Honolulu Marathon – 35th Anniversary!

The Honolulu Marathon always amazes me, and this year is no exception. It is the third-largest marathon in the country – trailing only New York (85,000 applicants, although capacity allows only about half to be accepted) and Chicago (35,000) – and the sixth-largest in the world. Considering Honolulu’s small population, our marathon’s popularity is phenomenal.

It looks as if a recent surge in registrations for the 35th annual running of the Honolulu Marathon, tomorrow, December 8, will bring the number of competitors close to 28,500, approximately equal to 2005 and 2006. This is a relief because recent drops in the number of visitors to Hawaii and in available airline seats had many people concerned that the number of Marathon entrants this year would fall.

One of the biggest reasons for year-after-year success of the Honolulu Marathon is Japan’s support of and interest in the event. Japan Airlines is the major sponsor. Other well-known Japanese sponsors include DC Card, Konami, Amino-Value, NTT DoCoMo, and Konica-Minolta. Thanks to their financial and promotional assistance, there will be around 23,000 entrants from Japan in the race and its accompanying, noncompetitive Race Day Walk this year, slightly ahead of 2006.

Another factor is that the yen has strengthened substantially in the past six months. It was recently pegged at 111 to the dollar, compared to 123 in July, making it about ten percent cheaper for Japanese to visit Hawaii.

The strong turnout from Japan also reflects the fact that in recent years, several Japanese women have been strong contenders, going head to head against elite runners from Kenya and Russia. For example, Eri Hayakawa of Tokyo took first place in the women’s division in 2003. She is back again this year along with several elite Japanese runners including Kaori Yoshida and Akemi Ozumi Ishige.

There is always a great deal of interest in the elite men runners. Five-time winner, Kenyan Jimmy Muindi, will be looking for his sixth victory on Sunday. Four other elite runners from Kenya and one from neighboring Ethiopia will be vying for victory alongside Muindi.

This year’s celebrity runner is Prince Peter-Christiaan of the Netherlands. Participating in his second Honolulu Marathon, he will be promoting the World Wildlife Fund.

There are many other race week activities. This past Wednesday through today there has been an exposition at the Hawaii Convention Center. Many years ago, we hosted the exposition at the Outrigger Reef, but as the Marathon grew, we ran out of space. Last year over 63,000 people attended the expo.

Last night, there was a luau and concert for over 7,000 people at Waikiki Shell.

The Honolulu Marathon has a huge economic impact on the entire state and in particular, on Waikiki. Hawaii Pacific University students have studied the Honolulu Marathon for several years. They found that runners and their traveling companions spend much of the month in Waikiki’s shops and restaurants. They estimated that in 2006, the Marathon brought a record $101.6 million in visitor spending to Hawaii and generated $4.6 million in taxes. Those numbers do not include spending by local participants. There is every reason to believe the economic impact of the race will grow this year!

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

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 organizers. Our Waikiki properties have run high occupancies all week, and we expect to be nearly sold out tonight. 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 assumed its leadership in 1987, the Marathon had only 10,413 entrants. 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 20 astounding years leading this world-class event.

The Honolulu Marathon must not be taken for granted. Data shows there has been an irregular but definite downward trend in the number of entrants over the past decade. Even though the number of racers tomorrow will be about equal to 2006, it is still some 16 percent under the peak reached in 1995.

The Honolulu Marathon deserves the support of everyone who benefits from it, 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.