PRE-RACE DROP-OUT FROM THE GLASGOW MARATHON

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ABSTRACT

A high drop-out rate prior to the running of a Marathon reduces its value as a spectacle and needlessly causes rejection and antagonism amongst potential runners. This research investigates reasons for pre-race drop-out in the 1983 Glasgow Marathon, and finds that a major cause was injury or illness during training, with a motivational difference existing between runners and non-runners.

Key words: Marathon, Motives, Drop-out, Injury, Training.

INTRODUCTION

The first mass Marathon in modern times took place in New York in 1970. Its success in terms of runners and spectators led London to copy it in 1980; by 1982 the London Marathon had become the largest event of its kind in the Western world, with 16,350 starters and over 1 million spectators. The first Glasgow Marathon was run in 1982, and had 14,392 entrants in 1983 (Race Director, personal communication).

From a health viewpoint it is argued that it is worth encouraging Marathons since the increased fitness of participants is associated with reductions in smoking and obesity. Marathons can also enhance participants' pride and self-respect and stimulate a breakthrough in performance in all spheres of life (Cannon, 1982).

Commercially it is entertainment value and media interest which attracts the sponsors (53% of the 1982 Glasgow Marathon was funded by private sponsorship). This appeal is partly dependent on the quantity of runners taking part. One of the issues affecting this is the drop-out rate prior to the race, which reduces the potential size and entertainment value of the event. Drop-out can also create antagonism among applicants rejected due to excess demand whose places were taken by those who did not participate. For example, in the 1982 and 1983 Glasgow Marathons 28% and 32% of entrants entering did not run (Race Director, personal communication).

While this is not a problem with the majority of provincial Marathons, the 1983 Glasgow Marathon organisers were forced to reject 1,500 applicants. The 1982 London Marathon organisers rejected over 40,000 applicants. Media coverage at the time referred to the "incredulity, shock, bewilderment, anger and even jealousy" of people whose applications had been rejected.

Drop-out of entrants can therefore reduce the value of the event as a spectacle and needlessly cause rejection and antagonism amongst potential runners. It was therefore decided to conduct a small scale survey to investigate the

causes of pre-race drop-out in the 1983 Glasgow Marathon, to see if guidance could be given in organisation or selection to reduce this pre-race withdrawal.

RESEARCH METHOD

A six-page mail questionnaire and covering letter was sent to a sample of 100 runners and 100 non-runners drawn randomly from the list of entrants to the 1983 Glasgow Marathon. The questionnaire covered various aspects thought to relate to drop-out using mainly multiple choice questions. Motives were measured using attitude statements and a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was mailed out five months after the Marathon. An overall response rate of 57% was achieved but this consisted of a 76% return rate from runners and 37% from non-runners. (The ratio of runners to non-runners in the returned questionnaire thus reflects the same distribution as in the actual event). The smallness of the sample and the differing response rates therefore emphasises the exploratory nature of the findings.

A consideration of possible factors related to drop-out led us to investigate; the effect of the heatwave in the two months prior to the event, illness or injury, and possible organisational causes. We further studied the nature of the training undertaken by entrants, and their attitudes towards it. Finally we considered possible reasons for entry to see if these would differentiate between the two groups.

The survey was sent out in February 1984. The data were considered in aggregate and in cross-tabulation form, although the size of the sample precluded detailed statistical analysis.

FINDINGS

Environmental

Of all respondents ($n = 113$) 43% of the total sample said the hot summer had not affected their ability to train and 53% said it had only affected them a little. There was little difference between the runner and non-runner segments. There was no evidence of any disease precipitating drop-out and minimal occurrence of viral-related illness.

Organisational

As only two respondents had run in a Marathon in the previous weeks, recent participation in similar events was not important. No respondent claimed that the decision not

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to take part was in part due to religious beliefs conflicting with running on a Sunday, a potentially serious issue in the West of Scotland; transport problems in getting to the event, again remembering this was a Sunday with limited public services; or problems with registration during the three days immediately prior to the event. Only 6% claimed that the starting time of 9.30 a.m. was inconvenient.

Experience

Inexperienced entrants outweighed experienced entrants by a rate of 57% to 43% in both the runner and non-runner segments, indicating that inexperience was not a reason for drop-out. While 73% of the respondents had not run in the previous 1982 Marathon, runners were more likely to have participated than non-runners. This may suggest their loyalty is to the event rather than running in general.

Training

Only 4% of all entrants did not train. Non-runners started to train marginally earlier than runners, but at the peak of their training were running fewer miles a week and shorter distances. (The average longest training distance was 13.5 miles for non-runners and 16.5 miles for runners). The most popular mileage per week was 20-39 miles, representing 42% of all those who trained. Runners did not find training any less strenuous than did non-runners but regarded it as more enjoyable and easier to fit in. They also found it easier to encourage themselves to train and were more determined to run. Similarly, they were generally more confident of their ability to complete the Marathon and meet their target time.

Overall, 46% of all respondents intimated some form of ill-health which affected their ability to run in the event. Of these 58% were caused by training, and 79% were leg injuries ($n = 52$). Of all those who encountered ill-health 33% were forced to withdraw, 19% said it affected their running ability "a lot" and the remaining 48% said it affected their ability "a little". In absolute terms, withdrawal through injury was the largest cause of drop-out and represented 48% of all non-runners. Surprisingly, injury forced a larger proportion (41%) of 18-24 year olds who experienced it to withdraw than the older grouping (25-54 year olds) (29%).

It was possible that drop-out was related to peer group support, or lack of it. However, no meaningful relationship was found between the support of family and friends and running in the event. Generally the most popular response (49%) was that respondents experienced no anxiety from their immediate family and friends, although runners experienced *more* of such anxiety than did non-runners.

Motives

There were 6 main motives for entering the Marathon. Of all respondents, 96% agreed they entered for the challenge, and 78% entered "to prove to myself I could do it". A third motive to entry was "for the fun of it" (74%), perhaps similar to "entering to be part of the occasion" (68%). Entering to improve fitness (70%) and general health (62%) were also agreed to be motives by a majority of respondents.

While 51% of all respondents agreed they had entered after being inspired by the 1982 Glasgow Marathon, not one of the 30 respondents who had run in the 1982 Marathon

agreed with the statement. Other motives for entry were for a hobby or pastime (43%), as a result of meeting and talking with other runners (28%), encouragement by others (20%), on the spur of the moment (14%) and to lose weight (9%). As can be seen from Table I non-runners tended to place more importance on the fitness and health aspects than runners. While runners stressed the hobby aspect and encouragement of those around them, equal proportions disagreed with the latter statement. Of the 14% who entered on the spur of the moment, a high proportion were non-runners. Five respondents entered for a wager, four of whom ran. 51% of respondents were running for a charity (59% runners but only 33% non-runners).

TABLE I
Motives for entering 1983 Marathon

	Runners	% Agreeing Non-Runners	Total
Fitness	65	81	70
Health	57	73	62
Lose weight	9	8	9
Hobby	49	35	43
Fun of it	73	75	74
Challenge	95	97	96
Prove to myself I could do it	78	75	78
Part of the occasion	66	70	68
As a result of talking/meeting other runners	28	27	28
Encouraged by those around me	23	13	20
Inspired by 1982	54	46	51
Spur of the moment	9	21	14

$n = 76$ Runners, 37 Non-Runners

Respondents scored all motives on a 5 point scale from Totally Agree to Totally Disagree

Other factors

Other factors such as an unanticipated clash of commitments or unexpected domestic problems were given as reasons for not running by 11 respondents. Two respondents said they simply lost interest. The sex of the respondent did not relate to drop-out, but age did with the younger entrants being more likely not to run.

DISCUSSION

Our study seems to suggest that a number of potential factors do not in fact differentiate between runners and non-runners. External environmental factors had much less affect than was anticipated, and are not important causes of drop out. Situational factors, such as transport problems, being unable to make the start time, losing registration forms were of minimal importance to both runner and non-runner segments, and the organisation of the event similarly brought no complaints. The main factor given for withdrawal was illness or injury followed by a clash with other commitments or an unexpected domestic problem. Only 5% admitted they lost interest.

The findings would seem to suggest much more attention be paid to the training necessary to compete in the Marathon. This should have the twofold aim of reducing injury and making training more enjoyable. The findings

also highlight what seem to be the important motivations for entering the event, which should be helpful in pre-publicity.

The typical profile of a 'runner' would seem to be that he was about 35 years of age, had entered for a hobby and was running for charity. He was determined to run and confident he could complete the Marathon. He also found training enjoyable and reasonably easy. The non-runner was between 18-25 years of age, had entered to improve his fitness and health and had difficulty in fitting in his training.

The strategy for organisers would therefore seem to be

to stress not merely the immediate health aspects of running but the more general psychological benefits of meeting a challenge. In particular, it would be helpful to emphasise self-improvement, through participating in a hobby which also improved health and fitness and benefited charities. Further research is obviously needed to clarify these issues but this limited survey may be of help to future Marathon organisers.

Reference

Cannon, G., "What makes so many run". The Cannon Study, cited in Sunday Times, 2 May, 1982, p. 19.