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The real stars of today's race are the teeming mass of fun runners who will raise millions of pounds for charity.

Somewhere this morning on the route of the London Marathon, an RAF squadron leader from Buckinghamshire expects the emotion of it all to become too much. Kate Tripp hopes she can keep her emotions in check until the finish. "I will cry like a baby," she says. "I aim to make it in five hours. But hey, does it matter? Two years ago I could not even make it up a couple of flights of stairs."

If Tripp's mind wanders, it will be going to only one place, back two years.

"April 23 is a very significant date for me," she says. "It was the day I ended chemotherapy. I have run the Great North Run since and when I found out that the London Marathon was on this date this year, well..."

Her voice trails away. She does not need to provide an answer because it is here in her race number, in her singlet, in her tracksuit bottoms and in the smile she has across her face. "The London Marathon," she adds. "Who could have imagined one event could do so much to inspire people who have never run in their life?"

It began on a cold Sunday morning in March 1981, the brainchild of the late Chris Brasher, the 1956 Olympic steeplechase champion, who along with his friend John Disley, devised a 26-mile, 385-yard race which has become more than just an institution on the national sporting calendar. For some people, such as Tripp, it has become a way of realising that when you are dealt a card you don't expect, there is a new challenge out there which can take you to another extreme.

While the London Marathon has become the greatest big-city race in the world for the elite runners such as Ethiopian Haile Gebrselassie today and the sorely-missed, injured world record-holder Paula Radcliffe, the essence remains people such as Tripp. She is one of 13,000 registered charity runners in an entry list of 46,000. Take away the elite, and the rest combine to make it the biggest annual day of fund-raising in the world. Today, more than £ 30m is set to be raised.

Tripp, 42, is running for Macmillan Cancer Support. "My husband Ian and I were trying for kids when I was diagnosed with breast cancer," she says. "Because of the

drugs I am on, I cannot have any. But at least I am here to tell the tale. It has been a real journey. I spent my 40th birthday and first wedding anniversary in hospital after my first treatment, so you can imagine what running in the London Marathon will be like.

"I never thought I would run, let alone be out here in an event such as this. I had a tough time. I could not even walk up a few flights of stairs at first. If I did, I could not breathe, but running is literally what the doctor ordered. My bones are pretty brittle after all the treatment, so light impact is what we need.

It is a coincidence, but it meant running became a motivator."

Since March 29, 1981, the London Marathon has become a backdrop to people's lives.

One of those is Chris Finill, the fastest remaining member of the elite club of runners who have completed every race. He has not been able to stop. "In 1981, my now wife Julia was my girlfriend," he says. "Our life cycle has happened within the time span of the London Marathon. It was never my intention to run them all. I had done 10 and it was beginning to be recognised as something to maintain. The 11th was easy, the 12th was easy and by the time it was the 15th, it was a question of making sure I did the 16th. When you get to 20, you think of doing 21, then it must be 25. I am 47 and if I make it to 70, I will be just shy of running in 50."

Finill is the youngest ever-present, the oldest is 80-year-old Reg Burbidge. But while the international runners remain the initial focus, as Finill says: "The Ever Present club is a club you can leave, but you can never join. Some of my best mates who have been members of it are no longer in it. People do fall by the wayside for a number of reasons." But not that quickly: from 42 in 1995, 28 remain today. In the 25 years of the race, the consistency of Finill's times stands out.

In 1981 he ran 2:32, last year 2:53. "I lose about a minute every race," he says.

When he thinks back to the first race, he says the atmosphere has hardly changed.

"The London Marathon has a winning formula which they have kept to."

Some things have changed, though. "On the first race, I remember the endless queues for the toilets," he says. "And there was someone bawling from a window, 'Don't pee in my garden'. It was chaotic but good spirited."

Residents should no longer worry too much because the organisers have 950 portable toilets to cope with the growing numbers of a race where this year 65,000 applications have been turned down.

"Why do I run marathons?" asks Finill. "I was born in the street in Harrow where Roger Bannister used to live when he was training to break the four-minute mile. I wanted to run marathons as soon as I could. But in 1981, I could never imagine that by 2006 I would have run every London."

But what is the secret of the race being so endearing, and such an annual success? "We have put a great deal of effort into improving the event," says Nick Bitel, the London Marathon's chief executive since 1995. "We make sure people have a better

time, there is more entertainment on the course, just sharpening up the act. We have to recognise that you cannot stand still.

"We have to be quality everywhere: the elite, the everyday runner, the celebrities. We have to interest every group because in today's marketplace, how do you talk to people over and above the noise that is football? By putting together the greatest fields, every aspect of it being a world-class occasion."

Records will be set. Take Sir Steve Redgrave, Britain's five-time Olympic champion. He hopes to raise £ 1.3m, to achieve the most ever by one person from the race, while Matthew Church, a former cricketer, laughs when he says he will probably run further today than in his whole career. He will be among a group of six, fully padded up, with gloves and bat, raising money for The Ben Hollioake Fund, in memory of the Surrey cricketer, who died in a car crash four years ago.

"The fund is linked to a charity called Chase, a children's hospice service," says Church. "We want to raise over £ 20,000 towards creating a centre for them in Ben's name in around The Oval region in London. It is what (his brother) Adam wanted. It is something positive out of the tragedy."

#### Running stories

Glyn Roberts, 37, from London, was preparing for the race when he broke off from his training to nail an armed robber after chasing him through the streets

A Gossard Girl at 19, a marathon runner today. Model Sophie Anderton was knocked down by a car when she was 11 and could not walk properly for three years and has metal plates in a leg. 'I am nervous how it will hold up,' she says. 'I am aiming to do it in under eight hours'

Charity golfer **David Sullivan** will hit a ball around the whole course, aiming to raise more than £ 5,000 for the Variety Club Children's Charity

Twenty runners will compete as a millipede, hoping to raise £ 30,000 for the Touching Tiny Lives campaign. 'I thought of the millipede because we wanted to break the record for the biggest ever costume team to run the marathon,' said team organiser Roland Partridge

Oswald Waye, of North London, ran the North Pole marathon two weeks ago and will compete here dressed as a polar bear. He became only the seventh member of the Marathon Grand Slam Club to have competed a marathon on all seven continents and at the North Pole

Tim Rogers, who holds the world record for being the fastest man for running a marathon on all seven continents, will make race history the moment he crosses the start line. He is dressed up as the mascot for the Anthony Nolan Trust, a leukaemia charity, and at 11ft, it is the tallest ever costume in the race.

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