takes a lot to halt the traffic in the world's great cities, but many are willing to shut down their city centres in order to stage mass participation sports events. **Kevin McCullagh** reports on their growing impact on sports, cities and sponsors.

MARATHONS, TRIATHLONS and mass cycle rides are seeing citizens reclaim the roads from the motor vehicle in the name of getting active, getting fit, raising money for charities and the simple, physical bodily challenge.

The biggest events are big business too. The world's great marathons have been major sponsorship properties for years. The five biggest marathons - Boston, New York, London, Berlin, and Chicago - are now working together under the umbrella of the 'World Marathon Majors' to boost media profile and bring structure to the discipline at the elite level.

Prompted by the efforts of a myriad of organisers, including charities, cities wanting to boost profile and public health, and professional agencies, a wide range of sports are gaining mass participation events. Many in the industry tip triathlon to break through and achieve mass popularity in the coming years. Its cousin the duathlon also has a growing presence.

However running is still by far and away the most common sport at the heart of mass participation events. It requires the least

infrastructure and facilities and is arguably the most accessible sport of all. If you are a resident in a major city in the US, western Europe, or Australia, where the mass participation phenomenon is most prevalent, the chances are that whatever distance you fancy yourself over, there will be an event for you, from 1K to the famous 26.2 mile-mark set by Pheidippides.

## Running repositioned

The world's marathons have driven an evolution in running as a sport that has seen the marathon distance go from an 'extreme' event in the 1970s, to very much part of the mainstream today. Many people who would not consider themselves athletes enter marathons today, to begin a healthier lifestyle, or just for the sense of achieving something difficult and remarkable.

The majors also put the sport of running into the headlines annually, when public attention might otherwise only be engaged in an Olympic year, or for the sports aficionado perhaps, in a World Championship year.

But running still suffers from - : an image problem that hurts its participation levels, according to

Mary Wittenburg, chair of the New York Road Runners, the organisers of the New York Marathon.

"We have done a disservice to running by positioning it as a punishment," she says. "In the football or the basketball team at school, when you miss the goal or basket, you have to do laps."

Getting children into running and to see it as a fun sport is one of Wittenburg and the NYRR's main aims, and it is here that this grievance is felt most. To address it, the NYRR have programmes that inspire 50,000 children in the New York public school system to run on a weekly basis, through games and play activities which encourage the youngsters to think of running as fun.

The NYRR also brings elite athletes to the schools seven to ten times per year to ensure the events get media attention and focus - and to give the children stars they can aspire to emulate.

Through the World Marathon Majors, the NYRR hopes to get children and other runners and fans following these stars throughout each 'season'.

However it is difficult to describe the WMM 'season' as a compelling

prospect just yet. The top athletes can only run a certain number of marathons per year, such are the physical demands, so they are unlikely to go through a full season of five majors.

NYRR maintains a programme of runs and events in New York throughout the year, supplying runners of all levels. Such is the interest in these, says Wittenburg, that they recently filled places in three 10,000-runner events in Central Park on successive weekends.

## Crowded market

The big marathons are consistently over-subscribed, and for the moment so are many of the smaller runs going on around the world. As Wittenburg says, running is "hot" at the moment.

But there are so many events taking place during this boom time that some are going to give. Madrid believes it is hosting too many runs already and has said it is not prepared to shut down its streets for any more.

But the presence in the sector of IMG, one of the world's most illustrious sports businesses, is a sure-fire indicator that running, and mass participation events, are

## SPONSOR ANALYSIS

The king of mass participation events is always the sport of running with its limited equipment needs and the capacity to handle thousands of competitors simultaneously.

TV coverage of flagship marathons like New York, London and Boston show us the sport's elite pursued by normal people further down the road running on the very same circuit, who are ordinary runners or dressed as giant chickens or in other weird looks for charity. Nike has done a remarkable job with events such as the world's first global 10K races - The Nike+ Human Race - and there are many similar events in almost every country and region including the BUPA Great Run in the UK which allow sponsors to get in close contact with often fairly substantial numbers of runners and their families.

In sponsorship terms, the most well known marathons are the pinnacle events. They offer major TV coverage on top of 20,000-plus participants and there is enough history of successful leveraging of these events to justify the sums being paid. Indeed, looking at the London

Marathon, Flora paved the way in overcoming the biggest handicap of such events - that they occur on only one day a year.

After the first few editions, the margarine brand came up with a strategy of showing how a number of women participants trained and improved their diet over many months to become capable of finishing a marathon.

No look at marathon sponsorship would be complete without the Virgin Group who signed a £17 million, five-year deal last year to become the official sponsor of the London Marathon ending Flora's 14-year association with the event.

From 2010, the event will be branded the Virgin London Marathon. Virgin made a lot of noise at the announcement about their role in developing the London Marathon even further as a fund raising machine for charities, and this theme is echoed by ING who sponsor many marathons around the world. ING value the sport's emphasis on individual effort within a wider community and one of the leverage points is their Run for Something Better charity campaign.

It is a clear theme that mass participation

sports do offer sponsors very reasonable media exposure at the top end, coupled with a means to conduct CSR type activity at a national and regional level.

Triathlons do not have the same mass media profile but they do have an attractive and resonant image of supreme effort and health. In some cases they have managed to transcend sponsorship by sports-related products such as Timex, Fila and New Balance.

Notable large companies using triathlons are Accenture, with the Chicago Triathlon, and Michelob's past sponsorship of the London Triathlon which stressed the lighter, healthier style of their ULTRA beer aimed at a young, upscale demographic.

Moreover, with Standard Chartered this year announcing major sponsorship renewals of both the Mumbai and Singapore marathons, the mass participation trend appears to be truly global.



*Text and table - The World Sponsorship Monitor (from Sports Marketing Surveys)*

### Mass Participation: Top Event Sponsorships 2007-2009

Date	Sponsor	Event or Activity Title	Value of Deal Estimated/ Reported \$US	Coverage	Years	Deal Type
Jul-09	Standard Chartered Bank	Singapore Marathon	\$6,900,000	National	4	New deal
Jul-09	Standard Chartered Bank	Mumbai Marathon	\$5,000,000 - \$9,999,000	National		New deal
Jul-09	New Balance	Singapore Marathon	\$1,000,000 - \$2,499,000	National	3	New deal
Apr-09	adidas	Boston Marathon	\$3,900,000	International	13	Renewal
Mar-09	K-Swiss	Ironman Triathlon	\$1,600,000	International	4	New deal
Dec-08	Dextro	Triathlon World Championship Series	\$5,000,000 - \$9,999,000	International		New deal
Oct-08	Timex	ING New York City Marathon	\$150,000 - \$499,000	International	1	New deal
Oct-08	BUPA	Great Run Series	\$1,000,000 - \$2,499,000	National	5	Renewal
Jun-08	Provident Bank	Under Armour Baltimore Running Festival	\$75,000 - \$149,000	National	1	New deal
Jun-08	Toyota	Under Armour Baltimore Running Festival	\$75,000 - \$149,000	National	1	New deal
May-08	Virgin Money	Virgin London Marathon	\$27,888,500	International	5	New deal
Feb-08	ING	ING Philadelphia Distance Run half marathon	\$500,000 - \$999,000	National		New deal
Nov-07	ING	ING Hartford Marathon	\$1,000,000 - \$2,499,000	National		New deal
Jul-07	ING	ING Denver Marathon	\$1,000,000 - \$2,499,000	National		New deal
Mar-07	McDonald's	McDonald's ITU Duathlon World Championships 2007	\$150,000 - \$499,000	National	1	New deal
Jan-07	ING	ING Miami Marathon	\$1,000,000 - \$2,499,000	National		Renewal

indeed 'hot'. Nick Rusling of IMG Events' mass participation section admits that the sector is not as big a money-spinner as some other parts of the IMG business, but nevertheless it is a place where the company feels the need to have an increasing presence.

"It is very labour intensive, and the events we organise lose money in their first two, three, or four years," he says.

"It is not a 'big business' model, but IMG believes it is an interesting area. It allows us to speak to brands globally, work with city centres around the world, and it is still rapidly expanding."

IMG's business model aims to have entry fees cover costs with profits coming mainly from sponsorship.

The table of sponsorships compiled by TWSM shows that the top events are earning six or seven figures from their key deals.

Andy Anstey of UK mass participation event organisers Limelight Sports points out that the events attract a broad

demographic including many groups that corporations would normally struggle to target with a sports sponsorship. There is a higher prevalence of older people, wealthier people, and women than in many sports crowds.

#### **Brand involvement**

Anstey says the events fill a gap in the market by creating opportunities to get involved in sport for people that are not likely to join clubs or gyms.

But he advises that the participants are not wealthy sitting ducks, ready to part with their cash under bombardment from any old advertising at their chosen event.

"The brand needs to think about how it adds value to the participants' experience and how it is relevant. This will be different with each sponsor," Anstey says.

Anstey also flags one obvious limitation to a mass participation event sponsorship.

Many of these events only happen once a year, some even only happen once. How does a brand

get back its six-figure investment in that? "If the brand, like the sport, wants to sustain participation and contact, it needs to get people into a sustainable pattern of participation prior to the event," he says.

These events, and the marketing around them, of course have an impact on the participants lives for a greater time span than the day of the competition. Most events will be in touch with their participants by telephone, email and post for months before and after the big day, giving plenty of opportunities for commercial partners to speak to them.

The fact that many of the events require a degree of training and physical preparation can give credibility to the communication before the event. And the fact that the events encourage the adoption and development of a healthy lifestyle can give credibility to the communications afterwards.

For many participants, a single event will be the greatest athletic undertaking of their lives to date - 60 per cent of New York

marathon runners are first-timers. A considerable amount of physical and emotional energy is being invested, and Anstey believes that the sponsorships are particularly suited to brands for whom emotion plays a big role in their customers' buying choices, or where complex behaviour changes are required.

Changing one's bank, or supermarket, are more complex and emotional choices than changing one's brand of washing powder. Financial services, the automotive industry, and clothing brands - arguably the subject of such complex purchasing decisions - appear quite prominently on the table of sponsors compiled by TWSM. But there is also an appearance, perhaps rather incongruously, from McDonalds and going back further than our table, from several beer brands.

Mary Wittenburg admits that the decisions of the New York Marathon to accept sponsors from the fast food and alcoholic drinks industries were long in the making and torturous.

## **CASE STUDY: MANCHESTER**

**Steve Flynn**, who leads on the Sport Events programme for the City of Manchester explains the importance of mass participation events in the city's major events strategy.

### **Does Manchester have a strategy for hosting or attracting mass participation sports events?**

Manchester has developed a major sports event strategy that strikes a balance between traditional elite championship events (World, European etc), mass participation and bespoke one-off events. What has always been important to the city is ensuring that sports events do provide some kind of benefit to communities in Manchester and clearly mass-participation events, which by their very nature engage the city's residents and visitors, are increasing in significance as we edge closer to 2012.

### **What benefits does Manchester derive out of hosting these events?**

As well as the obvious benefits of economic impact and the national/international profile delivered through strong media interest such as that generated by Gebresalassie and Bolt's visit, a key benefit from any mass participation event is its role in stimulating activity in residents of all ages across the City. Our Great Manchester Run now attracts over 30,000 entrants, many of whom are seen pounding the streets of

Manchester in the months leading up to the event. The Run also provides an opportunity for our young people to become involved via the Great Mini and Junior Runs and later in the year, the Great School Run. Sometimes it's not that easy dragging yourself off the sofa and into your running shoes but if you have an end target then that can serve as a motivator. It's our responsibility to help provide those targets.

### **Is Manchester facing tough competition to attract mass participation sports events?**

'Participation' has become something of a national priority aligned to the legacy commitments of the Games so yes, there will be interest across the UK to host such events. But equally, there are many opportunities to choose from as new events emerge and the challenge is to choose events which are the right fit for the city. The Great Manchester Run is now well established within the sports events programme and is a key date in people's calendars. The Skyride however is new to the city but seems a logical next step given our strong cycling heritage and our place as the home of British Cycling.

### **Madrid now says it has enough running events taking place on its streets. Is Manchester facing the same problem (that you have too many mass participation events taking place, or at least too many of a similar type of events)?**

It's certainly a challenge and something we will be looking closely at in the short term. Such events place considerable strain upon the city centre's infrastructure and, as above, it's important we have the right balance of events and that staging these can be justified in terms of the 'return' to the city.

### **How eagerly are the people of Manchester taking up places in these events?**

The majority have been local entries which was primarily our objective. As these events grow we have now seen interest from outside the region as well as overseas which is why for events such as the Great Manchester Run, we have sought to turn a one-hour run into a whole weekend experience for residents and visitors alike with an array of sport and cultural activities taking place alongside the main event.

But she is confident that the marketing works. "There is a purity to running," she acknowledges. For McDonalds' sponsorship of the New York Marathon the NYRR demanded a commitment to promote healthy eating and lifestyles for children.

"Who you associate yourself with says a lot about who you are," says Wittenburg. "You have to think not just about the sponsor itself, but also where you are putting it in the organisation."

"For us, going to the title sponsor [ING]...we said we would only do it if there was a shared commitment around kids, if there was a shared commitment around the pro athletes and if there was a shared commitment to the community, to New York City - and not just the global property."

### The venues

Not least from such socially aware organisers as the NYRR, the venues for mass participation events have a lot to gain. The most obvious benefits are from direct spend by

the influx of visitors either watching or participating, and from the boost to media profile. The New York marathon attracts around 2.5 million visitors to the streets of Manhattan, including thousands from overseas.

Elite competition and athlete appearances boost media coverage. Manchester in England scored headlines around the world in May this year when zoom men's sprint world record holder Usain Bolt appeared as part of the "Great City Games" series organised by UK company Nova International (see box off).

Increasingly, as the market of events becomes ever more crowded, creative additions like this are being required to attract attention and generate "cut-through".

Nick Rusling predicts the crowded London market will start to see events fail, even if it doesn't appear to be happening yet.

The introduction of novel concepts to mass participation events is appealing to different demographics, as well as generating

extra attention. IMG's London Triathlon, for example, has a 75:25 skew towards men. When IMG, in conjunction with Nike, ran an event called 'Run to the Beat', which had music played across the half-marathon course, the skew went 65:35 in favour of women, without women being particularly targeted by the marketing.

### Evolution

Although the concept has been around for several decades now, mass participation sports is at an early and speedily evolving stage.

It is bringing benefits for sports. For example with triathlon, the events are arguably driving sports forward in the absence of wealthy governing bodies or central authorities charged with growth and promotion. When IMG first spoke to the Swedish triathlon federation about a Stockholm competition, it turned out the agency's ambitions for the number of entrants in the race outstripped the federation's ambitions for the number of triathletes nationwide.

It is bringing benefits to cities, most obviously in increased profile as sports and general tourism destinations. And this is not just confined to city streets - IMG's third annual Etape Caledonia cycle ride in the Scottish highlands generated around £1 million in direct spending in the rural region.

It is opening up new demographics for sports sponsors, who, judging by the TWSM data, are willing to pay top dollar for the opportunity.

Charities are earning a fortune in the US and the UK, although the culture of running and raising money is more or less confined, as yet, to these territories.

It is no wonder the number of events is booming. In such an explosion there are bound to be casualties - events that do not capture the public imagination, that are too similar to what has gone before, that offer nothing new.

For the moment, though, with creativity and good organisation, it seems that mass participation event organisers cannot go wrong.



Usain Bolt soaks up the adulation in Manchester - Getty Images Sport

You recently got Usain Bolt to take part in a mass participation event in Manchester. How big a driver of interest are the elite athletes, and how do you secure their involvement?

It hasn't been difficult at all and it helps having strong properties such as the Run and the Great City Games. Our partnership with Nova International ensures that we have world class athletes lining up alongside recreational runners and this in itself has proved to be a key driver in building interest and awareness of the events. Equally, our partnership with British Cycling ensures that we have regular access to our Olympic and Paralympic cyclists who are ambassadors as well as residents in the city.

Do you leverage your other great sporting assets to help your mass participation events?

Our football clubs are very supportive of our events and are often directly involved. Manchester United were a much-reported factor in being able to attract Usain Bolt to the city and were helpful during his stay. The City of Manchester Stadium, home to Manchester City, also provides a great backdrop to our Great Mini and Junior Runs which take place around the Sportcity site which hosted the 2002 Commonwealth Games.