At 14.46 on 11 March 2011 Japan was hit by its worst ever earthquake. It registered 9 on the Richter scale, and was one of the five worst ever suffered – anywhere. The World Bank rated it as the most expensive natural disaster in world history.

A year later to the day, but 5 hours 39 minutes before the first anniversary of the fateful moment, a solemn ceremony started the inaugural Kyoto Marathon. The previous year the Lake Biwa Marathon had been held on 6 March, but after the earthquake all other major races were cancelled until the Lake Saroma 100km was held on 26 June – in the far north of the country.

Kyoto is inland, and well to the south of the centre of the earthquake (which was in the Pacific Ocean off Sendai) but the event was a national tragedy and shocking to the entire world. Reconstruction efforts are underway at remarkable speed, thanks to the resilience and underlying optimism of the Japanese people and to a smaller degree from well-wishers’ prayers and assistance from around the world.

The inaugural Kyoto Marathon was organized as a partnership between the City of Kyoto and Kyoto Athletic Association. It included the marathon, an Ekiden (a traditional Japanese-styled relay originating as far back as 1917) and a wheelchair race. The race started at the Nishikyogoku Athletic Park and finished in front of the historic Heian-Jingu shrine. In the first Kyoto Marathon – previously it had been a half marathon - the 15,000 places offered were filled within days of the announcement, making a mockery of the theoretical closing date for entries in late August 2011.

Of the 15,000 runners accepted fewer than a thousand were non-Japanese. Hardly surprising, as the race was locally over-subscribed by seven to

Continued on page 21
one. So at least 100,000 Japanese wanted to run in this race, but only 14,000 of them won the privilege of enjoying the city by running through its main streets and landmarks.

“It was important to be part of the marathon to show our support to the charity” said one runner. Entry fees of 10,500 Yen/12,500 Yen (domestic/overseas) included a 500 Yen donation to the Great East Japan earthquake reconstruction charity. Kyoto is one of four new popular city marathons dedicated to re-energizing and uplifting the country, others being in Osaka, Kobe and Nagoya (Tokyo, the first Japanese Marathon to “go popular”, did so in 2007).

“Kyoto is my hometown” continued that runner, “and I especially wanted to come back to run the marathon even though I am not a good runner. We hope to finish in five hours”.

Each runner received two number bibs. One was the ordinary bib with the number, to be pinned on the front. The other was a bib printed with one-third of a motivational quote reading: “Today, I do whatever I can. Remember 03.11. Move ahead step by step.” Runners pinned them on their back to inspire other runners running behind them.

The race snaked through Kyoto’s historic districts, ancient shrines and temples. It took in the city’s most famous sights including the Togetsu Bridge, Hiroosawa Pond, Kyoto Imperial Palace and the Kyoto International Conference Centre. Thousands of spectators lined the entire 42195m of the course: cheering; dancing; performing Taiko drumming; handing out candies, chocolates, small red bean buns, donuts, fruits, drinks ...

When I heard that the race was held to support the recovery programme, I thought that was an event to do. I didn’t want to race. I ran at a leisurely pace with a group of disabled runners and took pictures of them along the course. I entered the marathon with a hundred runners from a Hong Kong running club. The main purpose of their trip was to support the recovery program and to donate funds to two local charities. There were six pairs of handicapped runners among the hundred. A hearing impaired runner joined up with a visually impaired runner and ran with a guide runner. Their goal was to finish, if possible in under five hours. “The odds were against us” said Kim, a visually impaired runner. “My legs felt worse and worse after 20km”. Kim & Yuk Wing ran with two other teams of disabled runners and were asked to drop out at 32km because they hadn’t made the cut-off time. Although only three out of the six pairs completed the race within the required six hours, being able to take part in an overseas marathon reminded them that impossible things can become possible. They will resume their regular training schedule in a few days and get ready for a 10K race back in Hong Kong.

“We are here for charities,” said coach Tim Fung, who had raised funds for two Japanese charities in his home town and led a group of 100 runners to race in Kyoto.

Qiu Xiao Chuan was one of the Chinese mountaineers who carried the Olympic flame to the top of Mt. Everest in 2008. He joined two friends from Shanghai and Beijing to race in Kyoto: “We often travel in a group of three to race. Sport has given people so much in their lives.”

The finish involved passing through the largest shrine gate (torii) in Japan before crashing through the finish line. It was spectacular, and a moment enjoyed by 14,093 runners: a completion rate of 95.4%.

Continued from page 17

Result

MEN:
1 Jyunichi USHIYAMA JPN 2:26:21
2 Yuki MURATO JPN 2:26:50
3 Kosuke MURATA JPN 2:27:23
4 Koji TANIGUCHI JPN 2:27:52
5 Jyun IMADA JPN 2:28:42
6 Yasuhide MORI JPN 2:29:27
7 Hikaru IDEGUCHI JPN 2:29:31
8 Yoshifumi YAMADA JPN 2:30:56
9 Yasutomo TAKENAKA JPN 2:31:08
10 Jyun KOIZUMI JPN 2:31:17

WOMEN:
1 Reiko KOBAYSHI JPN 2:48:47
2 Rie SATO JPN 3:09:38
3 Maya IINO JPN 3:11:43
4 Chie KIKOKU JPN 3:12:07
5 Mitsuko NUMATA JPN 3:12:08
6 Saki YAMASHITA JPN 3:14:23
7 Yoshimi SHITAKA JPN 3:15:01
8 Kumiko MURASAWA JPN 3:15:39
9 Ritsuko WATANABE JPN 3:17:56
10 Katsuyo MIYAMOTO JPN 3:18:09

“I work and live in Tokyo for many years and I love Japan. Japanese are very nice people. I want to share that: “There is no wall that’s unbreakable”.”

An angelic smile from a person who wrote “I run as slow as a tortoise because I have a pelvic bone fracture.”

“I want to share that: “There is no wall that’s unbreakable”.”

I work and live in Tokyo for many years and I love Japan. Japanese are very nice people. I want to share that: “There is no wall that’s unbreakable”.”