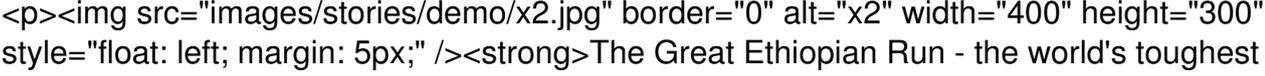


## Ethiopian Great Run

Written by Administrator

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The Great Ethiopian Run - the world's toughest fun run

The best race experience I have ever had, Mary Wittenberg recalls of her participation in the 2007 Great Ethiopian Run. Wittenberg is no ordinary runner. A former winner of the Marine Corps Marathon and a United States Olympic triathlete, she now directs the world's most famous road race, the ING New York City Marathon. Wittenberg knows a stunning event when she sees one.

Born out of a conversation between Haile Gebrselassie, the greatest distance runner the world has known, and Brendan Foster, the 1976 Olympic 10,000m bronze medallist turned race promoter, at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the Great Ethiopian Run has grown into a symbol of the new Ethiopia. Some 32,000 runners will line up for its eighth annual staging on November 23rd and the atmosphere will be as though the Bird's Nest Olympic Stadium in Beijing has been airlifted onto the streets of Addis Ababa.

It is such a moving experience, Wittenberg continued. It's a huge race, so it is wall to wall people within the race, but what is so moving is that the course is lined with people who have walked for miles just to cheer on the runners. Running is so vitally important in Ethiopia. The entire country is so proud of its running culture that you feel like they are celebrating a national pastime when they come out for the race.

To Gebrselassie, the Great Ethiopian Run over 10km is a vehicle to show something good about Ethiopia to the world. He adds: I feel very proud when I watch the race. It's a wonderful feeling to see thousands of people enjoying the run, especially in my home town. Running is an important part of our culture and this race is very much a part of that.

From a first-year official starting number of 10,000 in 2001, the event has grown almost as large as the Flora London Marathon (35,000 runners). The enthusiasm from the outset was phenomenal. Officially we had 10,000 in the first year but it was probably more like 14,000, as people without numbers joined in, recalls Myles Wickstead, British Ambassador in Ethiopia at the time.

Wickstead was part of the team comprising Gebrselassie, Foster and former World Cup marathon winner Richard Nerurkar, who got the event started. The numbers went within 24 hours and every one of those 10,000 thought they were going to win it, Wickstead said. The runners had never participated in an event like this and they didn't know what was expected of them.

My abiding memory of that first run was of all the runners going over the line, the stewards trying to get them back but to no avail, and of Haile running onto the podium telling them to get back behind the line because he was the only person they would listen to. The trumpet went and Haile leapt off the podium and went on to win.

At 8000ft altitude, Addis is no place for fast times and it is difficult to attract elite runners from outside the country. "No one in their right mind is going to compete against Ethiopians on their home territory," Wickstead says. As a guideline, when you are running at this altitude you add 10 to 15 per cent to your personal best time as a realistic aspiration.

At 25birr (1.50 GBP) entry is affordable (an average day's wages) and at least 90 per cent of the participants are Ethiopian, although the number of international tourist runners is growing. Unlike the London and New York marathons, the notion of running for charity has not taken hold yet. Come race day, it is a sight to behold. Everybody gets a pack which includes a tee-shirt, Wickstead explains. But what is different compared with most events is that almost everybody wears the T-shirt they have been given. The first year was red, yellow and green, the colours of the Ethiopian flag. It was like a great set of traffic lights running down the road!