

EVOLUTION OF MARATHON AND ROAD RECORDS

Some of the response to the recent change to TAC's Rule 185.5, which redefines a standard, record-quality course, accuses TAC of "stripping" records from deserving athletes, and of trying to rewrite the record book. At the last TAC convention, the effort to grandfather Boston in as a special case showed how deep the feelings run.

At the 1985 TAC convention, the case of Salazar's run at the 1981 New York Marathon received similar emotional attention.

At this point it may be productive to examine what we think of as the marathon "record."

Modern marathon "record" thinking began when, in 1969, Derek Clayton ran 2:08:34 at Antwerp. This time was not bested until, in 1981, Alberto Salazar ran 2:08:13 at New York City. During this time span the running boom began and matured, and the running media, lacking any official source of information, created their own lists of times, and called them "records." Also during this period, Ken Young founded the National Running Data Center (NRDC), and, with wife Jennifer, began to compile his own list of "records."

Around 1970, the US course certification program was begun by the AAU, with Ted Corbitt doing the work. This work was continued by TAC, to the present. NRDC's work took one step beyond the media records, in that NRDC would list no mark from an uncertified course.

Ken also understood that downhill and wind affected performances, and originated the concept of "loop" courses and "point-to-point" courses, and kept records for each category.

In the early 1980's, NRDC recognized that even a certified course could be incorrect, and instituted a program of "validating" races. In this process an expert measurer was sent to check the length of the course, and the conduct and timing of the race was examined. If all was correct, the performance was considered as valid, and NRDC recognized it as a record.

At about this time, NRDC began to work with TAC, in an effort to convert their unofficial records into official TAC records. By this time, enough validations had been performed to show that most of the certified courses were short. The TAC course layout procedure was changed to require that an extra 1/1000 be incorporated into new courses, to assure that courses would be at least the nominal distance. Later TAC validations show that this change had the desired effect, since about 90 percent of current courses now pass the test, and no expertly-measured course since 1983 has ever been found short.

It was recognized that races would continue to be run on old courses, and a two-year period was established, during which courses could be slightly short, yet qualify for records, because time was needed for an orderly change. Since 1985 no record has been set on a course later shown to be short.

TAC's first consideration of Salazar's 1981 New York City run took place in 1985, since the validation process became bogged down, and was not completed

until that year. The 1981 New York City course measured out to 42.047 km, short by 148 meters.

It must be understood that in 1985 Salazar held the "media record" but did not possess an official US marathon record. The TAC road records at that time were those compiled by NRDC, and the TAC Records Committee had never debated a short-course situation such as they were faced with. Great sympathy was felt for Salazar and the New York organizers, since it was recognized that - short course or not - the performance was a great one. However, the shortness of the course was seen as just too much, and the performance was not recognized as a record.

Did this constitute "stripping" Salazar of his "record?" Or was it simply a sincere effort by TAC to get their road running records off to a proper start, by basing them on solid performances set on credible courses? Obviously, opinions differ.

The Salazar controversy quieted down, and a new problem began to be seen, one that was noticed by NRDC and later by TACSTATS, and by all knowledgeable fans. Point-to-point records - always considered as less valid than loop records, because of the aided nature of the courses - produced the faster times. This is not surprising, since runners will go faster when running downhill or with a tailwind.

The existence of two records for one distance caused confusion in the press, and it became common for the point-to-point record-holder to receive the lion's share of the media attention. This was seen as undesirable by both NRDC and TACSTATS, for two reasons: 1) The credit went to the wrong person, and 2) Ten percent of the races had an advantage over the remaining 90 percent, since the point-to-point courses were aided by wind and/or slope.

This was corrected in 1989 when TAC decided to keep only one record for each distance, and defined the standard course on which a record can be set. A standard course has a start-to-finish drop of no more than 1 meter per kilometer of course length (a 10 km course may not drop more than 10 meters). In addition, to prevent wind aid, the start and finish of a standard course may not be separated by more than 30 percent of the course length (start and finish of a 10 km race must not be more than 3 km apart, as the crow flies). 90 percent of US courses meet the new criterion, and are considered to be standard. An additional 3 percent meet the drop criterion, but have separation greater than 30 percent. On these courses records may be accepted if it can be shown there was no tailwind during the race.

In short, TAC saw that keeping point-to-point records had been a mistake, and the mistake was rectified in a way that includes the vast majority of US courses in the record-quality category.

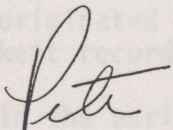
What about the remaining 7 percent of courses that have too much downhill slope? Normally, it might seem that a records system that includes over 90 percent of all courses is doing pretty well. However, the notable presence of the Boston Marathon, which drops 485 feet (3.5 meters per kilometer) over its length, added an emotional issue. Boston is a beloved course, and it seemed inconceivable to some that it should not be considered for record purposes. The argument was made that it was not an easy course, and that its uphill

more than compensated for its downhill. The prevailing opinion, however, was that it was not wise to make a special exception for one course, nor to expand allowable drop to a point that would include Boston, since this much drop provides an unacceptable amount of aid to the runner.

TAC's system of road running records, like any system, has taken a while to mature into a workable and fair procedure. Mistakes were made and corrected. Difficult issues were addressed and dealt with. Tempers got hot and emotions ran high. As a result of all the work and disputation, TAC now has a system of records that is as fair as it can be, given the varied nature of road courses.

So what about marathon and road records? At present TAC has them, but nobody else does. AIMS, the Association of International Marathons and Road Races, has measurement and validation requirements similar to TAC's. IAAF will soon have them. Today's recognized marathon "world records" (Densimo, Rotterdam '88 and Kristiansen, London '85) were checked, and found to be OK. Present international marathon records match the highest standard for fairness, as do all US road records. Importantly, now that standardization has been finally achieved, runners of the future will be able to compare themselves with those of the present, something not possible until now. Credible world road records at all distances are not far off.

Perhaps the way to look at past marathon performances is to judge each by the standards of its time. There is no reason to denigrate past performances because we have higher technical standards today. Uncertainties and disagreements abound in sport, and road racing is no exception.



Pete Riegel