Every November nearly 30,000 runners from across the United States and around the world descend on the ‘City of Brotherly Love’ to take part in the Philadelphia Marathon and Half Marathon. The mostly flat course and ideal autumn temperatures make it a favourite for runners looking to complete their first marathon, set a new personal best or qualify for the Boston Marathon.

As these participants make their way toward the majestic Benjamin Franklin Parkway they are greeted by volunteers in brightly coloured sweatshirts who guide them towards the starting corrals which lie close to the steps of Philadelphia’s Museum of Art — made famous in the Rocky film series.

Just after sunrise the race announcer prepares runners for what promises to be an unforgettable experience on the streets of one of America’s most historic cities.

The Marathon was established in 1994 by the City of Philadelphia and a group of dedicated runners and physicians at the Rothman Institute. In the past Philadelphia distance races were largely independent ventures held on the outskirts of the city but the new focus under the City of Philadelphia (led by then-Mayor Edward Rendell) was to shift the race to a course within the city limits and to showcase the City’s many assets. Today the Philadelphia Marathon is the only major U.S. marathon to be owned and operated by the city authorities.

Along the full marathon course runners pass by some of Philadelphia’s most iconic sites and several key landmarks from American history. On the Benjamin Franklin Parkway Philadelphia’s City Hall and the well-known “LOVE” statue loom into view. By 3km participants have reached the city’s Historic District within which lies Elfreth’s Alley, America’s oldest continuously inhabited residential street. After spending some time on Columbus Boulevard, a normally busy thoroughfare along the Delaware River, runners turn back towards the city centre. At 6km Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell are easily seen from the course. This portion of the race also features dense crowds of fans along Chestnut Street.

Next up is the hip neighborhood of University City — where the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University are located — and a number of landmarks in West Philadelphia. At 13km the course passes by Philadelphia Zoo, America’s first, which now houses more than 1300 animals. Shortly afterwards runners see another piece of Philadelphia history — Memorial Hall. Located at around 15km, Memorial Hall was built as the art gallery for the 1876 Centennial Exposition, and since 2008 has housed the Please Touch Museum.

The course becomes scenic as it follows the Schuylkill River back towards the Philadelphia Museum of Art for the half marathon finish. Half marathoners bear right to the finish line and full marathoners continue along the Schuylkill. They pass the historic Laurel Hill Cemetery, which serves as the final resting place...
Gore-Tex Philadelphia Marathon

place for many prominent figures including past mayors, U.S. Congressmen, military leaders, and famed announcer for the Philadelphia Phillies, Harry Kalas. On the way to the Manayunk neighborhood of Philadelphia runners cross Falls Bridge to reach the other side of the Schuylkill River.

Once they make it to Manayunk marathon participants face a few hills but also benefit from some of the greatest crowd support on the course. The return towards the finish line along Kelly Drive can be long and quiet, so runners need to stay focused and take advantage of the flat terrain that makes up the last few miles.

Approaching the Museum of Art the crowds get thicker and roaring cheers from fans fill the air. The electric atmosphere of the final mile is unrivaled: participants feel as if they are Olympic athletes when the Philly crowds bring them home to the finish line.

Philadelphia is known for having some of the most devoted sports fans in the world, and their boundless enthusiasm takes in the Marathon. Tens of thousands line the course to support all of the runners. More than 20 official Cheer Zones are set up throughout the city, marking key spots for fans to gather and support the runners. The area around the start/finish line is jam-packed with family and friends, providing a lively atmosphere for participants as they begin their journey and again as they feel the joy of crossing the finish line.

Although Philadelphia is the fifth largest city in the country and the Philadelphia Marathon is one of the ten largest marathons in the United States runners consistently note how this race manages to make each individual feel special. Participants’ names are added to their bibs so they benefit from personalised cheers along the course and get start/finish line shout-outs from announcer Rob Powers, or even Olympian Bill Rodgers who has attended the marathon for the last several years. Another tradition that has developed in Philly is the delivery of celebratory high fives from Mayor Michael Nutter as runners cross the finish line. Though the 2015 race marked Nutter’s last as mayor of Philadelphia, organisers hope that this tradition will continue with the next administration.

After they cross the finish line runners are draped in heat sheets and handed a medal that is uniquely Philadelphia — in 2015 it featured a replica of the Liberty Bell, complete with the legendary crack and the ability to ring. As they continue down the Ben Franklin Parkway finishers receive post-race food that includes a Philly staple — the soft pretzel. From finish line shout-outs and mayoral high fives to local favorites in the post-race food area, the Philadelphia Marathon is the city’s own.

No trip to Philadelphia would be complete without climbing the famed Art Museum steps and re-enacting the signature scene from Rocky... a challenge many Philadelphia Marathon participants are happy to accept, even after their own epic trek across the city.

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- The race will next be run on Sun 20 November 2016
- For more information visit: www.philadelphiamarathon.com