

INSPIRED BY THE BEST • MARA YAMAUCHI



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Famous as the second fastest **BRITISH FEMALE MARATHON RUNNER** in history, former Olympian Mara Yamauchi still runs for enjoyment and to stay healthy. We find out how she fits in exercise around work **WORDS** Rebecca Gibbs



Mara, you competed in an amazing total of six London Marathons, including coming second in 2009. Do you have any standout memories from these races?

Finishing second in 2009, defeating the Olympic and World Champions and smashing my PB (I ran 2:23:12) has to be the most memorable. Before that I had run 2:25 several times and just missed out on a medal at the Beijing Olympics, so it really felt like a breakthrough.

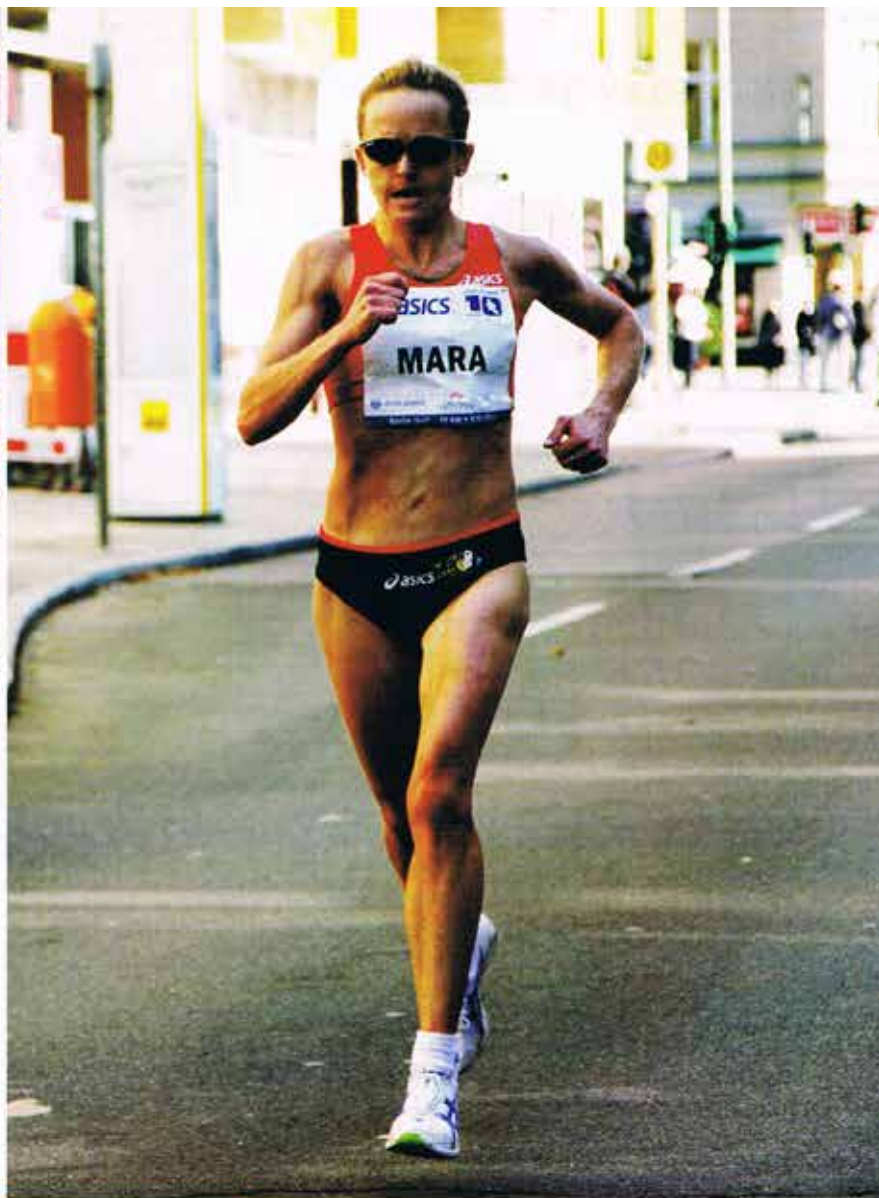
But my debut marathon, which was in London in 2004, was also a useful learning experience. I had a miserable run, got a stitch, failed to make the team for the Athens Olympics, and was disappointed. But I crossed the finish-line thinking 'I can definitely do better than that'. That was the start of several years of improvements and good performances.

You've said that simply competing in the Olympics fulfilled a childhood dream of yours. How did the atmosphere of the 2008 Beijing games compare to those held in London in 2012?

As an athlete, you're focusing 100 per cent on your performance, so to be honest you don't get much chance to soak up the atmosphere until your event is over. But my experiences of these two Olympic Games were very different. In Beijing I was in great shape, I knew I was going to run well, and my preparation had been excellent. In London I had an injury problem on top of all the expectation and pressure of a home games, so it was challenging. But difficult experiences can be better for you in the long run than positive experiences – you learn from mistakes, you get to know what real pressure feels like, and it makes you a much tougher athlete.

The press were always keen to highlight your assumed 'rivalry' with Paula Radcliffe. How did you stay motivated and focused?

I always focused on my own training, preparation and performance, because that is how you



LEFT: Training at altitude in Albuquerque, New Mexico.
ABOVE LEFT: Mara celebrates after overtaking Deena Kastor to win the New York City half-marathon in 2010
ABOVE RIGHT: Mara on her way to winning the ASICS Grand 10 race in Berlin, October 2011

improve and run fast. You can't control what other athletes do, so it's really pointless worrying about them. Of course I would check out other athletes' current form and tactics before races, and try to learn from what other athletes and coaches were doing. But essentially I concentrated on being the very best I could be in everything – training, recovery, nutrition, racing, mental preparation etc.

How do you now juggle your working life with an exercise regime? When do you get the chance to run?

I am now working self-employed as a coach, speaker and writer on running and performance issues. Because I work from home, I can be quite flexible about when I work and train. I like training early in the morning though so I try to get my running done first thing and then the day is free for work. It also means I never miss training because of unexpected things cropping up during the day. Looking after yourself as a runner is very important – eating real healthy food, getting enough sleep, doing conditioning to prevent injuries, etc. So I make sure I do my best with all these things too.

"...difficult experiences can be better for you in the long run [...] you learn from mistakes"



Do you have any time savers, gadgets or routines that help make it easier?

I always make my recovery drink before I go training so that I can drink it immediately after training while stretching or showering to speed up recovery.

I use a Garmin GPS watch to check my pace but I used to be a slave to it – now I just wear it now and again because I tend to run too fast if the Garmin tells me I'm running slower than I used to!

I still do my pre-run drills which I learned while competing as an elite athlete. It's a simple 10-minute routine which helps me maintain a good running form and keeps my glutes functioning well. My glutes are very lazy – if I don't keep them on their toes, they will sit back and let my hamstrings do all the work which I know from experience will lead to injury.

What is your favourite post-workout snack?

Always a drink rather than food because that way you replace fluids as well as energy. I usually use a protein/carb recovery drink with electrolytes which I find helps me recover more quickly.

Do you have a favourite piece of sports kit?

My tailor-made racing shoes made by the shoe technicians at ASICS in Kobe, Japan. Where a normal shoe would have the shoe model and size written on it, these shoes have 'Special' written on them, which is exactly how they make me feel! The ASICS staff show incredible commitment, expertise and devotion to helping their sponsored athletes perform at their very best.

What is it about running that you enjoy most?

There are many things – feeling fit and healthy, being outside in nature early in the morning, meeting my friends, feeling more alert after, to name just a few. Running is the most natural thing to do, and I will always love it. I can't imagine never running, and hope I die still able to run!



How would you encourage anyone who has never tried running before to give it a go? How has running benefitted your life?

Start off gently, mainly with walking, and then slowly introduce running, e.g. in a 30-minute walk, you could include eight lots of one-minute easy jogging. Once that feels comfortable, gradually increase the length of each jog to two minutes, three minutes, etc.

I would also recommend ignoring the mountain of advice out there! There is so much that it can be overwhelming and confusing. Instead, focus on yourself and what you enjoy; e.g. do I want to run in a park or on a road? Do I want to go with a friend or alone? Am I a morning person or would it be better to run in the evening? And so on. Running definitely can be enjoyable for everyone – the key is figuring out what works for you.

It takes time to reap the benefits of running, so it's also important to stick with it consistently for at least six weeks, even if it's really hard to start off with. By doing this you'll be giving your body time to adapt, to get fitter or perhaps to lose weight, all of which are all beneficial. If you quit too soon, you may never discover the positive things running can give you. ●

LEFT: Mara celebrating after finishing sixth in the women's marathon in Beijing in 2008. ABOVE RIGHT: Winning the BUPA London 10k in 2012.

Info

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