



## MARATHON, A SOCIAL PHENOMENON IN THE MAKING

Corina IVAN<sup>1</sup>  
Andrei ANTONESCU

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### Abstract

*Not only is the number of runners steadily growing from year to year, but from one marathon to the other the number of individuals that finish the race amplifies, proving that in the current crisis that defines the economic situation, the running "industry" (especially the marathon) remains strong.*

*The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that give the marathon event its great social amplitude. The development of this study was based on the institutional role that the marathon plays in the choice of possible and encouraging actions for citizens. Through this paper we have tried to prove that by becoming a social phenomenon, the future will belong to those who enter the race not necessarily to test their physical condition but rather to form links with other running enthusiasts.*

*Throughout the research phase, questionnaires were applied in two sporting events, their target group being marathon participants or runners that were in training. Our attention was focused on a broader scale, heterogeneous both socially as well as through the results.*

**Keywords:** *marathon, social amplitude, benefits, socializing*

**JEL classification:** *I 10, I 19, I 20, I 31*

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### Introduction

A drastic aging of the population can be noticed in many Western countries (as well as in Romania). The number of people over 65 years of age has multiplied. Simultaneously, the social pressure of "looking good" has emphasized, to keep oneself in shape, otherwise risking removal from life's social scene. Seniors are exercising, longing to show that they are still vigorous, while youths increasingly engage in activities such as endurance running, where effort is not to be ignored.

Over time the marathon has not raised only athlete's ambitions: the demanding 42.195 km race has been attended by all sorts of individuals from elders of 100 years, to people weighing 180 kg, nudists, blind people, criminals or pregnant women. In terms of location, in addition to the famous tournaments in Tokyo, London and New York, marathons have been held in the most inaccessible areas of the world, such as the Sahara, Mount Everest, the North Pole, on an island of only 6 square miles, and even in space.

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<sup>1</sup> Corina Ivan, UNEFS, corinajavelin@yahoo.com, 0724367926  
Andrei Antonescu, Middle School no. 80, andreigantonescu@yahoo.com, 0746105132



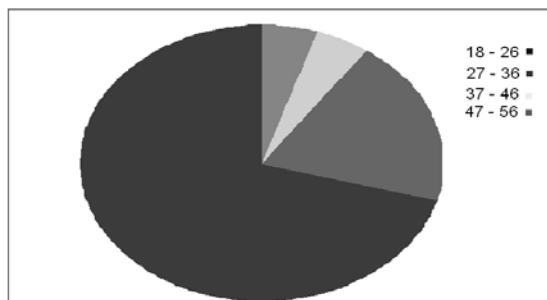
Regardless of the great physical suffering that is endured (we think on the famous 30 km marker), the desire to go further expresses lucidity, serenity of mind despite the burning body and despite its physical condition that would require it to stop.

### 1. The study samples

There were two events where questionnaires were applied, the International Bucharest Marathon, 5th edition, on October 7th 2012 and within Alexandru Ioan Cuza Park (Bucharest) in April 2013. The sought target group consisted of marathon runners as well as, race participants for the first event mentioned above, and individuals in training for the second. We did not turn to professional runners or individuals with valuable results, but tried to include as wide a range as possible both socially as well as considering results.

82 valid responses were obtained for ages between 18 and 56 years. Percentages calculated with age groups were distributed as follows:

- 58% for individuals of 18-26 years,
- 16% for 27-36 years,
- 4% for 37-46 years and
- 4% for 47-56 years.



**Figure 1 Distribution of respondents by age**

Each subject worked within different professional fields: student, security guard, waiter, cook, unemployed worker, IT, urban transport conductor, assistant manager, cleaning agent, insurance consultant, accountant, engineer, hair stylist, internal affairs employee, firefighter, coach. Among our subjects 56% had higher education studies and 44% had only completed high school.

Gender distribution was 39% female, 61% male.

We conclude that the marathon phenomenon encompasses populations of all ages and social status. It is not a privileged environment where only those from elite classes may gain access, however it is not inappropriate for them either. Contrary to the popular belief that young people today do not exercise as much anymore, the marathon phenomenon seems to be attracting mainly youths.



From research we have gathered that 31% of runners are now enrolled at a sports club where they practice athletics, and 53% of the subjects have been or still are part of an athletic club. The interesting conclusion is that 41% of those who competed for an athletic club but are no longer part of one are currently still running marathons. Although they don't practice athletics anymore (for various reasons) and have not been addressed at a performance level, those individuals are still drawn to the marathon phenomenon.



**Figure 2 Gender distribution of subjects**

## **2. Results**

### **2.1. Support in sports activities**

Processed data revealed that 96% of runners are supported by external parties. Only two subjects declared them self-sufficient, or said that it being a hobby there is no need for special support. Most runners are supported by their family (58%), by far the most powerful factor. Closely following is their group of friends (26%), their sports group members (26%) or their sports club (24%). Slightly below we find schools, teachers with (17%) and the last support category named "other factors" (10%). In this last category we found our subjects claiming as support: their girlfriends/boyfriends, God, doctors, other people; some just claimed they were self-supporting, or that it's just a hobby.

Of the participants 29% find help in two sources, 12% in 3, 5% are supported by all five factors, and 2.5% chose four of them. Here we see a correlation between those who practiced athletics at a sports club and support. They all claimed either the sports club or sports group or both supported them in their choices in sports. On the other hand only 46% of those who are currently enrolled in an athletic club believe that they receive support from their club or sporting group.



## 2.2. The physical and mental benefits of marathon running

To analyze this, we assigned points based on our subjects agreement with the following statements. A 5 point scale was used: The answer "to a small extent" is assigned one point, "heavily" brings five points. The maximum total number of points could be 410 (5 x 82).

The following number of points was recorded:

Note that all values are quite high, except those where open answers were chosen by four subjects. The average value between 2.1 - 2.14 is of 316 points, with a maximum of 344 for the pulmonary system and a minimum of 276 for digestive processes.

We are entitled to say our subjects assign great value to marathon running. There are benefits and they are quite obvious to its practitioners.

**Table 1 Points awarded to question 2**

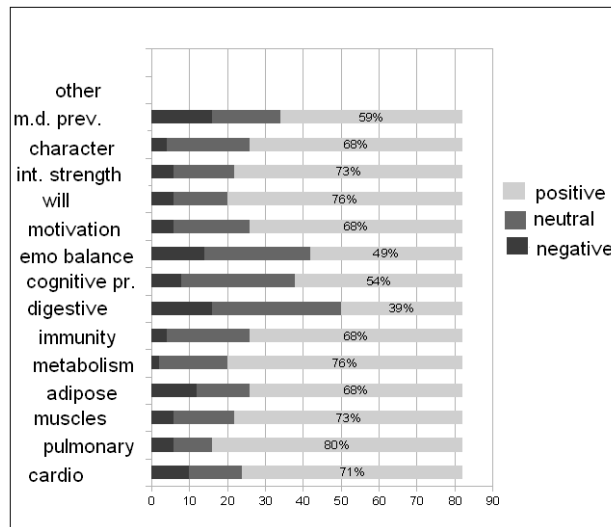
No.	Device / system / function	No. of points
2.1	Cardiovascular	320
2.2	Pulmonary	344
2.3	Skeletal muscle	326
2.4	Adipose tissue	316
2.5	Metabolism	326
2.6	The immune system	328
2.7	Digestive processes	276
2.8	Development of attention, thought and other cognitive processes	302
2.9	Emotional Balancing	290
2.10	Motivational development	326
2.11	Will development	334
2.12	Develops inner strength	326
2.13	Develops character	322
2.14	Prevents / improve certain mental disorders (depression, anxiety, insomnia, etc.)	292
2.15	Other	30

Responses were divided into three categories: positive, neutral and negative to find out how points were accumulated for the previous table.

We note that negative responses are fewer. The highest percentage of positive responses leans toward the pulmonary system, metabolism and will development (80%, 76%, 76%). Cognitive processes, digestive and emotional balancing had a fairly equal number between neutral and positive responses. The number of subject that claimed marathon running was not good for our metabolism and character was



the lowest of all others.



**Figure 3** Types of response to question 2

### 2.3. Improving the general wellbeing and material situation of practitioners

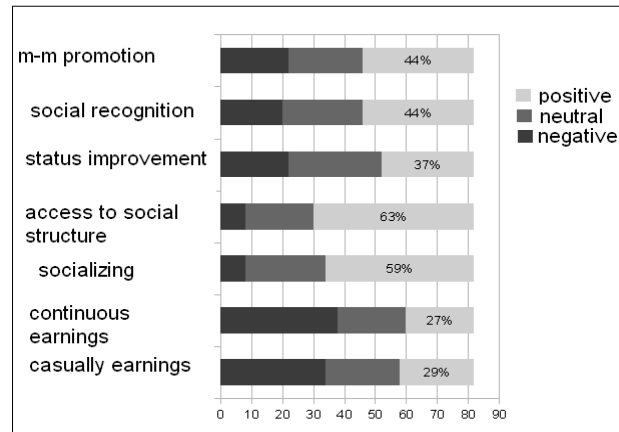
The same rule to awarding points was applied in this section as well.

**Table 2** Points awarded to question 3

No..	Benefit	Points
3.1	Occasional Benefits	230
3.2	Constant benefits	220
3.3	Socialization	300
3.4	Access to social environments	304
3.5	Improving the social status	260
3.6	Social recognition	264
3.7	Media promotion	258
3.8	Other	0

Note that on average the answers are positive, but not that close to the upper limit. The average value is 262 points (without field 3.8). This indicates that runners are concerned with benefits to themselves such as developing certain systems, functions, volitional processes, etc. rather than "social" ones.

Dividing responses into positive, neutral and negative we can trace.



**Figure 4 Types of response to question 3**

Compared to the previous chart, we find positive answers are not as frequent with regards to: benefits, both regular and occasional. These received mainly negative responses while improved social status gathered the same number of positive and neutral responses. This confirms that subjects do not practice marathon running for social benefits.

Subjects were divided in two categories: athletes (who had been part of an athletic club at least once in their lives) and amateurs. The second and third columns show the points received for each type of benefit, while columns four and five show the percentage out of the maximum possible number of points (220 for athletes and 190 for amateurs).

**Table 3 Points awarded benefits**

Benefit	Sport	Amateur	Athletes % max	Amateurs % max
Occasional income	136	94	61	49
Steady income	134	86	60	45
Socialization	158	142	71	74
Averages	164	140	74	73
Status	146	128	66	67
Recognition	158	110	71	57
Promotion	156	102	70	53

Note that athletes generally attributed more points to social benefits than amateurs. Athletes believe that there are material benefits brought by running the marathon. The actual socialization is seen almost equally by both categories:

- marathons help with socializing (71%, 74%),
- marathons ease one's access to certain social environments (74%, 73%),
- marathon running helps improve social status (66%, 67 %).



Only athletes believe that marathon running will bring recognition and progress. (71% and 70% versus 57% and 53%). The conclusion is that those who practice marathon running without thinking of performance are obviously interested in the social aspects and what access it may grant them to certain environments, while professional athletes see it as an activity that brings revenue, recognition and progress.

#### 2.4. Benefits for spectators

Centralized answers to the questions are presented in the following tables:

**Table 4 Absolute and percentage answers to question 4**

Benefit	Replies	%
History, tradition, cultural information	34	41
Quality sports show	56	68
Imposing certain role models	44	53
Other factors	2	2.5

**Table 5 Types of response to question 4**

Type of reply	Number	%
No answer	4	5
Simple answer	44	53
Reply double	10	12
Reply triple	24	29

Note that most subjects (95%) believe that marathon running is beneficial for spectators as well. A high enough percentage (29%) chose all variants as benefits of marathon running. The point where it is considered a "quality sports show" (68%), is followed by "imposing certain role models" (53%) and "history, tradition, cultural information" (41%).

#### 2.5. Critical point

Out of the questioned subjects, 56 (68%) of them face a critical point while running the marathon. Among athletes that have at least once been a part of a sports club 68.1% of them reach critical points as well as amateurs 68.4%. This data allows us to say that there is no link between the amount of training one undergoes and whether or not the critical point appears, since it appears in an equal measure in both categories of athletes.



How they manage to overcome that point boils down to willpower or bringing volitional processes(75%) into action: through will, fighting, motivating oneself, trust yourself, focusing, thinking positive, etc. "Will" is the word used most often (25%). 21% of subjects go beyond the critical point with a "mechanical" solution such as: training, ample breathing, stopping in order to hydrate etc. 2 subjects (4%) said they do not do anything special to overcome the critical point, it goes away by itself.

### 3. Conclusions

According to the responses from the questionnaire, practitioners are aware of the benefits of marathon running. Elements that benefit oneself are more appreciated (influences over major functions of the body, will development, etc.), however social privileges are not neglected. Whether training professionally or not, all runners recognize these benefits. Those who do train professionally (or did) add the aspect of material advantages. So the marathon for them is not just a hobby anymore but a means for living, a truly professional activity. Marathon running is available to absolutely everyone, young or old, executives and workers, educated or not, rich or poor, healthy or disabled. It is a positive action that people and society increasingly place value on. The reason behind the increased number of people who run, has nothing to do with success (in international events), because the motives differ.

Marathon running is definitely a social phenomenon, whether born of the individual's need to overcome him / herself or as an antidote for an either sedentary or stressful lifestyle. Regardless of the reasons, running remains a supreme challenge and an increasing phenomenon in our present society.

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