



Footsore ... exhausted runners at the finish of the Brighton marathon. This week London's marathon will boast 35,000 participants James Boardman

# Running into the record books

Britain is experiencing a boom time for urban marathons as recession bites

Owen Gibson

Some put it down to the high cost of gym membership, others to a newfound preponderance for midlife crises. But as the many thousands who crossed the finish line in Britain's newest city marathon in Brighton last Sunday know, British running is booming.

The Brighton event was the first major addition to the marathon calendar for many years. Experts predict several other UK cities will follow suit - Bradford is planning its first marathon and there are talks about reviving the Mersey marathon.

This Sunday, around 35,000 are expected to finish the most popular marathon of all, London, from first-timers in fancy dress to experienced club runners.

Organisers said this year's event had been the most oversubscribed to date. When the ballot opened to register, the maximum number of 120,000 applicants was reached in under three days, beating the previous record by more than 15 days.

Meanwhile, organisers of the big city marathons around the world in New York, Paris, Berlin and elsewhere report an increase in "destination running"

among those who want to combine a holiday with athletic endeavour.

According to the most recent Sport England quarterly figures, participation in athletics (including running and jogging) increased by more than 215,000 to 1.827 million between the 2007/08 survey and the 2008-09 survey.

Brighton marathon race director, Tim Hutchings, a former Olympic 5,000-metre runner who first had the idea for a Brighton event seven years ago, said the popularity of the London marathon - which leaves 80,000 applicants disappointed every year - proved there was room for more.

"Aside from London, Edinburgh is the only other big British marathon ... there are lots of little regional ones, but Germany has got at least six big marathons, Spain and Italy have got three or four each," said Hutchings.

He said the popularity of marathon running had grown as the London event had become ever more popular and more people had taken up running. The inaugural Brighton marathon had 12,000 places but Hutchings believes it could have easily attracted 20,000 or more.

"With the financial climate we're

in, people are jacking in their gym membership and you can buy a very nice pair of running shoes for the same price as a single month's membership. The facility they need is just outside the front door," said Hutchings. "People are also far more health and body conscious. Then there's the charity element that marathons have become synonymous with."

The statistics back up the anecdotal evidence. According to Sport England's Active People survey, athletics - including jogging - has recorded the biggest rise in participation in recent years. Due to cost and time pressures, the figures indicate that people are abandoning the gym and organised team sport in favour of more flexible and informal pursuits such as running and cycling.

The company that organises the Great North Run, Nova International, has expanded its network of half-marathons across the UK and internationally. It recently opened new offices in London and Manchester to cope with further growth.

At a time when opposition MPs and some sports administrators have criticised the

slow progress towards the government's stated aim of boosting sports participation by 1 million people in the run up to the 2012 Olympic games, running is one of only four sports showing an increase in the latest figures.

Steve Overt, the Olympic gold medallist who started the Brighton marathon, said the new races were meeting an untapped demand.

"The vast majority of runners have always been joggers. There's always been a great club structure in this country, we just never measured it. But there are more people taking it up, especially women. Marathons may well have been a factor in that," he said.

Marathons, half-marathons and 10k runs have become increasingly important fundraising tools for charities in recent years. The London marathon charges \$450 for a guaranteed charity place, which is then recouped from sponsorship raised by runners. The revenue generated by offering those places to runners, who pledge to raise a minimum figure through sponsorship, make this a big money-spinner.

The London Marathon, a charitable trust, claims it has generated over \$760m for thousands of charities in its 30-year history.

