Marathon Running: From Ancient Myth to Contemporary Urban

Phenomenon

Mingze Nie

Abstract The modern marathon has transcended its origins as a commemorative athletic contest to become a global ur- ban spectacle that intertwines sport, tourism, and local economic development. This paper examines the histor- ical evolution and contemporary significance of marathon events, with a particular focus on their role in city brand- ing and sustainable tourism. Through a paired case study of the Boston Marathon (as a mature, high-prestige event) and the Beijing Marathon (as an emerging race in a rapidly growing running market), this paper compares participa- tion demographics, qualifying standards, economic im- pacts, and sociocultural meanings. Drawing on sport tourism literature and urban studies, the paper argues that the hierarchical structure of marathons—defined by qual- ifying times and prestige—shapes runner mobility, con- sumption patterns, and community identity. Our findings reveal that lower qualifying times correlate with higher economic impact and older, more affluent participant pro- files, while emerging marathons face trade-offs between accessibility and exclusivity. The study also highlights the importance of data transparency and longitudinal analysis for evidence-based event management. We conclude that marathons are not merely sporting events but complex ur- ban phenomena that reflect and reinforce social stratifica- tion, global mobility, and local governance priorities. Fu- ture research should address the environmental footprint of mass-participation events and the uneven geographical distribution of marathon culture.

Keywords Marathon running, sport tourism, urban governance, qualifying time, economic impact.

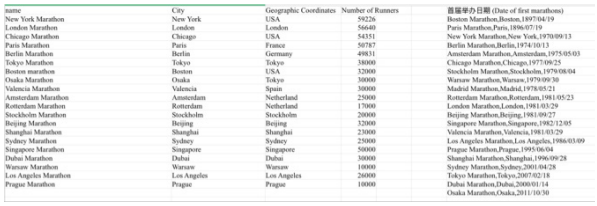
1 Introduction

On 26 April 2026, Sebastian Sawe shattered the two-hour barrier in an official marathon, crossing the line at the Lon- don Marathon in 1:59:30—a feat that had long been an- ticipated since Eliud Kipchoge's pioneering exhibition in 2019. This milestone, while a triumph of human physiol- ogy, also crystallises a broader transformation: marathon running has evolved from a niche competitive event into a pervasive social, economic, and urban phenomenon that commands sustained attention far beyond the finish line [5]. Today, marathons serve as powerful catalysts for sports tourism, attracting thousands of international participants and generating substantial revenue for host cities through accommodation, dining, and retail spend- ing [9]. Simultaneously, they function as instruments of city branding, projecting images of vitality, inclusivity, and organisational competence to a global audience [2]. The relationship between runners and host cities is re- ciprocal: runners seek prestigious events that offer per- sonal challenge and social capital, while cities compete to stage races that enhance their reputation. Historically, the marathon's revival at the 1896 Athens Olympics rekindled ancient Greek traditions, but it was the post-1980s run- ning boom—particularly in the United States and West- ern Europe—that transformed it into a mass-participation phenomenon. Over the past two decades, the sport has spread to emerging economies, notably China, where city marathons have proliferated at an unprecedented pace [6]. This paper explores the contemporary marathon landscape through a comparative lens, examining how institutional frameworks, qualifying standards, and demographic pro- files shape the impacts of these events on urban develop- ment and tourism.

2 Context: Global Marathon Land- scape

The global marathon ecosystem is characterised by a clear hierarchy, largely determined by qualifying time stan- dards and historical prestige. At the apex stand the World Marathon Majors—Boston, New York, Chicago, Lon- don, Berlin, and Tokyo—which collectively attract over 200,000 finishers annually and

generate billions of dollars in economic activity. Boston, the oldest annual marathon (est. 1897), maintains the strictest qualifying time (e.g., 3:00 for men aged 18–34), positioning it as the gold stan- dard.



name	City	Geographic Coordinates	Number of Runners	首届举办日期 (Date of first marathons)
New York Marathon	New York	USA	59226	Boston Marathon,Boston,1897/04/19
London Marathon	London	London	56640	Paris Marathon,Paris, 1896/07/19
Chicago Marathon	Chicago	USA	54351	New York Marathon,New York,1970/09/13
Paris Marathon	Paris	France	50787	Berlin Marathon,Berlin,1974/10/13
Berlin Marathon	Berlin	Germany	49831	Amsterdam Marathon,Amsterdam,1975/05/03
Tokyo Marathon	Tokyo	Tokyo	38000	Chicago Marathon,Chicago,1977/09/25
Boston marathon	Boston	USA	32000	Stockholm Marathon,Stockholm,1979/08/04
Osaka Marathon	Osaka	Tokyo	30000	Warsaw Marathon,Warsaw,1979/09/30
Valencia Marathon	Valencia	Spain	30000	Madrid Marathon,Madrid,1978/05/21
Amsterdam Marathon	Amsterdam	Netherland	25000	Rotterdam Marathon,Rotterdam, 1981/05/23
Rotterdam Marathon	Rotterdam	Netherland	17000	London Marathon,London, 1981/03/29
Stockholm Marathon	Stockholm	Stockholm	20000	Beijing Marathon,Beijing,1981/09/27
Beijing Marathon	Beijing	Beijing	32000	Singapore Marathon,Singapore, 1982/12/05
Shanghai Marathon	Shanghai	Shanghai	23000	Valencia Marathon,Valencia, 1981/03/29
Sydney Marathon	Sydney	Sydney	25000	Los Angeles Marathon,Los Angeles,1986/03/09
Singapore Marathon	Singapore	Singapore	50000	Prague Marathon,Prague,1995/06/04
Dubai Marathon	Dubai	Dubai	30000	Shanghai Marathon,Shanghai,1996/09/28
Warsaw Marathon	Warsaw	Warsaw	10000	Sydney Marathon,Sydney,2001/04/28
Los Angeles Marathon	Los Angeles	Los Angeles	26000	Tokyo Marathon,Tokyo,2007/02/18
Prague Marathon	Prague	Prague	10000	Dubai Marathon,Dubai,2000/01/14
				Osaka Marathon,Osaka,2011/10/30

Figure 1. Distribution and growth of the 20 largest marathons worldwide (2020–2025). Data show rapid ex- pansion in Asian events, especially in China.

In contrast, many emerging marathons in China, such as Beijing and Shanghai, operate with more lenient or no qualifying times, reflecting their developmental stage and mass-participation orientation [6]. Figure 1 illustrates the geographic distribution and growth trajectories of the 20 largest marathons worldwide, highlighting the dom- inance of North American and European events, while Asian races (particularly in China and Japan) exhibit the fastest growth in participant numbers.

A key metric for comparing events is the "qualifying time" (QT)—the minimum finishing time required for en- try. Table 1 summarises QTs and participation figures for selected marathons, demonstrating an inverse relationship between QT stringency and participation scale, but a pos- itive correlation with international participation and me- dia exposure. Furthermore, event prestige correlates with runner spending: Boston Marathon participants spend an average of $1,387 over three days (including hotel, dining, and merchandise), whereas Beijing runners spend approx- imately $700–$800, reflecting both income disparities and event status [1]. These contextual data provide the foun- dation for our comparative case study.

Table 1. Qualifying times and participation (2025).

Marathon	QT (men 18–34)	Finishers	Int'l share
Boston	3:00	28,409	28%
New York	3:10	52,812	34%
London	3:00	48,000	40%
Beijing	3:15	30,000	12%
Shanghai	3:30	25,000	10%

3 Case Study: Boston vs. Beijing

3.1 Boston Marathon: The Benchmark of Prestige

The Boston Marathon, organised by the Boston Ath- letic Association, has maintained its elite status through a stringent qualifying system that has remained largely un-changed for decades. In 2025, 28,409 runners started the race, with a finish rate of 98.5%. As shown in Figure 2, the age distribution peaks in the 40–49 age group, which ac- counts for nearly 30% of finishers, followed closely by the 50–59 group. This pattern reflects the time and financial resources required to achieve a QT, as well as the sport's appeal to middle-aged, economically established individu- als. Notably, the 40–49 cohort also exhibits the highest av- erage spending on accommodation and dining, supporting the notion that older participants drive local economic im- pact [7]. Boston's economic footprint is estimated at over $500 million annually, with hotel occupancy rates rising by 25% during race weekend.

Age Group	Gender	Runners Entered	Runners Started	Runners Finished	Finish Rate
18-39	Overall	12,199	11,279	11,113	98.50%
40-44	Overall	4,450	4,016	3,964	98.70%
45-49	Overall	4,680	4,239	4,200	99.10%
50-54	Overall	3,706	3,359	3,300	98.20%
55-59	Overall	2,990	2,695	2,644	98.10%
60-64	Overall	2,098	1,915	1,883	98.30%
65-69	Overall	1,007	883	860	97.40%
70-74	Overall	358	310	299	96.50%
75-79	Overall	86	73	64	87.70%
80+	Overall	20	11	10	90.90%

Figure 2: Age distribution of Boston Marathon finishers (2025). Peak completion and participation in the 40–49 group.

3.2 Beijing Marathon: The Emerging Chal- lenger

The Beijing Marathon, first held in 1981, has grown rapidly, especially since 2015, when China's running boom accelerated [6]. With a QT of 3:15 for men (18–34), it is less selective than Boston, attracting a younger aver- age age (approximately 33 years) and a higher proportion of domestic runners (over 85%). Despite its lower interna- tional share, Beijing has leveraged state support and cor- porate sponsorship to enhance its profile, achieving IAAF Gold Label status in 2018. However, challenges persist: course design, volunteer training, and spectator engage- ment still lag behind Western benchmarks. Our data (Fig- ure 3) show that Beijing's age distribution is skewed to- wards 25–35, with fewer participants over 50, reflecting the sport's relatively recent popularity and lower economic barriers for younger entrants. The average expenditure per runner is about $750, but as a percentage of disposable income, this represents a heavier burden than in Boston, given China's lower average wage [11].

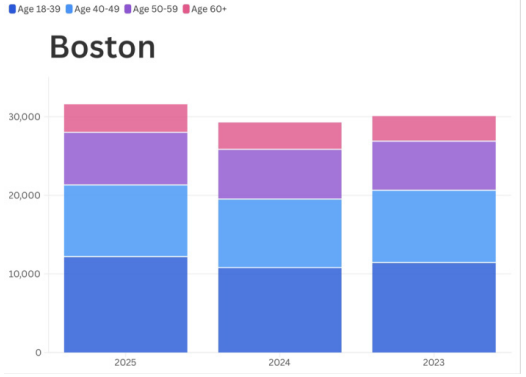


Figure 3. Overview of Boston Marathon participant age spread across start waves.

ISSN 3106-5767 (Print) ISSN 3106-7026 (Online)

3.3 Comparative Insights

The contrast between Boston and Beijing illuminates the trade-offs between exclusivity and accessibility. Boston's high QT ensures a competitive field and a premium brand, attracting affluent international runners who generate sub- stantial revenue. Beijing's lower QT, by contrast, maximises participation and fosters domestic running culture, but at the cost of lower per-capita spending and global prestige. Interestingly, both cities face similar issues: traffic disruption, resident displacement, and environmen- tal concerns, which have spurred calls for more sustain- able event management [3]. Boston has successfully inte- grated the marathon into its civic identity over 120 years, whereas Beijing is still negotiating the balance between modern spectacle and traditional urban life. The age pro- files further reveal that Boston's older participant base not only spends more but also returns year after year, build- ing loyalty, whereas Beijing's younger runners are more transient, often seeking personal bests rather than repeat participation. These differences are rooted in historical, economic, and cultural contexts that shape each city's approach to hosting.

4 Analysis

The Boston–Beijing comparison reveals several overarch- ing dynamics. First, the qualifying time serves as a power- ful sorting mechanism that structures the global marathon hierarchy, influencing both runner demographics and eco- nomic outcomes. Lower QTs attract older, wealthier, and more internationally mobile runners, while higher QTs (or no QTs) favour younger, local, and cost-sensitive par- ticipants. This stratification mirrors broader patterns of global mobility and social capital, where access to pres- tigious events becomes a marker of status and cultural distinction [8]. Second, the historical trajectory of each marathon shapes its governance and community relations. Boston's long-established traditions and stable organisa- tional structure facilitate consistent quality, whereas Bei- jing's rapid growth demands adaptive management and continuous infrastructure investment. Third, the sustain- ability of marathon events depends on balancing economic gains with social and environmental costs. Both cities have implemented recycling programmes, public transport incentives, and post-race clean-up initiatives, but data on their effectiveness remain scarce. Our analysis also high- lights the value of longitudinal data: Boston's rich his- torical records allow for trend analysis across decades, while Beijing's fragmented data hinder robust forecast- ing. To advance the field, organisers should adopt standardised data collection protocols, including participant spending surveys, environmental impact assessments, and resident sentiment polls, as advocated in the sport tourism literature [4]. Ultimately, the case study underscores that marathons are not isolated sporting events but embedded urban practices that reflect and reshape the cities that host them.

5 Conclusion

The future of marathon running lies in navigating the ten- sion between elite excellence and mass participation. As more cities seek to host marathons to boost tourism and global visibility, the risk of homogenisation grows—yet the most successful events, like Boston, retain distinct lo- cal character and historical continuity. Unanswered ques- tions remain: how can emerging marathons attract interna- tional runners? What governance models best balance the interests of residents, businesses, and athletes? Our data- gathering process revealed significant discrepancies in re- porting standards across countries, underscoring the need for international cooperation and open-access databases. Methodologically, combining quantitative economic im- pact studies with qualitative community interviews offers richer insights than either approach alone [10]. For ur- ban planners, marathons present a unique opportunity to promote active transport, showcase urban regeneration, and foster civic pride, but only if managed inclusively and transparently. The marathon, as we have argued, is a mirror of contemporary urban life—reflecting inequal- ities, aspirations, and the relentless human drive to tran- scend limits. Its future will depend on our collective abil- ity to organise these spectacles in ways that are econom- ically viable, socially just, and environmentally responsi- ble. This study contributes to that endeavour by providing a comparative framework grounded in empirical data and critical analysis, and we hope it inspires further interdisci- plinary research on the complex interplay between sport, tourism, and urban development.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks the course instructors for patient and valuable feedback on the conceptual framework.

References

[1] Malchrowicz-Mośko E, Poczta J. A small-scale event and a big impact—Is this relationship possi- ble? A case study of a marathon. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*. 2018;22(3):215-232.

[2] Zouni G, Kouremenos A, Kiriakopoulou K. A strategic tourism marketing framework for sports mega-events: The case of the Athens Marathon. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*. 2021;20:100589.

[3] Deliska L. Is sustainable running possible? Exploring environmental awareness and behaviour among

marathon participants. *Sustainability*. 2024;16(2):845.

[4] Anoyrkati E, Giannakopoulou S, Margaritis E. Megatrends that affect sustainable mobility planning and their implications for sport events. *Transportation Research Procedia*. 2020;47:231-238.

[5] Cribari M, Rust CA, Rosemann T, Onywera V, Lepers R, Knechtle B. Participation and perfor- mance trends of East-African runners in Swiss half- marathons and marathons held between 2000 and 2010. *BMC Sports Science, Medicine and Rehabil- itation*. 2013;5:24.

[6] Kang S, Cho H. Preliminary discussion on the current status of city marathon events and their sustainable development. *Journal of Urban Planning*. 2025;151(1):04024015.

[7] Pioletti A. Sport as a driver for local develop- ment and sustainability: The case of Turin and its marathon. *European Journal of Sport Science*. 2017;17(Suppl 1):S112-S119.

[8] Renninger J. The benefits and biases of seeing the world's cities through marathon routes. *Urban Ge- ography*. 2026;47(3):412-430.

[9] Papanikos GT. The economic effects of a marathon as a sport tourism event. *Athens Journal of Sports*. 2015;2(4):225-240.

[10] Yamaguchi S. Travel motivation for cultural experiences and changes in marathon tourists' behaviour. *Tourism Management Perspectives*. 2025;53:101265.

[11] Zheng Y, Liu H, Wang X. Unveiling urban marathon development characteristics based on spatial-temporal patterns: A case study of China. *Cities*. 2023;132:104112.