

GREATEST RACES OF ALL TIME

2003 LONDON MARATHON WOMEN'S WORLD RECORD

by Daniel Green

In recent years Paula Radcliffe has single-handedly revolutionised women's marathon running. In this edition of the Greatest Races of All Time we revisit her world record run in the 2003 London Marathon.

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THE term sensational could be considered an understatement for the string of performances compiled by Paula Radcliffe in 2002. The year began when she defended her long course World Cross Country Championship in Dublin, Ireland. This was followed with a three and a half minute victory in the 2002 London Marathon. Running on what has traditionally been considered a slow course, her time of 2.18.56 narrowly missed Catherine Ndereba's recently set world record by just 11 seconds.

A brief respite ensued before attacking the track in the European summer. On July 19th Paula set a new Commonwealth record for 5000m in a 'hit-out' race prior to the Commonwealth Games in Manchester, where she demolished the field to run another Commonwealth record, a time of 14.31. Yet another record was broken a week later at the European Championships, this time in the 10000m. Radcliffe took the title and the European and Commonwealth record with her in a time of 30.01.

Several road races followed before another attempt on the marathon world record, this time at the Chicago Marathon. After her narrow miss in the London Marathon and sizzling form all year, she certainly looked a strong chance of taking the record. But Radcliffe didn't just claim the record by merely a few seconds, she sliced one and a half minutes off the time, running 2.17.18. What a truly remarkable year, but the best was yet to come.

The two-time defending champion was a noticeable absentee from the 2003 World Cross Country Championships as she had decided to focus all of her energies on the upcoming London Marathon. The event has a separate start for the elite female field and 2003 was unique as it was the first time male pacemakers were present for the women's field. The pace was hot and after the first mile, run in 5.10, Radcliffe was up the road with two of the African pacemakers leading the way. Three miles (4.8km) was covered in a staggering 15.15 and 10km in 32.10, Paula was on pace for a 2.14 marathon - surely she would have to implode! Maintaining this pace would bring her home three minutes quicker than her amazing performance in Chicago six months earlier. The rest of the women's field had been left in tatters. Romania's Constantina Dita and Susan Chepkememi of Kenya tried to maintain contact with Radcliffe, trailing by just 10 seconds, but the rest of the contenders were a full minute behind at the 10km point.

Relentlessly Radcliffe continued to smash along, reeling off kilometre after kilometre at 3.15 pace. Later in an interview with the BBC, Radcliffe was quoted as saying "In the first mile nobody seemed to want to go with us and we weren't running that fast, so I just relaxed and followed the two guys (pacemakers). I was just trying to stay relaxed until halfway and then just keep it going."

Considering the halfway split of 68.02 would have, at the time, ranked her 10th fastest all time, you get some impression of how fast Radcliffe was going whilst trying to stay relaxed. It was about this time that the trademark Radcliffe nodding started to become evident, indicating the pace was starting to become more difficult. The main bunch of the women's field had been devastated by the fast pace, but there were still five athletes who passed through halfway in close to or under 70 minutes, which two

years earlier would have been world record pace.

Incredibly, after the halfway point Paula increased the tempo and was running close to 3.12 per kilometre. The male pacemakers were even starting to feel the pinch and one of the two was dropped. Like a metronome, Radcliffe continued to throw down a truly phenomenal pace, rarely sitting directly behind the pacemakers, but instead choosing to run to the side. After 90 minutes of running she was still on target to run sub 2.16 and it was over two minutes back to the next best female. Those who tried to stay close to Radcliffe in the early stages were really beginning to pay the price as they were passed by the more conservative starters, Kenya's Catherine Ndereba and USA's Deena Drossin.

The final 10km of a marathon is not a place for the faint hearted and when you pass through 30km close to two minutes faster than when you set the current world record, you know that danger is not far away. But few seem to be able to hurt themselves the way that Radcliffe can and she amazingly began to work harder from this point.

The extreme pace of the first half didn't slow Radcliffe, but instead she managed to run the last 10km of the 2003 London Marathon as quickly as the first 10km. Running strongly over the final mile, Radcliffe breasted the finish line in 2.15.25, one the greatest performances ever, stripping close to another two minutes of her recent record breaking run. The time also put her three minutes and seventeen seconds ahead of the next best performance by a female over the distance.

Regardless of your opinion of using male pacemakers, this was without a doubt one of the greatest races of all time.

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RACE RESULTS

1. Paula Radcliffe	2.15.25
2. Catherine Ndereba	2.19.55
3. Deena Drossin	2.21.16
4. Susan Chepkemei	2.23.12
5. Ludmila Petrova	2.23.14
6. Constantina Dita	2.23.43
7. Jelena Prokocuka	2.24.01
8. Elfenesh Alemu	2.24.56
9. Michaela Botezan	2.25.32
10. Derartu Tulu	2.26.33

Paula Radcliffe crosses Tower Bridge out of sight of the rest of the Women's field - Getty Images



Radcliffe rewrites the record book - Getty Images