

# TAKING TO THE STREETS

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On Sunday, April 20 thousands of people will line the roadside from Greenwich to Westminster to witness and participate in the sixth London Marathon. At the same time a far greater number will view the event on tv in the relaxation of their own homes. The London Marathon has rapidly become one of the most popular national events as well as a major competition in international sport. As both sport and spectacle there is a significant difference between the way in which the marathon is experienced by those participating and those encouraging runners along the roadside, and by those who watch it 'live' on tv.

The London Marathon was first organised in 1981 by the former Olympic gold medal winner, Christopher Brasher together with the Sports Council and the Greater London Council and sponsored by



Photo: Steve Rose/Allsport

**London Marathon: the most dramatic and democratic event of the sporting calendar.**

Gillette. Since then the organisers have more than achieved their aims - to bring the public into sport and to make participants out of spectators - as entries have increased from under 8,000 in 1981 to an expected 23,000 this year. Applications are already over 90,000 and entries are reserved for overseas runners, wheelchairs and championship runners. Mars now provides the funding and prize money and the GLC assists in administration and on

the ground, providing the start line in Blackheath and the finish on Westminster Bridge.

Despite uncertainty about the future of the County Hall building there seems to be little doubt that the marathon will continue in its present form after the GLC's abolition. The London Marathon intends to remain independent of government or local government bodies for finance and any future profits are ear-marked for the

development of sport and leisure facilities in the London boroughs.

With participants coming from all over Britain and abroad and from all walks of life, entertainment, competition and charity are equal facets of an occasion in which differences of sex, race, class, even physical ability are set aside for the endurance of what has become a 26-mile carnival. As the organisers have stated in their official programme, it is a day in which the 'human race can be one joyous family, working together, laughing together, achieving the impossible together'.

Nevertheless, the event's promoters have distinguished between the 'serious runners' and the 'fun runners'; the 'elite' and the 'vets and virgins'; those competing for the prize money and those raising money for charities. With the familiar format of informed commentary on the international athletes and participating reporters interviewing the 'fun runners' on screen, television coverage has reinforced the distinction between the professionals and a much larger proportion of amateurs.

The route begins in Greenwich Park and goes east to Woolwich and then west to follow the river through Deptford, Surrey Docks and Bermondsey. Then over Tower Bridge it turns eastwards for the six mile loop around the Isle of Dogs. Then west again, past the London Docks and the Tower, along the Embankment via Trafalgar Square and the Mall to turn past Buckingham Palace in the direction of the finishing line on Westminster Bridge.

Together with the bands and crowds along the roadside and the numerous London landmarks, the route provides television with the material with which to evoke the cultural identity of the nation - its people wedded together in harmony and *esprit de corps*. If we are to congratulate the BBC for covering the marathon with the reverence usually reserved for state occasions, then we must also bear in mind that 'live' tv has seldom the opportunity to project an image of London and the British people taking possession of the streets in the most dramatic and democratic event of the sporting calendar. For if the BBC's 'tour of famous sights' presents us with the RAF band on the Mall, the band of the Welsh Guards, beefeaters outside the Palace, it also brings us the pearly kings and queens in Greenwich, a band and crowd singing the 'Hokey Cokey' - all participating in what has become not merely an event but, for tv at least, a celebration of our national belonging.