

January 1 2009 £2.75

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WEEKLY

2009 PREVIEW

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MARA YAMAUCHI

Olympic sixth-placer
striving for the
perfect marathon

**Bumper Christmas
results round-up**



The route to marathon glory has taken Mara Yamauchi from Oxford to Kenya and then to Japan, but the end is not yet in sight, writes PAUL HALFORD

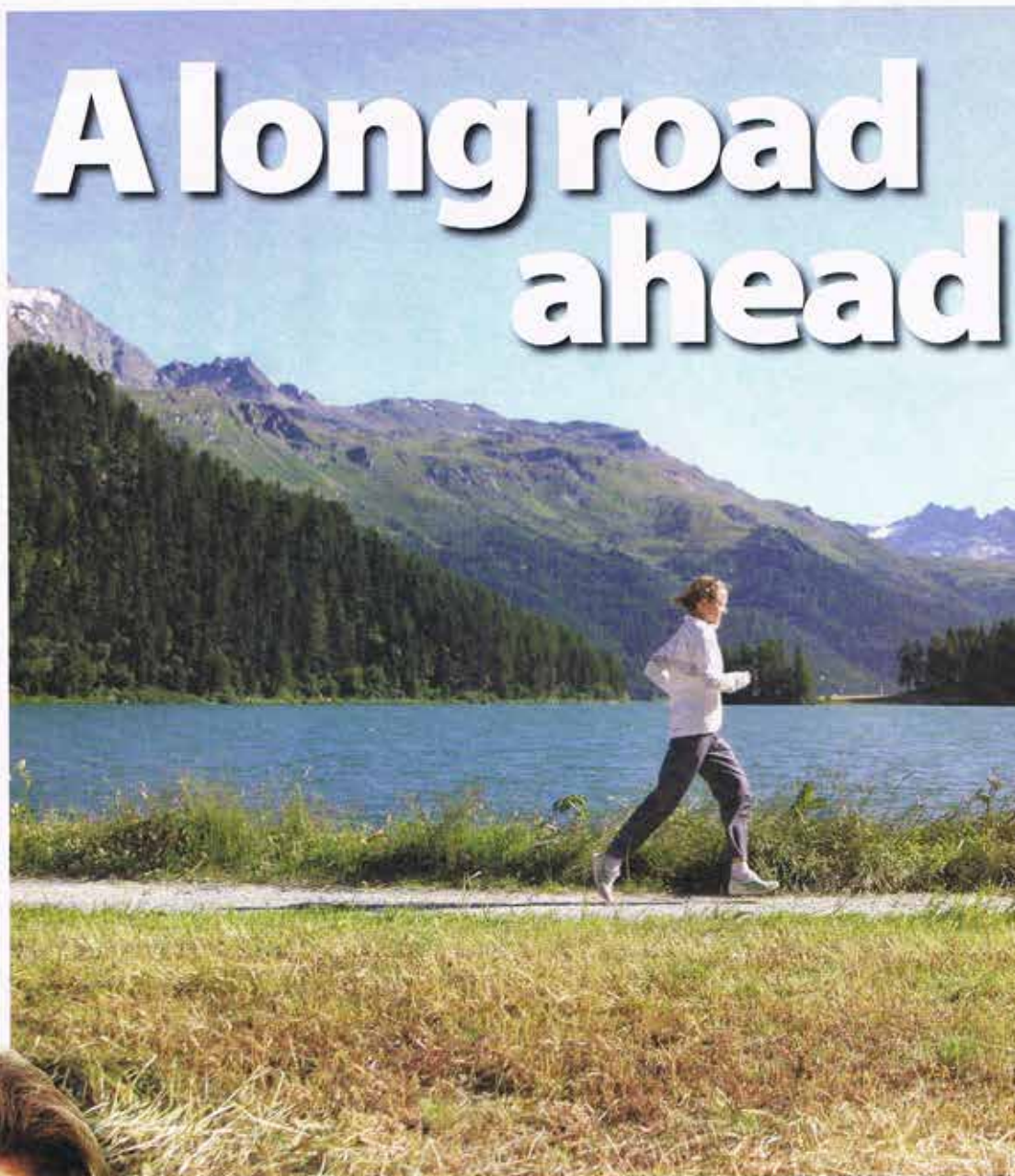
Pictures: Mark Shearman and Shigetoshi Yamauchi

DAYS before the women's Olympic marathon in Beijing last year, bookmakers were offering odds of 50-1 against Mara Yamauchi winning gold, while the world's media were focused on whether world record-holder Paula Radcliffe had recovered from injury sufficiently to achieve her destiny.

Though understandably not one of the favourites in a star-studded field, the 35-year-old Briton was clearly underestimated. Both consistent and level-headed in competition and ideally located in the similar climate in Japan, where she lives, the so-called second-string Brit was perfectly placed to capitalise on any impetuosity among her rivals in the expected harsh conditions.

As Romania's Constantina Tomescu ran away from the field to claim the Olympic title at the age of 38, Yamauchi enjoyed

A long road ahead



Born in Oxford, Olympic sixth-placer Mara Yamauchi benefited from being brought up at altitude in Kenya and is now bearing the fruits of training full-time in Japan

her best-ever championship result to place sixth.

However, the public and media are not the only ones who will be giving Yamauchi more respect in future. She also has more confidence in her abilities since crossing the line behind the European, two Kenyans and two Chinese in the Bird's Nest.

One of the toughest line-ups ever assembled for a women's marathon awaits her in London on April 26. It includes not only Radcliffe, who has proved she is approaching her best form, but two others from among the four fastest in history. Yamauchi is only 10th quickest on the start list and her PB, set last year in Osaka, is nearly 10 minutes slower than Radcliffe's world record.

However, she is undaunted. Just after returning to Japan after a two-week stay

back in Britain last month, Yamauchi told AW: "After the Olympics, I said the next step for me is that I have to go into every race trying to win it."

"Of course, I would love to win London. Looking at the field, that would be very difficult, but one or two of those might drop out before London through injury and then not everybody turns up in 100 per cent perfect condition. And then some people have bad runs on the day, sometimes the weather can influence people. On paper, yes it's very difficult. In practice, there are some big names there who I can beat. If I look at the list and think, 'Crumb, this is really hard', then I'm not going to get the best out of myself. I just have to concentrate on turning up in the best possible shape I can and then running a sensible race on the day."



“My age as an athlete is not that old because I only took up full marathon running when I was about 30. If I keep doing marathon running, I could win more races or hopefully win a medal somewhere”



Her build-up to London will begin in Japan. “The winter weather (in Japan) is really good for training,” she said. “It’s not that cold and it doesn’t rain much.”

She then might head to Albuquerque for altitude training in the spring, mixing in a couple of half-marathons and a 10km in Japan.

In 2008 Yamauchi enjoyed her best-ever season. She won her first big-city marathon, in Osaka, and continued in winning fashion at the high-calibre Matsue Half-marathon.

It may appear an insignificant point, but in Beijing, she became British veteran over-35 record-holder, though that may be short-lived as Radcliffe, who is four months younger, entered that age bracket last month. Yamauchi then took seven seconds off her PB in

finishing third in the Tokyo International Women’s Marathon. However, she considers her career best of 2:25:03 due for some revision.

“I feel I’ve got a 2:22 or 2:23 in me, but I’ve only managed 2:25 for the last four city races I’ve done. But, looking at my training and how the races have gone, I’m sure I can run quicker than that,” she said. “So if I can get everything right on the day and run 2:22 or 2:23 then I think even on the London course, which is fast, it should be good enough for top-three.”

Yamauchi’s ascent to world-class marathon running has been notable given how late in her life it happened. After representing Britain at the European Cross Country Championships and winning the 1998 National cross-country as Mara Myers,

Britain’s second quickest marathoner of all time believes she can improve further to at least 2:23.



Mara Yamauchi winning the Matsue Half-marathon in Japan last year in 69:59

Having won the 1998 National cross title, Mara Yamauchi took a five-year career break from the sport



she moved to Japan to focus on a career as a Foreign Office diplomat.

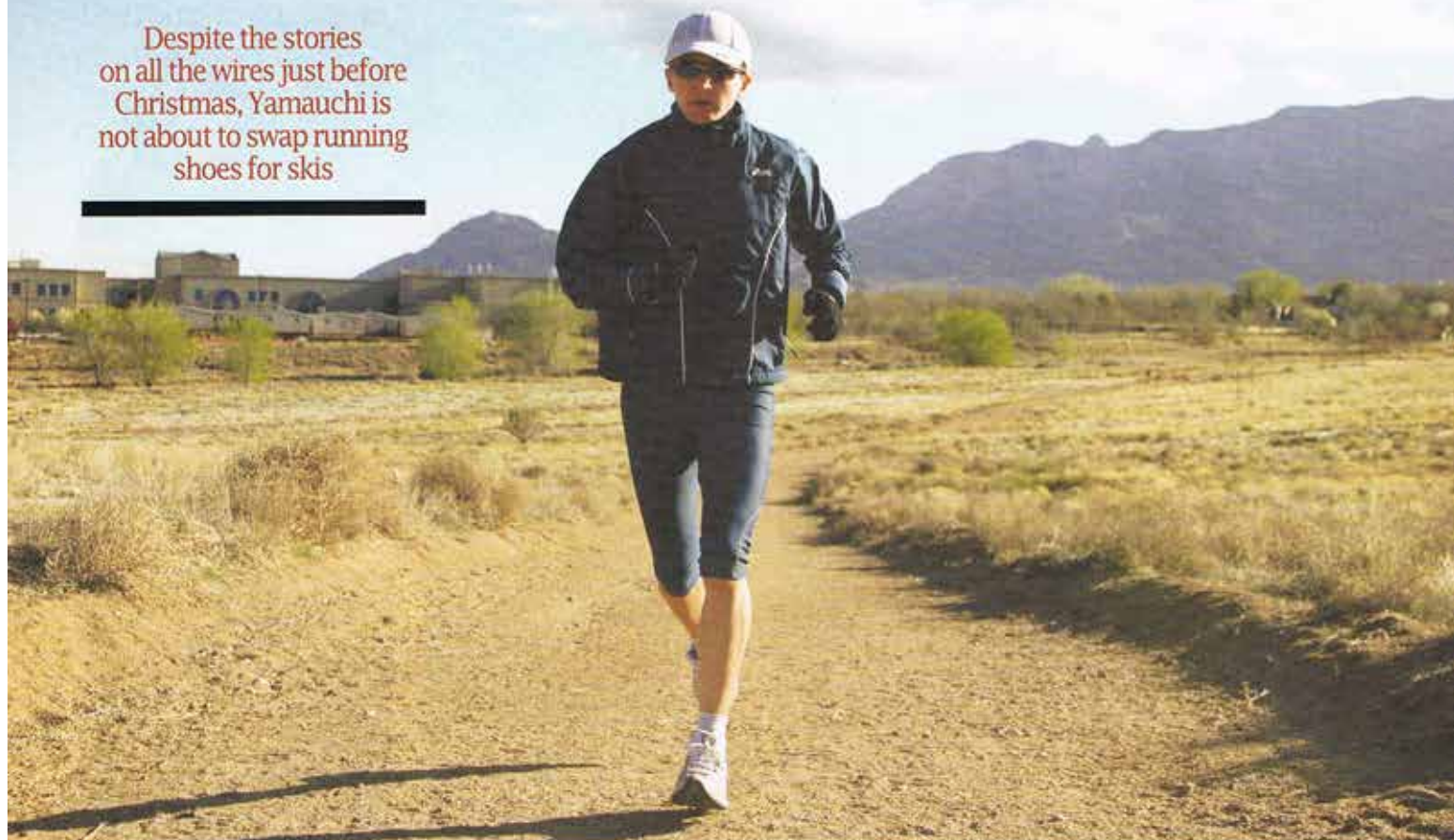
After marrying Shigetoshi Yamauchi, who has also become her coach and manager, she made a comeback in 2003 and enjoyed a breakthrough in 2005 when finishing 27th at the World Cross Country Championships before taking more than seven minutes from her marathon best to run 2:31 in London.

Continuing to be coached also by Bob Parker, who guided David Bedford to a world 10,000m record in the Seventies, she ran 2:27:38 by the end of that year and she has since proved that marathon runners can go on improving until well into their thirties. Last year six of Britain’s top-ranked women marathon runners were aged 33 or over. Yamauchi explains the phenomenon by saying:

“I think doing well at the marathon is partly to do with how you organise your life as much as what training you do. Sometimes it takes people into their late 20s or 30s to get organised. I only really got into an environment conducive to good marathon running when I was about 30. Also, because you can only run two or three marathons a year, it can take you much longer than other events to mature as an athlete and produce good times.”

The lifestyle that has created for Yamauchi that right environment has come about in Japan. The expression “land of runners” is often applied to Kenya or Ethiopia, but it could also be used to refer to Yamauchi’s adopted homeland. Marathon running is the country’s No.1 sport in terms of popularity. Being selected to run in the women’s national

Despite the stories on all the wires just before Christmas, Yamauchi is not about to swap running shoes for skis



team in the marathon at a major championships is tougher there than in any country and the depth is strong too. Last autumn more than 400 men ran quicker than 70 minutes in one half-marathon. She said a lot of it could be put down to the abundance in Japan of ekiden relays, which are usually marathon length, with legs of varying lengths.

"It's partly down to the popularity, partly that ekiden relay running is very popular and for any ekiden team you need at least six runners, maybe more. A lot of schools, universities and companies will make sure they have enough runners for an ekiden team, plus one or two reserves. So I think ekiden running increases the amount of people doing athletics.

"Athletics is just really popular so lots of school kids are doing it to quite a high level, training really hard, so as people in their early 20s are going to be running good times and I guess once you get into it and start improving, one thing leads to another, you get a sponsor and that spurs you on and you might be asked to join a good team and that spurs you on even more and the whole thing sort of snowballs, especially if you've got people around you."

It is hardly surprising that Yamauchi has flourished under such conditions.

"The number of women training full-time for the marathon is in the hundreds, whereas in the UK it's just a handful of us," she said. "You're in an environment which forces you to raise your own game because you're surrounded by people who are training full-time and running fast."

Though Yamauchi the world-class marathon runner was made in Japan, it may not have been possible without her Kenyan roots. She was born in Oxford, but her parents, who lived in Kenya for 25 years and named her after a river in the African nation, took her straight back to high-altitude Nairobi to live until she was eight. "I think that helped my

later running career," she said of being brought up at altitude.

Yamauchi believes, though, that altitude is not the only reason why Kenyans are so dominant in distance running. "I think the Kenyans probably have an evolutionary advantage," she said. "Kenyans who live at sea level, for example, Kenyans who have gone to school and grown up in Japan, are still extremely quick. So I think over generations they've probably evolved some sort of adaptation to the altitude that makes them good distance runners."

She was helped by her genes too. Her father, Norman Myers, who became a renowned environmentalist and has

written about Kenyan distance running, once held the record for the fastest ascent of Mount Kilimanjaro.

However, although she did a number of sports in Kenya, mainly swimming, it was not until she was back in England at university that she took up running.

"I just thought I'd join the cross-country team and see how it went and I really enjoyed it and, when I did proper training, I started improving a lot," said Yamauchi.

But it was particularly when she put her career on hold and signed up to a Radcliffe-esque lifestyle devoted to running that she benefited. In January 2006 she took unpaid leave from her job with the Foreign Office to train full-time and has asked for a further extension. "I do miss it a bit," she said. "I miss having colleagues around me. Sometimes being a marathon runner is a solitary existence and the work was very interesting so I miss that too. But marathon running has its own challenges in very different ways so I do feel like I'm being challenged quite a lot by this."

She misses Britain too, but a pre-Christmas visit to Britain allowed her a chance to meet up with friends and family and to communicate with staff at UK Athletics and the English Institute of Sport.



Mara Yamauchi at St Mary's College during a two-week trip back to Britain last month

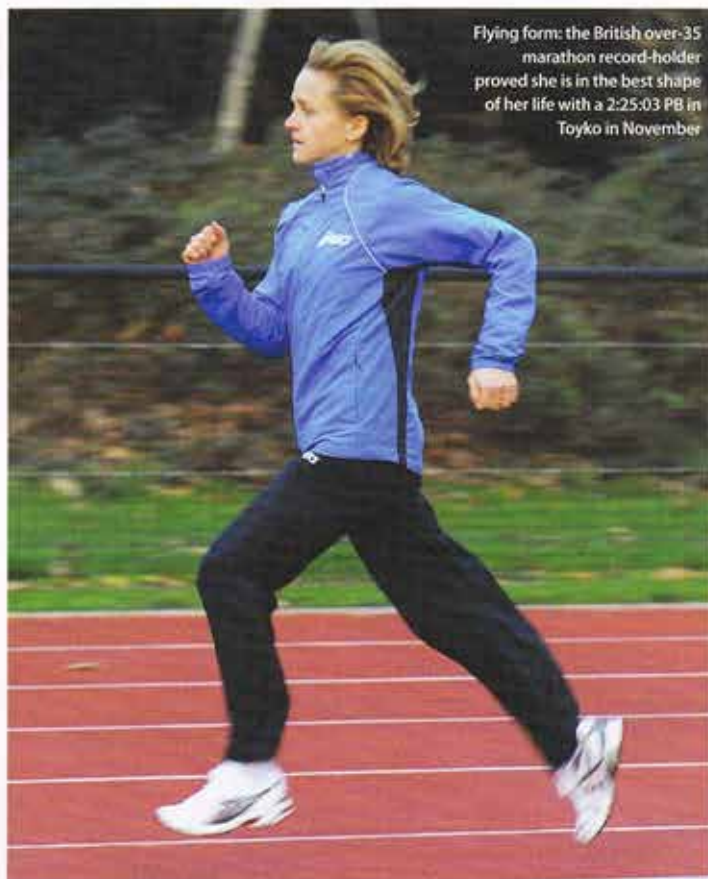
While here, she was able to pass on advice to three-time European junior cross-country champion Steph Twell, who has a long-term aim to step up to the marathon, and her coach, Mick Woods.

"They asked very general questions about what sort of training I do and if I had any suggestions with a view to doing the marathon in the future," she said. "But to be honest, I didn't really have anything new or special to suggest because she's doing so well anyway. She's got a really fantastic base to build on for the future."

"She's obviously doing everything right now because she's running so brilliantly. I guess my advice was, can you maintain that level of intensity and motivation for many, many more years, but she seems to be very well motivated and doing so well so I'm sure she will."

Also while here, she received the Achilles Club medal given to former Oxford and Cambridge students for outstanding achievement from Sir Roger Bannister.

During the trip home, a seemingly innocuous visit to her former school in Oxford led to slightly overblown reports of her switching sports in future. Despite the stories on all the wires just before Christmas, Yamauchi is not about to swap running shoes for skis. She explained: "When I was giving a talk at my school, the BBC regional news came to cover it and one of the girls asked, 'If I wasn't a marathon runner, what would



Flying form: the British over-35 marathon record-holder proved she is in the best shape of her life with a 2:25:03 PB in Tokyo in November

I be doing?', and I said that I've had this vague idea to take up cross-country skiing, which is true, but it's not a serious thing at the moment. The BBC picked up on that, so it's been reported with a bit more certainty than I thought."

However, she has gone as far as contacting Britain's cross-country skiing federation for more information. "It's because it's an endurance sport and

athletes in other sports have switched sports quite successfully so I thought it might be worth a try. But because I'm already 35 and I think it takes a lot more technical skill and upper-body strength than I originally thought, I'm not sure how realistic it is," said Yamauchi, referring to a UK Sport initiative designed to make it easy for top sports people to make suitable switches to other sports. She is partly inspired in her idea by

the experiences of her sister, Malindi, who has competed as a runner to a high level and also as an international rower. Malindi ran 2:53:25 for the marathon at the age of 35 in 2006.

However, any switch to the snow for Yamauchi will likely have to wait until at least after 2012. She has unfinished business on the road and the Beijing win of Tomescu at age 38 has given her hope she can be competitive at the next summer Olympics.

"I've done two PBs this year, so I'm still improving," she said, "and I feel in the next two to four years I can improve more so it would be a shame to quit running now."

Though she would be 38 in London,

Fuelling the Japanese way

MARA YAMAUCHI has frequently credited the Japanese diet for her performances. She talked AW through her typical daily intake.

Breakfast: We make vegetable juice every day and I have a different breakfast every day. It might be a mixture of cereal with yoghurt, it might be eggs and toast, it might be porridge, but I change it every day.

Lunch: Lunch is usually noodles or rice, plus meat or fish and quite a lot of vegetables and then, in the afternoon, I often have vegetable juice again or toast or something.

Evening meal: Quite similar to lunch.

One thing Yamauchi does not miss about Britain is the food. The Harrow AC athlete puts high value on the Japanese diet for her improvement and said: "Every time I go back to the UK, I'm quite shocked by the general standard of nutrition. When I was there I had to eat on the go quite a lot and the food available just isn't good enough for marathon running or any sport. I'm not saying it's bad but the variety isn't there. It's quite hard to find snack food that is low-fat and not full of sugar."

"Nutrition is the basis of life, whether you're a marathon runner or not. If you don't have a good basis in what you eat, you're not going to have the recovery to improve or the strength to train hard."

Typical week's training

Mara Yamauchi gives AW a peek at her training log.

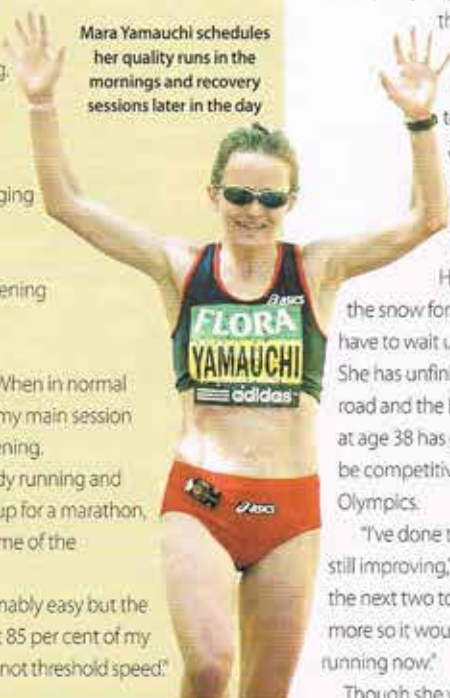
- Mon: am: Steady 70min; pm: weights and a jog of about 40min.
- Tue: am: Track; pm: jogging and drills
- Wed: am: "mid-long run" of 12-16 miles; pm: jogging and weights
- Thu: Easy day, so steady morning and evening
- Fri: am: Long reps or tempo; pm: jog in the evening
- Sat: Easy day
- Sun: Long run

"I'm building up my training right now," she said. "When in normal training, I run twice a day most days and then do my main session in the morning and then a recovery run in the evening."

"In my endurance phase, I might do more steady running and less fast reps or more long runs. If I'm sharpening up for a marathon, I might do more speed work and reduce the volume of the steady running."

"The easy runs in the evening I would do reasonably easy but the mid-long run and any steady running I try to do at 85 per cent of my marathon speed or quicker, which is quite hard but not threshold speed."

Mara Yamauchi schedules her quality runs in the mornings and recovery sessions later in the day



she said: "My age as an athlete is not that old because I only took up full marathon running when I was about 30 so I feel I've got more in me. I feel, if I keep doing marathon running, I could win more races or hopefully win a medal somewhere."

Persistence paid off for Tomescu, who reached the pinnacle of every athlete's career after 21 years of training, more than 10 years of marathon running and in excess of 20 marathons. So often the front-runner who was caught and ended up second or third, she pulled it off in Beijing.

What chance another 38-year-old winner in London? The odds are relatively short with Radcliffe around, but learn from Beijing and don't bet against it being Mara Yamauchi.