

# Running in Paradise

by Gaye Miyasaki and Yoshio Saito

Lush, green tropical mountains. The crystal blue Pacific Ocean. Against this backdrop, runners from all over the world converge in the city of Honolulu, Hawai'i every year in December. They come for the Honolulu Marathon, the third largest in the United States after Chicago and New York. This event is open to anyone who would like to participate, and there is no set finishing time—the marathon is over when the last person runs, walks or limps over the finish line.

Yet the event attracts elite runners, with winnings of as much as \$40,000 for the top slots. Kenyans have won the men's division 16 times since 1985; women from the former Soviet Union won 9 times in the last ten years. But 82 percent of the marathoners come from Japan, bringing family and friends to cheer them on.

One of those runners is Yoshio Saito, a native of Kamakura, Japan. A 41-year-old student in the Executive MBA program at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, he first ran the Honolulu Marathon in 1999. He moved to Honolulu in April 2005. NJAHS board member Gaye Miyasaki, born and raised in Honolulu, has seen the race mushroom into one of the biggest tourist draws in the state. In 2005, marathon visitors spent around \$100 million in Hawai'i. She sat down with Yoshio to get his impressions of the Honolulu Marathon as a participant and spectator.



Jake Shimabukuro finishes with friend, Jeff Lau.

2006 start of the Honolulu Marathon at 5 a.m. on Dec. 10.

...and finish line

Photos courtesy of Pat Bialow.

**Gaye:** You participated in the 1999 Honolulu Marathon. What motivated you?

**Yoshio:** I found out about the Honolulu Marathon from a Japanese TV program and I decided that I wanted to participate. Also, since the year was 1999, the end of the century, I wanted to do something to memorialize the event and my life; something that I would remember for the rest of my life.

**Gaye:** How did you train for and prepare for the marathon?

**Yoshio:** I decided at a very late date to participate. I finally applied through a website in the beginning of October 1999.

I started running short courses, around three miles every day, near my house, along the seashore, from Kamakura to Inamuragasaki, mostly in the morning around five am. before I went to work. From the last half of November, I increased my running course to eight miles every day. Since I was not an athlete, but an ordinary and not-so-serious runner, this course of practice was enough for me. Unfortunately, since the exercise was intense with little preparation, I began to experience a strong pain in my right knee from December. So I had to stop running about one week before the race.

**Gaye:** Describe your marathon experience.

**Yoshio:** Unfortunately, I still felt a heavy pain in my right

knee when I arrived in Hawai'i. Two days before the marathon, I went to the hospital so the doctor could tape and fix my knee. In that respect, it was a little difficult.

I had traveled to Hawai'i by myself. My wife and children stayed in Japan because the children had to attend school. I stayed in a hotel in Waikiki and left the hotel before five am. on the day of the race to walk to Ala Moana Park, where the race started. It was raining and some of the runners were wearing raincoats. There were many people. That exceeded my expectations.

It was like a festival—a very dramatic and impressive start. When the starting pistol was fired, a spectacular fireworks display filled the sky. There was the sound of music. As I started around the downtown area, I could see many shining Christmas decorations and lights. What a beautiful course! It was amazing! Decorations of Santa Claus and other Christmas things made me feel very happy, so that I forgot the pain in my knee. I had never seen such a fun marathon. In Japan, the marathon is very serious, stoic and competitive. But the Honolulu Marathon is totally different. Most of the people run the course for fun. Some runners were wearing funny costumes, such as a female bunny, a samurai, animals, etc. Some were wearing the uniform of their club or school. They looked as if they were totally enjoying the race.

In the beginning, I ran, enjoying the beautiful decorations and lights with lots of cheering from the many, many volunteer workers. Thus I could run without pain around Diamond Head. But as I reached Aina Haina and Kalaniana'ole Highway, the pain started and I had difficulty running. So I had to alternate between walking and sometimes a light run. Since I was wearing a knee pad and limping, many other runners spoke to me and asked if I was all right and patted me on the back saying, "Good job!" I was helped by these encouragements. At the time, I felt, "This is Hawai'i! How warm and wonderful the Hawai'i people are with the Aloha Spirit!" In the latter half of the race, I almost walked and ran very little. It was very hard to endure the pain. But many volunteers and people in the neighborhoods came out to cheer the runners, so I could keep running. When I approached Diamond Head again, music from a band was playing, and that music made me keep my chin up.

With the support of the many runners, volunteers and neighbors, I could reach Kapiolani Park, the finish line. My time was almost six hours, and that was not satisfactory to

me. But I really enjoyed the race. Beautiful scenery, warm people, amusing atmosphere, perfect support—this is what I believe is the reason that over 15,000 Japanese come to this marathon every year.

**Gaye:** Are a lot of people running and training in Japan for the Honolulu Marathon?

**Yoshio:** Many Japanese train a lot in the parks, the roads near their homes. Some enthusiastic runners even run during their lunch break from work, near their office. But for the Honolulu Marathon, many runners are not athletes. They are "fun" runners. And the Honolulu Marathon tolerates these "fun" runners, which is one of the reasons that it is so popular with many Japanese.

**Gaye:** In 2005, your sister came from Japan to run the Honolulu Marathon and you were a spectator.

**Yoshio:** My sister turned 40 years of age. Her birthday was one week after the race. So she wanted to memorialize her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday by running a marathon.

On the day of the race, I woke up around 6 am. and waited for the runners on the street. I woke up to the sound of a motorbike and the top group of runners' footsteps. When I reached the point where the runners were passing, I saw that some neighbors were already there and cheering. They had prepared chocolates and candies for the runners. Some people had also prepared signs for cheering the runners on, even in the early morning. It was impressive for me to see this. In Japan, I believe that this type of neighborhood cheering is not so common. The people in Hawaii prepare sweets for the runners even if none of their relatives were running.

I regretted that I had not prepared anything. I clapped and called out to the runners: "Good job," and especially for the Japanese runners, I called out "Ganbare!" They smiled, and some runners replied with a "Thank you," and with the "shaka" sign and a smile. My sister reached my area a little late, but she looked fine and as if she were enjoying the race. After I cheered my sister on, I wanted to run the marathon again. ✨

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