"Thanks and friendship, 20 years after the earthquake" was the theme of the 2014 Kobe Marathon, and it literally shone through from the start. A sea of yellow-gloved runners in the full marathon provided the backcloth for the Mayor, in a striking red cap and jacket, to fire the starting gun at 9:00 sharp. Taken together they represented a sunflower: the symbol of the city’s regeneration.

You wouldn’t think that just 20 years ago, on 17 January 1995, Kobe was devastated by the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. Standing at the Marathon start line in the shadow of the modern City Hall skyscraper, with a gentle breeze and the sun shining, there was no visible trace of the charred and destroyed buildings or the suffering caused by the earthquake. But it cannot have been far from the hearts and minds of the thousands of supporters, volunteer, and runners at the race who experienced the tragedy that fateful year. This year’s marathon was to thank all those from Japan and overseas who supported and contributed so much to the rebuilding efforts. It was to build links of friendship and extend omotenashi (a truly Japanese concept which is often translated as “hospitality”) to visitors to Kobe. And it was to show the world the beautiful city which has risen from the ashes.

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The race takes the runners west through the city, in more or less a straight line, until two 90-degree turns take them past the iconic Tetsujin 28 monument in Shin-Nagata, an area that was particularly hard-hit by the 1995 earthquake. The finish line for the 1,783 quarter-marathon runners comes just as the full-marathon course starts to hug the coastline, and this year an impressive 97.9% of the quarter-course participants reached their destination. But the day is far from over for the full-marathon runners, who can see the course stretch out in front of them and enjoy the serene beauty of Kobe’s scenery. The water lies to the left and mountains to the right as they continue west towards the impressive Akashi Kaikyo Bridge. When it comes into sight, they know the turnaround point is getting closer. The world’s longest suspension bridge is just before the 18km point, and runners get close to it before taking a U-turn to head back east along the coast towards their final destination on Port Island.

The Kobe Marathon started in 2011, but Kobe has had a long history of long-distance races. The city boasts the longest relationship with marathons of any in Japan, being the starting point for the Kobe-Osaka Marathon Race held in March 1909, the first long-distance race in the country to bear the “Marathon” name. At that time such events were reserved for serious athletes but, as Japan has entered the running boom in recent years, marathons have become more accessible to young and old alike. The Kobe Marathon is no exception.

With a generous time limit of 7 hours keen runners from teenagers to octogenarians took part in 2014 and the percentage finishing was 97.8%, the highest in the race’s history. A staggering 86,516 people applied for just 18,000 full and 2,000 quarter-marathon places — runners were already winners just by getting to the start line. But don’t let this discourage you from applying: entries from overseas are accepted automatically, not subject to the lottery after which Japanese applicants wait several impatient weeks before learning if they have been accepted or not.

As the reach of marathons has expanded, so has the support. The 4th Kobe Marathon brought 610,000 people out to cheer the runners on, 40% of the city’s 1.5 million inhabitants. From the very start to the very end the course is lined with supporters clapping, cheering, and shouting “FIGHTO!”, not to stir up trouble but to keep the runners going, as in Japanese the word means “Do your best!”.

The support and feeling of community sets Kobe’s race of Thanks and Friendship apart, and it is clear that the whole city is spurring on every participant. Trains blasting their horns, posters of support by local schoolchildren pasted along the route, and even fishing boats with well-wishing flags hoisted high to lift the spirits of runners looking out to the sea. Runners are treated to wadaiko (Japanese drum) performances, cheerleading, Chinese dragons, brass bands and elementary school students dancing on trampolines along the way; all doing a fine job of distracting them from the aches and pains inevitable when running a marathon.

The generally flat course has one particularly steep point — the ascent of the Kobe Ohashi Bridge which peaks at 37km into the race. At the top, you are rewarded with a view of the finish line less than 1km away. But this is as the crow flies; as tantalisingly close as it comes, the path snakes off course and demands that runners keep going those extra few kilometres to make it up to a marathon. To compensate, there is a special facility in place: a boat which sprays a fine mist of cooling water over participants.

The finish line finally comes back into view and this time it’s for real; the streets buzz with excitement, as runners’ bodies and minds surely do, with the prospect of crossing the line. The first man to do so was the Kenyan Haron Malel, setting a new course record of 2:13:45 and smashing his own personal best by four minutes. The 20-year-old Hiromi Saito came in as first woman with 2:38:26.

The 2014 Kobe Marathon was an event of excitement, an event of passion, but also one of remembrance. A true event of thanks and friendship.
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