

November 5, 2006

NEW YORK CITY MARATHON

## Foreign Runners Find Getting to Race Can Be Hardest Step

By JERÉ LONGMAN

For many elite international runners competing in the New York City Marathon today, reaching the starting line of the 26.2-mile race has required the same kind of planning and strategy that will be needed to reach the finish line.

Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the process of obtaining visas to compete in the United States has become more closely scrutinized, costly and time consuming, according to immigration officials, race organizers and sports agents. A process that might have taken two or three days in the early 1990s can require two or three or more months now, agents said.

New York race officials and a number of sports agents said they welcomed stricter examination of travel permits, noting that it had made the sport of distance running more professional while protecting against visa violations. At the same time, a handful of top runners have missed important road and track races in recent years and have lost chances at six-figure paydays.

"I think there is certainly higher scrutiny, and administrative logistics have increased substantially," said Mary Wittenberg, race director of the New York City Marathon and chief executive of New York Road Runners, the club that organizes the race. "I think it's good for our sport. If you're a serious athlete, you've got a lot to take seriously. Half the battle of winning New York is getting to the start line. And a key component is getting a visa."

Not all invited athletes have made it to the race.

In 2002, the Algerian runner Rachid Ziar was invited to compete in New York three months in advance, but he could not secure a visa to enter the United States from France, where he was living, race organizers said. They said they were told by security officials that Algerians had to undergo thorough security vetting, including a screening by the [F.B.I.](#), that could take up to six months.

"Our hands were tied," Richard Finn, a spokesman for the Road Runners Club, said.

Today's elite field in New York will consist of 44 male and 29 female runners in a largely recreational field of about 37,000 participants. Most recreational runners come from the United States or Western Europe, whose citizens do not need visas to compete here. Neither do stars like Stefano Baldini, the 2004 Olympic champion from Italy, which has a visa waiver program with the United States for visits of 90 or fewer days.

On the other hand, athletes from East Africa's dominant distance-running nations, Kenya and Ethiopia, do require visas to compete in the United States. According to race organizers and sports agents, most Africans enter the country on what is known as a P-1 visa, meant for internationally recognized professional athletes

and entertainers.

Elite runners usually participate in no more than two marathons a year, one in the spring and another in the fall. The biggest marathon of all — the Olympics — offers no prize money. Missing a top American race in New York, Boston or Chicago can mean forfeiture of a lucrative payday that amounts to a significant part of yearly income.

For instance, Paul Tergat of Kenya, who holds the marathon world record of 2 hours 4 minutes 55 seconds, could make \$300,000 to \$500,000 in prize, bonus and appearance money if he repeats as champion in New York.

“It can be heartbreaking for an athlete” to miss a scheduled race, said Derek Froude, an agent based in Tampa, Fla., who represents runners from Africa, South America, Mexico, Russia, Portugal and New Zealand. “There isn’t a race the caliber of New York to run the next week.”

Daniel Cheribo, a lesser-known Kenyan, was denied entry into the United States on a tourist visa one month before the 2004 New York City Marathon, said his agent, Gianni DeMadonna, a former top runner from Italy who finished second in New York in 1987.

At the time, Cheribo was told he needed a P-1 visa by officials at the United States Embassy in Nairobi, DeMadonna said. This is a complicated process that requires petitioning for the visa in the United States by the runner’s sponsor, like an agent or a shoe company. Approval can take two to three months, although the waiting time can be reduced to 15 days by paying a special processing fee of \$1,000. Such a fee can be prohibitive for second-tier runners, agents said.

Once the visa petition is approved by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the [Department of Homeland Security](#), the runner’s application is forwarded to an American embassy or consulate in the athlete’s home country. An athlete must then make an appointment with consular officials to obtain the visa. In Kenya, the wait for an appointment can take up to a month or six weeks, some agents said.

Cheribo declined to pay the \$1,000 fee to expedite his visa application in 2004, unconvinced he could complete the process in time to compete in New York, his agent said.

Instead, Cheribo ran the Milan Marathon several weeks later, winning and setting a course record in 2:08:38. But his prize money — about \$35,000, according to his agent — was far less than the \$100,000 available that year to the winner in New York. Cheribo has since secured a P-1 visa and is scheduled to compete today in New York.

“After September 11, everything becomes so difficult,” DeMadonna said. “It can be a nightmare.”

Statutory changes have not necessarily slowed the process for obtaining visas, said Shawn Saucier, a spokesman for the citizenship and immigration services department. But, he added, “As an agency that takes its role in protecting the U.S. seriously in a post-9/11 world, we definitely pay more scrutiny to everything we do.”

An incident that crystallized the urgency of the visa issue was the absence of the favorite Robert Cheboror

from the 2005 Boston Marathon. Cheboror, a Kenyan, finished second in Boston in 2004 and was the fastest scheduled entrant in 2005. He did not get his visa until two or three days after the race, said Jos Hermens, Cheboror's agent.

"I look at that moment as waking up a lot of people," Wittenberg, the New York race director, said. "There was a delayed reaction in terms of agents fully understanding how much farther out they had to plan. I hope they are largely caught up now."

Many races now face heightened security challenges. A month after the terrorist attacks in 2001, The Detroit Free Press Marathon eliminated the part of its course that crossed the border into Windsor, Ontario.

"We were all in fear of what could happen next," Barbara Bennage, marketing director of The Free Press, said.

The Detroit marathon has resumed its cross-border route, but, before last weekend's race, all participants who were not residents of the United States and Canada were interviewed by border and customs officials, according to the marathon's Web site. Spotters and timing chips attached to the runners' shoes kept track of the competitors' whereabouts on the course. Anyone who jumped into the race unofficially was subject to arrest.

"It does discourage foreign athletes from coming here," Bennage said.

When international runners attempt to collect their visas overseas, they must essentially convince American consular officials of two things: that they are legitimate athletes and that they plan to return home.

Four or five years ago, the top Russian runner Galina Aleksandrova was denied a visa to enter the United States to compete in a series of summer road races, Froude, her agent, said. "They refused to believe she wasn't coming to the U.S. to find a husband," Froude said, referring to American consular officials in Moscow. Later, her visa request was granted, Froude said.

In addition to the visa application, the race invitation and other paperwork, agents say they advise athletes to take to consular visits such corroborating evidence as medals, trophies, newspaper clippings, marriage licenses and bank records.

"I can be sympathetic to the athlete; it's a complicated process," Bob Kerr, a spokesman for the United States Embassy in Nairobi, said. But, if the paperwork is in order and there is no history of visa violations, he added: "No visa officer would reject a Kenyan athlete who had a good chance of winning and setting a record. I can't imagine."

Some agents regularly visit the United States embassies in places like Nairobi and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to facilitate the visa process. Still, there can be hitches. For one thing, it has become much more difficult to enter American races at the last minute, agents said.

Last June, Ejegayehu Dibaba of Ethiopia, the 2004 Olympic silver medalist at 10,000 meters, was unable to secure a timely P-1 visa to compete in the 5,000 meters at the Reebok Grand Prix meet in New York, said Mark Wetmore, her agent.

Wetmore, who is based in Boston, said he tried to get Dibaba a single-entry tourist visa, but that also proved futile. Instead Dibaba ran in a meet in Oslo, missing a chance to contend for a world record in the 5,000 that was set in New York by her countrywoman Meseret Defar.

“In the past, people could essentially get tourist visas,” Wetmore said. “That’s pretty much come to a halt.”

Geopolitics can also play a role in the visa process. A P-1 visa can be good for up to five years. At this point, though, Kerr, the embassy spokesman, said that Kenyans were being granted visas to the United States for a maximum of one year.

“That’s because Americans only get one-year visas to Kenya,” Kerr said. “That has to do with reciprocity.”

This might prove yet another bureaucratic irritant, said Lisa Buster, an agent for Kenyan runners, including the marathoner Catherine Ndereba, the 2004 Olympic silver medalist and a four-time winner in Boston. Ndereba’s visa expires in December, and Buster said she had been expecting another five-year stamp.

“It’ll be disappointing if she only gets a year,” said Buster, who is based in Philadelphia.

On the other hand, Buster said that she sometimes prefers shorter visa allowances for runners she does not know well, in case they abuse terms of their entry into the United States. In the past, she said, one of her runners began a computer export business here, while another seemed to want only to spend time with her boyfriend. She said she sought revocation of the two runners’ visas.

“What if they do something bad?” Buster said of runners who might violate their visa requirements. “I don’t want to be held accountable. My company’s name is on that visa. I will definitely follow the rules.”

Even when the rules are followed, things can go awry. Last spring, Rita Jeptoo of Kenya was granted a visa to run the Boston Marathon, but she put the wrong home address for her passport to be delivered. She arrived in Boston less than 48 hours before the race, and did not get a chance to examine the course. Somehow, she still won.

“She was lucky,” DeMadonna, her agent, said. “Really lucky.”

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