

GREATEST RACES OF ALL-TIME

1982 Men's Commonwealth Games Marathon

In the lead up to our upcoming 'home' Commonwealth Games in Melbourne it seemed like perfect timing to relive one of the greatest races of all-time from a our most recent home Commonwealth Games, those held in Brisbane in 1982. Many people, including Dave Power and Herb Elliot who were commentating for the event, consider it to be one of the greatest athletics performances they have ever seen. In 1979, one Australian athlete had burst into the public limelight by winning the Australian marathon championships in 2.13.23 at 22 years of age and just his second attempt at the distance. The athlete is of course Robert de Castella. Deek's progression in the marathon continued in 1980 when he finished second behind Gerard Barrett (who was just one year his senior) at the Olympic marathon trial, running 2.12.34. This effort won him selection in the 1980 Moscow Olympic team where he finished a very credible 10th. Rob backed up for a third marathon in 1980, the Fukuoka marathon, where he again lowered his personal best by two minutes down to 2.10.44. After all of these successes, it was in 1981 that Deek truly become a dominant world marathoner. Returning to Fukuoka Deek took another two and a half minutes of his personal best to run 2.08.18 and what is now considered a world marathon record. Fast forward another year and the 1982 Commonwealth Games were in full swing. Given his outstanding performances over the previous three years and considering he was, on paper, 2 minutes clear of the next fastest man in the field, Deek was the clear favourite leading into the men's marathon. However, strong competition was still expected from the defending Commonwealth Games marathon champion, Gidamis Shahanga of Tanzania, who had romped home to win the 10,000m a week earlier. Kevin Ryan from New Zealand and John Graham from Scotland were also both experienced marathoners and expected to provide a worthy challenge. Australia had two

additional competitors in the event, Lawry Whitty and Robert Wallace. Being held in Brisbane the event was conducted in oppressive humidity of greater than 94% and over a rolling course, all which should have indicated slow times. Rob arrived at the event feeling physically drained from a rigorous training schedule that had included running up to 250km per week plus an additional 4-5 gym sessions. Adding to his tired physical state

Rob was also suffering from an irritated spinal disc incurred from a back strain whilst moving house. The race had an explosive start as Gidamis Shahanga and his Tanzania teammate, Juma Ikaanga (running his international marathon debut), raced away through the first 5km in 14.45, a likely suicidal pace given the course, the weather and the current world record of 2.08.18. A bunch of 8 runners had formed some 150m

behind the Tanzanian's and by 12.5km had nearly caught the early leaders, only to see the lead again grow rapidly and by half way (63.40) the Tanzanian's were out of sight and running strongly. The main group, still largely intact, came through half way close to 300m behind. Just after the half way point Deek decided it was time to make his bid to win the race and moved away from the main pack after the leading duo. In what has become marathoning folklore, Deek started to experience sharp abdominal pains that were inhibiting his continued chase. He is quoted as saying 'I let go of my bowels and there was some diarrhoea.' Following this

release (and some sponging of the affected area) the chase continued and the cracks had begun to appear in the Tanzanian's armour. Shahanga was drifting back from Ikaanga, who still looked amazingly rhythmic and efficient, but whose face was now showing the first signs of the strain. At the 33km point, millions of Australian's cheered wildly when a distant green and gold clad Deek, was seen in the same TV shot as the Africans. He was a long way back in the distance, but there nonetheless. As the km's started to tick away Deek closed faster and faster upon the broken Shahanga until at the 38km he flew past him and set

his gaze firmly upon the diminutive Ikaanga still another 80m adrift. Watching the coverage of this race, the suspense of the final 3km is agonising. At 39km Ikaanga is still floating along and Deek is starting to make in-roads into catching him. The crowd on the course is three deep in parts are really giving some great support to the runners as they hurtle past, especially their own Robert de Castella and he is really flying. It is a great contrast, the light, smooth action of Ikaanga and the well built, strength and power of de Castella. Just shy of the 40km point Deek finally catches up to the Tanzanian and after an initial surge of resistance Deek finally hits the front for the first time in the race with a trademark bushman's hanky and a weary glance from Ikaanga. However it was not a glance of defeat, but one of defiance and within 100m Ikaanga again has surged to the front and is trying to run away from the Australian. Without panic or fuss, Deek spends a few hundred metres closing the gap and again hits the front. It has come down to a battle of wills. Ikaanga throws down another challenge and surges away again, but absent of the same ferocity as his first surge. Deek counters quickly and then opens up the first of what becomes the winning break. Under immense strain and fatigue, Deek still looks like he could run through a brick wall, just so strong. Deek continued on his way to win in front of a jubilant Australian crowd in a time of 2.09.18, absolutely amazing given the conditions. Ikaanga held on brilliantly to finish just 12 seconds shy of the home-crowd favourite. Mike Grattan from England ran through the field to claim third in 2.12.06. The images of Robert de Castella celebrating, holding the trophy high above his head with his coach, Pat Clohessy, by his side, are some of the most moments in Australian running history. Such was the impact of Deek's victory he was awarded an MBE in the Queen's New Year's Honours as well as receiving multiple annual sportsmen of the year awards.

Deek finally manages to catch the silky smooth Tanzanian, Juma Ikaanga – Getty Images

