Honolulu Marathon It’s Amazing

This coming week will be a busy one, particularly for members of our ‘ohana in Waikiki. Many are working almost around the clock attending to the thousands of details needed to open the Hula Tower of the Embassy Suites® Hotel and the first shops at Waikiki Beach Walk”. Others will be taking care of many of the tens of thousands of participants in town for the 34th running of the Honolulu Marathon, Hawaii’s largest sports event. To add to the challenge, the rock group U2 and many fans are also in town for a concert. Waikiki is completely sold out.

The Honolulu Marathon amazes me every year, and this year is no exception.

Honolulu Marathon Association president Dr. Jim Barahal estimates the final registrant count this year will be over 29,000, up from last year and tying the number registered in 2002. However, that number is still well below the record year of 1995 when 34,434 runners signed up.

The Honolulu Marathon is the third-largest marathon in the United States—trailing only New York (85,000 applicants, although only about half those are accepted, due to capacity limits) and Chicago (35,000)—and the sixth-largest in the world. That is an amazing statistic, considering Honolulu’s relatively small population compared to the Big Apple and the Windy City.

One of the biggest reasons for Honolulu’s success is Japanese support and interest. Japan Airlines is the major sponsor. Other Japanese sponsors include DC Card, Konami, Amino-Value, NTT DoCoMo, and Konica-Minolta. Thanks to their financial and promotional assistance, there will be over 22,000 entrants from Japan in the race and its accompanying, noncompetitive Race Day Walk this year, about the same as last year. This is especially noteworthy considering the value of the yen has slipped substantially. It was recently pegged at 119 to the dollar, compared to 104 in 2004, making it about 15 percent more expensive for Japanese to visit Hawaii. This only underscores the value of the promotional partnership with Japanese sponsors.

The strong showing of Japanese runners also reflects the fact that Eri Hayakawa of Tokyo has been a top finisher in the women’s division for the past three years. She broke the 2003 tape at 2:31:56 to take first place. In 2004, she improved her time to 2:28:11, but still came in behind Russian Lyubov Morgunova, who ran a record 2:27:33 race. In 2005, Eri again finished second with a respectable time of 2:32:59.

Hayakawa will run again this year, along with a number of elite women runners, many of whom come from Russia, including last year’s winner, Olesya Nurgalieva, who will be defending her title. Morgunova will not be racing this year, however, due to an injury.

In the men’s division, many of the elite runners come from Kenya. Last year’s winner, Jimmy Muindi, will be looking for his sixth victory in Honolulu. Three-time winner Mbarak Hussein, also from Kenya but now a U.S. citizen, will be running alongside Muindi, vying for the prize.

And the prizes will be much bigger this year, at least double for the top five finishers. The first across the line will receive $40,000, up from $15,000 last year.

There are many other activities going on during race week. Wednesday through Saturday there will be an exposition at the Hawaii Convention Center, featuring running and fitness products, plus celebrities Naveen Andrews and Yunjin Kim from the ABC series “Lost.”

Many years ago, we hosted the exposition at the Outrigger Reef Hotel but, as the marathon grew, we soon ran out of space. Last year over 63,000 people attended the expo.

Friday night, there will be a luau and concert for over 7,000 people at Waikiki Shell featuring ukulele wonder Jake Shimabukuro and singer songwriter Gavin DeGraw. His song “I Don’t Wanna Be” is the theme song for the hit TV show “One Tree Hill” and has been featured on “American Idol.”

The Honolulu Marathon has a huge economic impact on the entire state of Hawaii and in particular, on Waikiki. Hawaii Pacific University students have studied the Honolulu Marathon for several years. They found that race participants and their traveling companions spend much of the month in Waikiki’s shops and restaurants. They estimated that in 2005, the marathon brought $100 million in visitor spending to Hawaii, not including the money spent by local participants. There is every reason to believe that the economic impact of the race will exceed $100 million this year!

In addition, for each of the past three years, the Honolulu Marathon Association has donated $10,000 to the University of Hawaii Foundation.

There is also a lot of spending by the race committee, which purchases things like 1.9 million paper cups, 70,000 sponges,
Outrigger and OHANA Hotels & Resorts are the official hotels of the Honolulu Marathon. In return, we provide complimentary and/or deeply discounted accommodations for many of the elite runners brought in by the race organizers. Our Waikiki properties will run high occupancies all week, and we are completely sold out for Saturday night. This is quite a contrast to the typical pre-holiday slump experienced at our neighbor island properties.

We all owe a debt of gratitude to the Honolulu Marathon Association, and particularly to its president, Dr. Jim Barahal. When he took over leadership of the association in 1987, there were only 10,413 entrants in the Honolulu Marathon. With a lot of work and dedication, the Marathon has grown, so that it is now the largest annual event in Hawaii, with over 80 percent of the entrants coming from out of state. Dr. Barahal puts in countless hours to make the Honolulu Marathon a premier sporting event. He has been honored with the Neal Shaw Blaisdell Award for “exemplary efforts to bring great recognition to sports in Hawaii,” but he deserves more accolades than that for his 19 astounding years of leadership of this world-class event.

The Honolulu Marathon must not be taken for granted. Data show that there has been an irregular but definite downward trend in the number of entrants from all areas over the past decade. Even though the number of entrants is up over last year, it is still some 16 percent under the peak reached in 1995.

The Honolulu Marathon merits the support of everyone who benefits from the race, including hotels, shops, restaurants, transportation providers, a wide range of other businesses, many of them far from Waikiki, and directly or indirectly, all the people of Hawaii.

At the finish line, only a handful of competitors are listed as winners, but in reality, everybody in Hawaii wins when the Honolulu Marathon races into town.