

TV and the New York City Marathon

How television covers and enhances
this captivating annual event.

By Greg Vitiello

You can watch the New York City Marathon by staking out your favorite corner in any of the five boroughs and waiting to pass out water or oranges, wave a national flag, or shout encouragement to friends and the tens of thousands of runners from dozens of states and scores of countries. But if you want to *see* the New York City Marathon, switch on WNBC (if you're in the tri-state area) or NBC (anywhere in the United States) or in any of 150 territories where the international feed transmits the race.

On television, you'll actually get to see the lead runners glide over 26.2 miles of city streets, bridges and park roads at a mind-boggling pace. You'll hear step-by-step analysis of the race from experts

riding beside them in motorcycle sidecars or observing the runners from the NBC studio. And you'll get more – much more – as the television team introduces you to mid-pack runners (people sort of like yourself); identifies races within the race (such as the Foot Locker Five-Borough Challenge); profiles such neighborhoods as Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or Harlem, as the race pulses through their streets; and provides you



NBC's Bruce Beck (right) interviewed Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg at the awards ceremony for the 2003 New York City Marathon.

with overhead views of the City's autumnal beauty.

Covering the event in all its intricacy requires sophisticated technology, a great sense of pacing (not unlike that of the runners themselves), and a showman's ability to keep an audience hooked for five hours of broadcast time as the 35,000 runners traverse the course.

The five-borough course dates to 1976, when New York Road Runners Club President Fred Lebow persuaded the city to turn the streets over to the runners for a single day. The timing was apt: distance running was on the rise and the nation was celebrating its 200th anniversary. The response was extraordinary: For an event that had attracted just 126 runners at its inception six years earlier in Central Park, the initial five-borough race drew more than 2,000 runners and millions of spectators. It became, in Lebow's words, "a day of urban magic."

As broadcast producers, Trans World International relies on a crew of about 400 – including producers, directors, editors, cameramen, commentators and spotters. "We bring in about 80 members of the Columbia University track team as spotters," explains Steve Mayer, TWI's Head of U.S. Production and producer of the marathon broadcast. "Each of them gets a walkie talkie, stop watch and T-shirt and is assigned to follow a specific story or a point in the race."

TWI's technical director Gary Crichlow adds, "The spotters give us that kind of eye-to-eye contact with the runners that we primarily get from Kathrine Switzer and Tony Reavis," referring to the two commentators who report on the lead runners from motorcycle sidecars.

A former New York City Marathon winner who has covered distance running for the past 25 years, Switzer is adept at providing cogent analysis while clinging to a speeding vehicle. "We have expert motorcycle drivers, but we ride so close to the runners that I'm terrified we'll bump one of them," she says. "At the same time, it's a great privilege because you're closer than anyone else to the most incredible athletes in the world."

Operating from an office trailer on Central Park West, which serves as the main compound, Mayer's team must decide when to cut to the motorcycle teams or any of the other commentators and cameras spread around the city. "In addition to the main compound, we also have compounds at the starting area in Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island, and on First Avenue in Manhattan," says Mayer.

"Last year, we had a total of 33 cameras, including the stabilized mounts that we put in the bed of pick-up trucks to shoot the lead men and women. We also have cameras on the motorcycles that track the lead runners. And we have

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two cameras with gyroscopic mounts in the helicopters that give you beautiful wide shots of the runners and the city."

Until three years ago, the helicopters also served to relay signals from cameras covering the race to the towers of buildings spread around the city. These signals provided the images seen on television – except when obstacles interfered. "In the past, when the runners got to the 59th Street Bridge, you'd get this visual static as the picture broke up,"

says Mayer. “Now, with the digital transmission we have, I can go directly from any of the cameras to a tower without any break-up.”

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Technologically, television has advanced light years since 1979 when WGBH, Boston, provided a one-hour taped broadcast of the Boston Marathon and WNEW, New York, covered the New York City Marathon. At Boston, Switzer and fellow broadcaster Larry Rawson were assigned battery-operated golf carts from which they followed the lead runners. “The carts were fine on the flats and downhill parts of the course, but we could barely get up the hills,” recalls Switzer. “We were shooting with these great big video cameras. Every five or six miles we’d hand over the cassettes to guys who were waiting on motor scooters to take the tapes back to the studio.”

“For what was being attempted, we felt like the Wright Brothers,” says Rawson (who now co-hosts the New York race with veteran sportscaster Al Trautwig). The only prior coverage of a marathon, for the 1972 and 1976 Olympics, had merely contained portions of each race.

The technology and overall coverage improved during the 1980s when the race was broadcast in its entirety by ABC and included Al Michaels, Jim McKay and running legend Marty Liquori as commentators.

And yet even as recently as a decade ago, when the race was being covered by WPIX/Channel 11, Crichlow recalls: “We had to run a cable from the top of WPIX’s offices down the stairwell of the building to our control room out on the street. We

did some archaic things back then.”

However primitive the coverage was by today’s standards, television proved invaluable to the marathon and the city.

“Television allowed the world to see what New York City – and the New York City Marathon – was all about,”

says Allan Steinfeld, president of New York Road Runners since Lebow’s death in 1994. “Television captures visually and emotionally the strengths of our race – its great start on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, the five boroughs with their diverse, multiethnic neighborhoods, and of course the race itself.”

Each year, Steinfeld ensures that the event has some of the world’s top marathoners, who compete for substantial prize money and the prestige of winning the New York City Marathon. And yet without an American champion in the past 20 years, viewers can easily lose interest in a race that spans more than two hours. This is where the coverage must excel. “I think we do a very good job of humanizing the runners,” says Mayer. “We provide stories people can relate to – and someone to root for.”

As the camera focuses on a lead group of runners covering a mile at a sub-5 minute pace, Rawson will interject: “Imagine running once around a quarter-mile track in 75 seconds or less – and think about doing that for 26.2 miles.” Or he will provide statistics on how the average height and weight of elite runners has dropped dramatically while their speed has increased. “I try to vary the information, finding good human interest stories and anecdotes with a bit of humor thrown in,” says Rawson.

Like the runners, the broadcasters come prepared. Calling herself “a very



Beck talked with elite U.S. runner Deena Kastor at the start of the race.

good bird dog,” Switzer often picks up valuable pieces of information on early morning runs in Central Park during the week prior to the marathon. Sometimes it will be a snippet of conversation or a glimpse of an elite runner. “You can actually watch the way an athlete runs in training and learn a lot by their color, how they’re moving and the expression on their face. I remember seeing Billy Rodgers (the leading American marathoner in the late 1970s and a four-time winner of the New York race) on one of his training runs during marathon week. He was bouncing along like an elf while he laughed and carried on and I knew he’d have a good race.”

Above all, Switzer, Rawson and Reavis know the runners through personal contact and even friendship. A 4.07 miler while in college, Rawson knew the sport as a competitor and fan long before he did his first broadcast. His debut was serendipitous. While he was standing

near the finish line of the 1974 Boston Marathon, he heard the radio broadcasters struggling with the name of the lead runner. Finally, ducking under a rope, Rawson said, “That was Neil Cusack.” The bemused broadcaster said, “How do you know this?” Rawson barely had time to explain before the announcer handed him the mike and said, “Here’s Larry Rawson to tell us about today’s race.” Rawson has been doing just that ever since. Most importantly, he and his fellow broadcasters provide the context that we value as we try to assess which runner will have the staying power and speed to capture the race.

The art of sizing up a runner helped to expose Rosie Ruiz after this previously unknown marathoner apparently won the Boston Marathon in 1980. During the post-race interview, Switzer asked Ruiz about her training methods. Hearing that Ruiz ran about 50 miles a week (a piddling amount for champion runners),



Sean Combs ran for charity in the 2003 New York City Marathon.

Switzer said, “You must be doing some terrific intervals.” Ruiz had never heard of intervals – bursts of fast running interspersed with slower-paced moments. Flustered and devoid of credibility, Ruiz was exposed as someone who had jumped into the race in its last few miles and crossed the finish ahead of the other women runners.

For Switzer, the story brings a wry smile, leavened by her own experience of becoming the first woman to run the Boston Marathon officially. In 1967, she had entered the men’s-only race as “K.V. Switzer,” before being jostled at the four-mile point by race official Jock Semple. His attempt to force her off the course was thwarted by Switzer’s companion, a hammer thrower who was accompanying her on her historic run. As Semple went tumbling, Switzer kept running – and broke the Boston sex barrier. Her announcing debut came 12 years later.

After Switzer’s 1980 interview with Ruiz exposed a case of blatant cheating, the organizers of the New York City Marathon found Ruiz’s name among the top finishers in their 1979 race. Eyewitnesses subsequently recalled seeing Ruiz riding the subway uptown that day – just before she slipped in among the lead women and ran her own abbreviated version of the New York City Marathon.

Television will help to guarantee that no one manages a sequel to the Rosie Ruiz story. Unlike previous years, the 2003 race featured a separate start for the women, ensuring that the leaders were in direct contact with each other rather than running in the midst of other men. Commentators and cameras can follow the lead pack of women before cutting away to the men or focusing on other stories – the wheelchair race or the Five-Borough Race. Each race-within-the-race is given its own drama and shape.

Tim McLoon, a member of the television crew who covers the course on foot, often profiles midpack runners, interviewing them as he runs beside them. In 2003, his assignment was to report on the marathoning debut of P. Diddy, aka Sean Combs, rap entrepreneur and megastar.

On marathon day, perhaps the biggest star of all is New York City. This was never more true than in November 2001, less than two months after the 9/11 attack. With the city draped in mourning, many city events were cancelled. But Steinfeld never wavered about the marathon. When one of the commentators asked him about safety at the start on the Verrazano Bridge, he quickly said, "I'll be on the bridge and Mayor Giuliani will be on the bridge." The commentator said, "I'll be there too." On the morning of the race, more than 30,000 runners lined up

on the bridge where bomb-sniffing dogs had checked the course and scuba divers investigated the pylons beneath the bridge. With snipers on rooftops and undercover police running in the race, the New York City Marathon went forward.

"The television courage was just right, capturing the somber mood beforehand but focusing on its main theme that the marathon was an event that could unite the city," says Steinfeld. "It was like the phoenix rising."

Each year, on the first Sunday in November, New York City rises in pride as 35,000 runners navigate through its streets, dodge its potholes and bask in the crowd's encouragement. For the television team that covers this memorable event, there is ample pride at capturing its drama and its spirit.

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