The Maritzburg Marathon has never focused on elite athletes, so when Munyaradzi Jari burst through the finish tape in the fastest time yet run in the 17-year history of the race no great fuss was made.

The Zimbabwean had held off several challenges in the second half of the race from his compatriot Samuel Pazanga, who finally capitulated on the short steep climb 3km from the finish. For Pazanga, who held the previous best time, those final kilometres were the longest of the day as he lost over two minutes before reaching the finish line and losing his event record by 31 seconds.

Melanie van Rooyen, third in the South African Marathon Championships three weeks earlier, passed Candycye Hall shortly after halfway and went on to dominate the women’s race.

In the first half of each year South Africans run marathons the way the rest of the world do their long slow distance training – every 10 to 14 days – as an attempt to prepare and qualify for the two biggest distance running events in the country. These are the Old Mutual Two Oceans 56km Marathon and the Comrades 90km Ultra Marathon - both AIMS members. Runners must run under five hours in a marathon to enter either of these iconic events and the Maritzburg Marathon has become the country’s most popular qualifier. In all over 5000 runners took part in the three race-day events, including the new addition of a 10km race.

By South African standards the 21km lap which tours the Victorian city – first through the centre of town and then into the suburbs – is relatively easy. But even though the return to the Drill Hall home of the host club, Natal Carbineers, is predominantly downhill, there are also a lot of ups to be negotiated. Some opt for one half marathon loop but most head out for a second lap, which is inevitably run under a shining South African summer sun where temperatures can hit 30C.

The Maritzburg Marathon offers features that belie the club-level organization. A runner-centric approach has led to a diverse range of distances being offered from a 42m nappy-crawl through to the full marathon.

In 2012 the race introduced the AIMS Marathon Flame to the African continent and in 2013 this continued with the lighting of a Maritzburg Flame, which was ceremoniously transferred from the Mayor’s office to the Drill Hall to open the weekend of activities.

In another first the organizers teamed up with the Comrades Marathon to host the first regional AIMS Conference, a taster for the 20th World Congress of AIMS, which will be held in Durban next June.

Maritzburg, or more correctly Pietermaritzburg, is the capital of the province of KwaZulu Natal, and is steeped in history. Mahatma Gandhi was arrested here in 1893 for sitting in the first class carriage, for which he had a ticket, on his train journey from Durban to Johannesburg. Gandhi was incarcerated in the Pietermaritzburg jail, which has now been renovated both as a museum and a craft and memorial site.

City Hall, when it was built, was the biggest brick-faced building in the southern hemisphere, and was where the first Comrades marathon started from on 24 May 1921. It has remained the start of the “down” race, finishing in Durban, that is run in “even” years. Only 5km away is the rather smaller Aya Samaj Hall in Edendale where Nelson Mandela, at the time nicknamed “the Black Pimpernel”, gave his final speech as a free man in March 1961.

Mandela delivered his message to the 1400 delegates at the All-In Africa Conference before being smuggled out of the area. Little under 18 months later and 30km away as the crow flies, the security police finally caught up with Mandela and arrested him on 5 August 1962 on the old Johannesburg road. He then started his 27 years of
The most innovative city has its own marathon

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imprisonment. The site is marked by a multi-faceted sculpture, which when viewed from one specific position creates the unmistakable image of Madiba’s face in profile.

Last year saw the inaugural running of the Mandela Day Marathon, which is run between Edendale and the capture site, fittingly, over one of the most gruelling of marathon courses. While the second half offers panoramic views of the “Midlands Meander” with the Drakensburg Mountains as a towering backdrop, in the first half there is only a 500m relatively flat section between the 11km long “Struggle Hill” and the shorter but steeper 3km “Challenge Hill”. Taken together they climb almost 500m.

Pietermaritzburg’s central location makes it accessible to the mountains and the coast. It is known as the “City of Choice” and Maritzburg Marathon has become the “Marathon of Choice” for many international and local running tourists.

One of them, 72-year-old Harry Botha, is part way through an attempt to run marathons on all continents. “I really enjoy the atmosphere and history of the Maritzburg event” he said after the race. “The cannon start, the tour of the city: it’s the marathon most people talk about.” After the Santiago Marathon in April followed by the Great Barrier Reef Marathon in November Botha should become the oldest man to complete seven marathons on seven continents.

It would seem the Maritzburg race has indeed become the African marathon of choice given that in 2012 Anand Anantharaman, who had already run marathons on the seven continents, chose this event for his bid to run six marathons on six continents barefoot.

The Weekend Witness Maritzburg City Marathon may not be known for fast times, high prize money, massive fields or high profile razzmatazz, but it is one of those events organized by runners, for runners.

Continued from page 21

Weekend Witness Maritzburg City Marathon, South Africa

You don’t see many unhappy runners on the Maritzburg City Marathon. Megan van der Merwe enjoys the route, overcast weather and the support along the way. Celeste Grant is the happy runner just behind. Photo: Action Photo

Silver medallists Phuzakahle Ngcobo and Xolani Ndaba celebrate their finish. Photo: Action Photo

The festive atmosphere at the finish. Photo: Action Photo

The Weeken Witness Maritzburg City Marathon, South Africa

Silver medallists Phuzakahle Ngcobo and Xolani Ndaba celebrate their finish.

Photo: Action Photo

The festive atmosphere at the finish.

Photo: Action Photo

Result

MEN:
1. Munyaradzi JARI ZIM 2:22:04
2. Samuel PAZANGA ZIM 2:24:08
4. Mosoumuniuh MORAPALLA RSA 2:25:11
5. Professor MOLLEN RSA 2:25:24
7. Andre BARNARD RSA 2:27:59
8. Christopher NORMAN RSA 2:28:09
10. Shkumbuzo DLABINI RSA 2:31:21

WOMEN:
1. Melanie VAN ROOYEN RSA 2:56:24
2. Candyce HALL RSA 3:11:36
3. Lauren CALENBORNE RSA 3:15:07
4. Wendy MORGAN RSA 3:16:29
5. Teresa MOLLER RSA 3:26:23
6. Precious DUMA RSA 3:27:27
8. Iris NDLIVO RSA 3:28:47
9. Michelle LLOYD-ELLIS RSA 3:29:03
10. Ntombizethu MNYANDU RSA 3:30:05

HALF MARATHON

MEN:
1. Samuel KIPTUM KEN 1:08:00
2. Sibonela DUMA RSA 1:08:12
3. Michael MZOBEL RSA 1:08:37

WOMEN:
1. Suzette BÓTHA RSA 1:20:40
2. Jenna CHALLENGER RSA 1:21:31
3. Danielle ADLAM RSA 1:25:19

10km

MEN:
1. Siya NIKONDE RSA 30:09
2. Thobane CHAGNE RSA 30:15
3. Sithembele FANEKO RSA 31:37

WOMEN:
1. Tanith MAXWELL RSA 36:39
2. Pusuletsa DLADLA RSA 38:04
3. Daisy Kipngetich KEN 38:37
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