

# Peaks of spirit, valleys of soul

ASICS Melbourne Marathon, Australia. 10 October 2004

By Don Nicholson\*

It was one of those cloudless spring mornings that seemed perfect for running fast. The air was cool and the brilliant blue sky reflected in the calm of the bay. Beautiful seaside vistas regularly open up along the famous bayside course, whether or not competitors care to take a peek

As the field began to stretch out in those first few minutes you got the feeling that it could be, yes, a perfect day. One of those days where you sense that there's the potential for "runners high". A day where you feel so good that you keep going faster and further, never tiring, just feeling better.

In those early minutes of the ASICS Melbourne Marathon the spirit of the race was shining. You could smell the spirit of competition, of possibility. We all felt it. It was a day for realising dreams.

When we speak here about spirit, we use the word like a crazy old Beat poet. Like Jack Kerouac, we're On the Road! Eccentric psychologist James Hillman sees spirit not as a thing, but as an emotion or a place.

Hillman reckons spirit lives in the peaks, the "highs", and is ablaze with light. Spirit is fast and quickens what it touches. It



excites us! It makes our pulses race! It inspires prose with exclamation marks! It is an arrow – straight and knife-sharp.

It urges us to climb the mountain, to feel the coolness of altitude, to leave behind our fellow travellers and journey upward, to commit heroic deeds, or die trying.

Rod De Highden (twice Australian Olympic Marathon representative) and Magnus Michelsson (who had run the World Half Marathon in New Delhi only a week before) took the lead in the first few kilometres.

There was spirit, competitive spirit certainly, and the urge to leave the rest of the field far behind. Those of us not in the lead group also inhaled the spirit, wanting to feel light and airy so that the kilometres would just float by. Wanting to be sharp, unflinching and honed for action. We wanted to feel refreshed, cool and comfortable, ready to climb the mountain.

All distance runners secretly wonder whether the heavens will smile on us and grant a day where we run and feel no pain. Like a punter with his wager on a high-odds bet, we nervously yearn for just one of those special days. Where you feel so good that you keep going faster and further, never tiring, just feeling better.

An hour or so into the marathon spirit had waned. Rod De Highden, having made the pace, then pulled out. His job was done, but he looked uncomfortably warm. Michelsson then took up the running with Saeki Tsutomu of Japan, and the real work began. They turned off the highway at Mordialloc and begin the tough part of the course all the way through to Brighton. Now we entered soul's territory.

Soul lives in warm, languid places. In soul territory we have descended from the mountain into the valley; we're no longer on a high. Like Icarus, ascending and coming to grief from the warmth

of sun's rays, so the October sun began to melt the wings of those that had flown too high, that had gone out too fast.

Soul floods us with warmth of all varieties. For instance, we may feel a new regard for the many volunteers. We realise, as the going gets tougher, that their encouragement and support is crucial for us to continue.

Soul territory emphasises connectedness. Although we still want to do our best, we start to appreciate the shelter and support of the pack. We may even encourage others around us – it's a long way to go and a hard task to do it alone. We look out for family members, hoping for a cheer.

Little by little soul envelops us in the urge to slow, to move like lazy, tropical lizards. Maybe even to lie down. In soul territory we encounter the ordinary. At around 32km we understand our limitations.

Dream goals are revised or abandoned. Many now just hope to finish. The long, straight, ordinary flatness of Brighton's Golden Mile is perhaps the toughest section of the course. Michelsson was feeling the heat and slowed. Saeki Tsutomu looked comfortable up to this point but now dropped away, his dreams of victory gone.

It is here we sometimes mourn and curse. Sometimes we don't want to acknowledge our limitations. We question and complain. "Why have the race in October? Why did I have to wait for drinks? Why don't they make it an easier course? Why? Because it's the soul of Melbourne and its marathon. The fluky weather, the wind off the Bay, the October humidity, and the journey from Frankston all give the Melbourne Marathon its character and forms its soul spaces.

Like a welcome cool change for those that make it through to Elwood, there is a hint of relief. The sniff of spirit can again just be

distinguished from the lattes and the sweetness of electrolyte replacement products.

We speak about teams getting a sniff of victory, of winning glory; this is the essence that pervades the air as competitors pass the St Kilda Marina and head towards the Esplanade. Michelsson had the aura of a winner, even though he was now clocking each kilometre a minute slower than at the start.

Spirit grows stronger the closer one gets to the finish. There is a sense that a mighty achievement is possible - no matter the disappointment after the humbling brush with soul.

The competitive spirit rises back up. In the final few metres of the race Saeki Tsutomu and John Meagher (Half Marathon winner at the World Masters Games in 2002) stage a fight to the death for second place, like the last two samurai left in the battle.

To finish the marathon is a spiritual experience. Many of us surprise ourselves with tenacity and willpower we never thought possible.

There is also a feeling of how easily we could have relinquished ourselves to soul - to defeat or disappointment. The marathon helps us lose our dogmatic certainties, our jaunty self-confidence.

Paradoxically it leaves us knowing ourselves better for having experienced the peaks of spirit and the valleys of soul.

\*Five-time ASICS Melbourne Marathon competitor who this year pleaded middle age menopause and saw it all from the sanctity of the lead car.

## Result

### MEN:

|    |                   |     |         |
|----|-------------------|-----|---------|
| 1  | Magnus MICHELSSON | AUS | 2:26:51 |
| 2  | John MEAGHER      | AUS | 2:29:12 |
| 3  | Saeki TSUTOMU     | JPN | 2:29:12 |
| 4  | Rowan WALKER      | AUS | 2:29:26 |
| 5  | Justin WILSON     | AUS | 2:32:19 |
| 6  | Michael MCINTYRE  | AUS | 2:37:18 |
| 7  | Grant MORGAN      | AUS | 2:39:09 |
| 8  | David GALEA       | AUS | 2:40:33 |
| 9  | Blair MORRIS      | AUS | 2:43:42 |
| 10 | Geoff MOULDAY     | AUS | 2:43:56 |

### WOMEN:

|    |                  |     |         |
|----|------------------|-----|---------|
| 1  | Billinda SCHIPP  | AUS | 2:54:01 |
| 2  | Lee-Ann TURNER   | AUS | 2:54:29 |
| 3  | Hifumi FUKUYASU  | JPN | 2:54:37 |
| 4  | Karyn BOLLEN     | AUS | 2:58:11 |
| 5  | Heather CARSON   | AUS | 3:01:31 |
| 6  | Alison BOWMAKER  | AUS | 3:05:10 |
| 7  | Sandra PROSENICA | AUS | 3:06:39 |
| 8  | Dianne AITKEN    | AUS | 3:10:13 |
| 9  | Kristen WYATT    | AUS | 3:12:34 |
| 10 | Sandy ALLAN      | AUS | 3:12:38 |

### WHEELCHAIR:

|                |     |         |
|----------------|-----|---------|
| BRETT MCARTHUR | AUS | 2:04:35 |
|----------------|-----|---------|

### Half Marathon

#### MEN:

|   |                  |     |         |
|---|------------------|-----|---------|
| 1 | Martin FEDMOWSKI | AUS | 1:08:16 |
| 2 | Masashi WADA     | JPN | 1:08:25 |
| 3 | Tod INGRAM       | AUS | 1:09:40 |

#### WOMEN:

|   |                 |     |         |
|---|-----------------|-----|---------|
| 1 | Yuka AIKAWA     | JPN | 1:16:57 |
| 2 | Nadelle LEGG    | AUS | 1:18:47 |
| 3 | Loretta MCGRATH | AUS | 1:22:03 |

### 10.9km MARAFUN

#### MEN:

|   |                |       |
|---|----------------|-------|
| 1 | Marcus TIERNEY | 34:37 |
|---|----------------|-------|

#### WOMEN:

|   |             |       |
|---|-------------|-------|
| 1 | Karen THORP | 39:27 |
|---|-------------|-------|

