

Nick Bitel

The Marathon Man

Michael Fishman meets the man behind this iconic annual event

Among the high profile positions he holds, Nick Bitel is the Chief Executive of the London Marathon, a position he has held since 1995. During this time, participation in the event has grown to the extent that it now attracts 35,500 participants. This year, sadly, 100,000 would-be athletes had to be rejected.

Nick was born in 1959 at the now defunct Royal Northern Hospital in Holloway Road. He grew up in Edgware, the son of Max Bitel ז"ל, a well-known solicitor who was very involved in Jewish cultural and social activities. Max Bitel died last year, but his heritage of communal and charitable work lives on through his son. Nick was educated at St Paul's School and went on to university in the United States – the Davidson College – a place he obtained through a scholarship due to his rugby prowess. "Rugby in the States?" I queried. "Surely we are talking about American Football?" He corrected me, "Rugby is a very popular sport and, like soccer, tails off at college level." However, the USA participated in the recent Rugby World Cup, albeit not very successfully.

He returned, after two years, to complete his law degree at Manchester University and spent a great deal of time improving his rugby skills, playing for Rosslyn Park Second Fifteen. His great hero and coach at the time was Andy Riply, the England international. He also spent a great deal of time, "too much time", he says, taking part in NUJS politics. On qualifying as a lawyer, he joined the family firm, Max Bitel Greene, in which he is now the senior partner.

He married Sharon Levan in 1982 and they moved to the Suburb in 1984. They have three sons, Daniel, the eldest, who gained First Class Honours in maths at Bristol University and is now a banker, Adam, who is involved in the property market and the youngest, Jonathan, who is still at school. Sharon is the professional tennis coach at Temple Fortune LTC and has played for England at veteran level. However, unlike their parents, none of the boys have sporting aspirations.

Max Bitel had a wide-ranging practice and, amongst its clients, was George Graham's Arsenal double winning team of 1971. A client possibly more important to the future of the practice, if such a thing was possible, was Keith Prowse, then the foremost travel and ticket agency in the country. It was this client that introduced Nick and the Bitel Greene practice to sporting events.

As a result, Nick began specialising in sporting contracts and this coincided with the rapid growth in the number of sporting agents, many of the most prominent of whom happen to be Jewish. Nick's great interest was events and, in 1995, he became Chief Executive of the London Marathon.

The history of the Marathon is interesting. It was founded by two great friends and steeplechase rivals, Chris Brasher and John Disley. Brasher beat Disley, the favourite, to win gold at the Melbourne Olympics.

They laid down six principles for the London Marathon: Charity, Fun, The Brotherhood of Man (if only for one day), promoting Britain is Best, promoting London and, finally, the improvement of British long-distance running. The principles are still strictly in place. As a charity, The London Marathon is in The Guinness Book of Records as the largest fundraiser for a single event. This year it raised 35 million pounds.

The Fun is unique to the London event and, although many cities stage their own marathons, only in London does one see the zany costumes into which so many runners squeeze themselves and parade for the amusement of the worldwide TV audience. The runners, both professional and amateur, come from all over the world to compete – the professionals number only 150.

Obviously, for the charities, it is a bonanza and 12,000 places are reserved for the Marathon's approved charities. It costs £300 to enter and each runner raises approximately £2500. The Marathon is itself a charity and raises around £4,000,000 a year which is used, among other good causes, for purchasing recreational facilities and supporting the Spinal Injuries Association.

Surprisingly, Nick achieves all this with a permanent staff of just 24, backed up by 6500 volunteers, something which is also unique to us too-often maligned Brits. Some of the key staff have been there from the beginning: David Bedford, the Race Organiser, and Jim Clark, the Chairman, who joined the board while CEO of Zettlers Pools, and who handles the logistics.

The first London Marathon was in 1981, considerably later than the first City Marathon, held in Boston Massachusetts in 1896. The London Marathon Charity runs seven events per annum and takes up half of Nick's working week.

Most of his remaining time is taken up by his position as Chairman of UK Athletics which is the main distributor of the lottery money funding athletes and events, the Lottery being John Major's lasting contribution to the wellbeing of the sporting youth of the UK. Nick is due to retire this year, having completed his term of office – after six years it is mandatory for him to resign.

I asked Nick for his opinion of drugs in sport and whether its misuse, which risks making a mockery of international athletics, could ever be overcome. I added the rider that drugs appear to be more apparent among the sprinters than in the far fewer cases of the long distant runners. Surprisingly, he was very optimistic. The reasons for the disparity was that the athletes took different types of drugs – one for speed and one for stamina – and, until recently, the drug EPO, used by far too many prominent sprinters, was almost impossible to detect. However, there is now far superior testing and detection in place and this will be further enhanced by the soon to be introduced biological passports.

With his resignation from UK Athletics, Nick will, initially, have more time for his practice, which has the Ryder Cup and Wimbledon as long standing clients. What would one not give for his address book, being as he is, on first name terms with many of the world's foremost sportsmen and women. However, he sees his future less in law and more in events. Maybe the Macmillan quote, "Events dear boy, events", could have been aimed at Nick, but for totally different reasons.

The London Marathon is considered by many to be one of the UK's best-organised events and I asked Nick for the secret. He replied that simply working out the needs of the participants – for example, 35,500 bags of clothing are transferred from the start to the finish – would seem impossible to the uninformed observer, a logistical nightmare. After all, BA constantly fails to deliver passengers and their baggage on the same flight! Without doubt, Nick and his team should have opened Terminal 5! In addition, there is a contingency plan for every – well almost every – occasion. This year, as the leading women athletes were nearing a petrol station on the route, a gas leak was discovered. The athletes were diverted while the police and fire brigade dealt with the crisis. No one – the athletes, the media or the public – was any the wiser. A lovely human story and I did not ask what would have happened had the athletes been that much nearer when the leak was discovered. There would have been an equally positive response, of that I have no doubt.

Lastly, I could not resist asking, "Will Nick miss Ken Livingstone?" Always the diplomat – obviously one of his great assets, besides being a great administrator and negotiator – he smiled. "In truth, I did not have much to do with Ken. We sometimes acknowledged each other in the corridor, but it was his team we dealt with mainly and they were most helpful." That statement sums up a man who gives the impression of someone who is relaxed, who does not seek self-publicity and who does a wonderful job for promoting the six ideals laid down by the founding fathers of the London Marathon.



This year's HGSS Runners

Martin Fine

Martin (57), a solicitor, was running for an incredible fourteenth time. He completed the course in 3 hours, 52 minutes, raising £2500 for Emunah.

"During the first mile my calf began to hurt. I thought, 'I won't be able to finish – 25 painful miles is too far to run'. But there's something about the London Marathon and its crowds that keeps you going – the pain remained but settled down and three and three quarter hours later I made it to the Mall (not Brent Cross – the Royal one) It's always worth it!"



David and Abigail Pinnick



David, a 52-year-old estate agent, notched up a time of 4 hours 12 minutes, raising £1250 for Children with Leukemia.

"This year was my seventh London Marathon and though not my quickest, probably the best so far as I ran with my daughter Abbi and we crossed the finishing line together! A unique moment as I was still able to 'sprint' the last hundred yards!"

Abbi says: "I am 23 and a Chartered

Physiotherapist working at Hammersmith & Charing Cross Hospitals. This was my first and last marathon! (although my Dad doesn't believe me!) I really enjoyed the day but as I missed six weeks' training due to injury, my preparation wasn't exactly ideal. I enjoyed running with my Dad and we ran through the finishing line together which was a nice moment, mainly because it was all over."

David Wise

David is 41 years old and a solicitor. He completed the marathon in 3 hours 37 minutes, raising for £6000 for Shaare Zedek

"I have been running for the last 16 years - initially to lose weight and then it became an addiction! This is my second Marathon, having run the first last year for Chai Cancer Care. I started running 'seriously' about a year and a half ago when I teamed-up with Shul members David Pinnick and Martin Fine and trained for my first marathon. These chaps are undoubtedly the North West London running gurus! – professional runners through and through! They really know their stuff – they taught me pace and hydration and took my running to the next level. I love my running and it was an honour to run for Shaare Zedek. I plan to run for them again in 2009. Special thanks are due to my wonderful wife Simona (my "campaign manager" on the fund-raising) and my daughters Joanna, Nicole and Hayley - all of whom put up with my absences from home whilst pounding the streets of London! I would also like to say a massive "thank you" to all who sponsored me and to the team at Shaare Zedek for their marvellous support."



Jonathan Goldstein

Jonathan is an ex-lawyer, now joint managing director of a property company. He is 42 and this was his first marathon. His time was 4 hours 16 minutes. He raised £60,000 for Cancer Research.

"Best story was borrowing someone's phone en route. I wanted to phone my wife to see where she was standing. Not recognising the number and thinking she had a heavy breathing/panting crank on the line, she put the phone down!"

Ylana Roback and Michael Goldberg

Husband and wife team Ylana (a 40 year old graphic designer) and Michael (a 41 year old solicitor) were both running their first marathon. They ran together, raising £15,000 for Bottoms Up, a bowel cancer charity. Their time was a very respectable 5 hours 36 minutes.

Ylana describes the atmosphere of the event as exhilarating. She found the preparation stressful but thoroughly enjoyed the day itself. Would she do it again? Well, she would do the event, but not the preparation.



Benjamin Lee



April was a busy month for Benjamin. A week after celebrating his Barmitzvah, he participated in the Mini London Marathon, representing the City of London (he attends the City of London School) in the 13 to 14 year old category. The course was three miles long and the competition was fierce with 230 competitors. "It was an amazing experience running through London and ending, like the main marathon, down the Mall", said Benjamin. He was disappointed with his finishing time of 22 minutes and 13 seconds but this has given him great incentive to run faster next year.

Benjamin's Barmitzvah photograph is on page 8