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The crowd that lifted the marathon man

APART from his work as an assurance adviser, Geoffrey Buchler's interests include active political work, debating and numerous sporting activities.

He was a regular contributor to the *Swiss Observer* during the '70s, and makes a welcome return with this very personal description of the London Marathon.

While studying at Lausanne University in 1967 he took part in the University Athletic Championships.

It was during a return visit to

Lausanne in 1979 that he decided to travel on to the Engadine, where he found that "The real beauty of the mountainside is never more noticeable than when running along woodland paths early in the morning bound on a destiny that seems timeless, with hardly ever another soul to be seen, breathing in the clean rarified air (at mostly 2,000 metres) at temperatures rarely exceeding 10 degrees centigrade and of course, by way of anticipation, a full 'English' breakfast on return."

However, running through the streets of London proved to be a very different experience – with elation coming not from the beauty of a peaceful setting but from the enthusiasm of an ever present crowd...

“The welcome that the people of London gave to the runners that morning was so exhilarating that at times we quite forgot the pain and the agony that our bodies were experiencing.

I will always remember the tremendous feeling I received when, having run through the desolate wastes of the Surrey Docks, I turned the corner to see that I had arrived at Tower Bridge.

What a transformation! The crowds were so huge and so vocal in their encouragement that I felt as if I was flying.

Seldom have I received such an amazing lift, but then the crowds along the whole of the course were fantastic.

All of us, whether runners, administrators, spectators, helpers or police were united in one ideal – an ideal not easy to adequately define in a few words.

Here we had 7,000 runners all trying to do their best over a gruelling 26.2 miles with well over a million people actively cheering them on and wanting them to do well.

It was a day when that seemingly rare, yet absolutely marvellous quality of courage was to the fore.

No matter that some runners completed the course in a little over two hours while others took more than six. The race had its own official winners, but in essence on that day everybody was a winner.

The witnessing of that first London Marathon inspired a good many people to say: "I'll do it next year." They started jogging and training with the result that London's parks played host to many new visitors.

Well, that was in 1981. In 1982 the marathon field had more than doubled, an extraordinary occasion, only to be surpassed by the performances achieved in 1983.

The gigantic field which plodded its way from Greenwich to Westminster Bridge featured the usual collection of zany characters, including Spiderman, Superman, a fireman in full kit complete with axe, six fairies, six MPs, a jester, a clown, last year's famous pantomime horse, two skeletons, a masked burglar, a

chef with hat and frying pan, and one "Gandhi".

There were two blind competitors, a man with a hole in the heart, another with a pacemaker, and a kidney transplant patient in addition to three athletes in wheelchairs.

Everyone of the 15,699 runners who completed the 26 miles and 385 yards was a winner, even if they then collapsed exhausted, many having raised enormous sums for charity through personal sponsorship.

Scenically, historically, London is impossible to beat... old Greenwich Observatory, the Cutty Sark and Tower Bridge. Then the detour into the East End and the Isle of Dogs.

What a depressing area you might say, but where else would you hear "Keep right on to the end of the road" and real London humour?

The fearful stretch of cobbles in front of the Tower, the Embankment, the sweep of the river rising majestically to Big Ben.

The long stretch of the Mall, St. James's Park and the Palace

in the distance, and then Big Ben once more in sight and on to Westminster Bridge – yes, for some, "earth has very little to show more fair" than the finish line beside County Hall.

Those who ran in the middle and at the back of the field had no thought of winning. For them and for me "the most important thing... was not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing in life is not to have conquered but to have fought well".

Thus, the echoed words of Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games.

As in previous years, the 1983 London Marathon was a joyous occasion. Despite the awful weather (awful, that is, for everybody except the runners) the crowds turned out in vast numbers to applaud the elite runners and encourage and celebrate with the not-so-élite.

Already plans are being drawn up for next year's event, which will be held on May 17.

For many it will be the sporting event of 1984. ●