

FOCUS ON WINNERS: MARA YAMAUCHI

Few elite athletes have had to combine competing and training with a career as a diplomat. Talent and tenacity have allowed Mara Yamauchi to concentrate solely on distance running for the past five years and she is hoping the long hours on the roads of London, Tokyo and 1,000 points in between pay off at the 2012 Olympics.

Marathon Mara

Distance runner Mara Yamauchi has a Kenyan first name and Japanese last name, but she is currently preparing for an Olympic Games, London in 2012, that will, for her, be on home soil. She was born in Oxford, but her parents had lived in Kenya before that and took her back to Nairobi to live soon after she was born. She lived in the African country that is so synonymous with middle- and distance-running glory until the age of eight and it seems to have made a lasting impression on her.

"I grew up living in Nairobi which is at more than 1,600 metres altitude above sea level. I'm sure this had a positive impact on my endurance running ability," she says. "Also Nairobi has a great climate all year round so it's nice to be outdoors. As a child I was very active and enjoyed many different sports. Kenya's many top distance runners are also a great source of inspiration."

Returning to the United Kingdom, she was an enthusiastic member of a local athletics club in Oxford, the Headington RoadRunners, while still at school, but says she only began to compete seriously, mostly in cross-country events, at the city's famous university, where she studied politics, philosophy and economics (PPE) at Saint Anne's College. PPE at Oxford is the chosen academic route for many politicians and political commentators; alumni include the current UK prime minister, David Cameron, and seven members of his government, as well as the leader of the opposition and three past prime ministers. Oxford colleges have also guided former prime ministers of Australia, Pakistan and Thailand to PPE degrees.

On completing her university course (including a Master's at the London School of Economics) in 1996, however, Mara Yamauchi decided on a career in the diplomatic service





Mara Yamauchi at the end of the 2009 London Marathon.

 Rachael Russell / Shutterstock.com

instead. While preparing for her first overseas posting, she earned the right to represent her country, not at conferences and cocktail parties, but in athletics. She competed in the European Cross Country Championships in 1997, achieving a top-40 finish, and went on to win the English National Cross Country Championship the following year.

Tokyo time

Then she was asked to go to work in the British embassy in Tokyo, the impact of which on her sports career was partly good and partly bad. The bad part was that she took a break from competing at international level. It's difficult enough to get to the Brecon Beacons, in Wales, in time for an event on a Saturday morning in October if you live 250 kilometres away in Oxford, but if you live in Tokyo and have to be back at your desk on the Monday morning to arrange the visit of a trade delegation, it's impossible. On the plus side, while in Tokyo, she met and married the man who is now her coach, Shigetoshi Yamauchi.

Returning to the UK in 2002, Mara Yamauchi was able to opt for flexible working, which left her enough time to train for the 2004 London Marathon, her first event over this most iconic of Olympic distances. She came seventeenth in the women's race, clocking a time of 2:39:16. Her performances that year were good enough for the UK athletics team selectors to pick her for international competitions again. She took part in the 2005 World Athletics Championships in Helsinki, winning a team bronze medal, and in November that same year achieved a new personal best time for the marathon in the Tokyo event, running 2:27:38.

Away from work

Her performances in distance running earned her the chance to join the UK Sport World Class Performance Programme, with enough funding to take unpaid leave from her job in the diplomatic service and return to Tokyo with her husband to start a new training programme (as a full-time athlete for the first time in her life) to win selection for, and compete in, her first Olympics in Beijing in 2008.

On the question of combining work with running, she now says: "From 2003 until 2006 I worked as a diplomat and trained and competed. I was able to work flexibly which made all the difference to being able to fit in training and all the other things an athlete has to do. But being full-time means I can get enough rest, which is perhaps the most important bit, and devote enough time to strength and conditioning, massage, physiotherapy and so on, on top of training. I think being full-time at this level is essential, but working at the same time certainly has its benefits, mainly because it prevents you from over-training and provides a non-running focus in your life, which helps to maintain mental freshness."

Olympic debut

The full-time regime paid early dividends: a bronze medal in the 10,000 metres at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, a new personal best in the 2006 London Marathon (2:25:13) and victory later that year in the Rotterdam Half Marathon. At the start of the Olympic year, she won the Osaka Marathon with a fresh personal best time of 2:25:03. Then, in the big event itself, she achieved the best Olympic Marathon result



ASICS sleeveless inner muscle top and W's wind and water repellent jacket.

ASICS

ever for a UK woman athlete, finishing sixth, just 43 seconds behind gold-medal winner, Romania's Constantina Dita-Tomescu.

Ms Yamauchi says her first Olympic experience taught her that much more is at stake in an elite competition of this kind compared to city marathon events, which have become so popular with runners of all abilities. "The biggest difference is that in the latter you are running for yourself, but at the Olympics you are running for your country," she explains. "Of course city races are important to an athlete, but the pressure to perform well in the Olympics is much greater. The preparation is very different too—at the Olympics you will be spending time in the athletes' village with your team-mates before competing, whereas in a city race you can prepare pretty much as you wish. This pre-race phase and how you handle it can have a big impact on your performance."

Although not quite at the pre-race phase for the next Olympics, London 2012, her preparations are advanced. She has moved back to live in London and she admits her excitement levels are building. "Running in the 2008 Olympics was a dream come true for me. Since I was small I wanted to run at the Olympics so realising my long-held ambition was very special," she says. "But being able to compete in a home Olympics is a rare opportunity for an athlete, and I'll be doing everything I can to qualify, and hopefully perform well."

Running ambassador

Her talent and her Japanese connections will have done her no harm in securing a spot as one of sports brand ASICS's running ambassadors. It's a particularly appropriate title

in this case, but something else that she feels fits well is the company's name, which, as is well known in the industry, comes from the Latin phrase *Anima sana in corpore sano* (healthy soul through a healthy body). "Marathon running is very much a mind and body experience," the athlete explains. "Physically you have to be in shape to complete a marathon, but ultimately it's all about mental strength: belief in yourself, and the capacity to push your body further than it is willing to go. And the ASICS motto is also very relevant to everyday life, looking after your body and mind enables you to lead a fulfilling and happy life."

There's more to ASICS than an aphorism, of course. Shoes are perhaps the most important item a marathon runner wears, and Mara Yamauchi has used a variety of ASICS models over the years. She goes into more detail: "My favourite shoe for training runs is the Nimbus, which I've been using for many years and use



The women's Gel-Nimbus 13 shoe.

ASICS

now. It provides stability and good cushioning, which is essential if you're running many miles per week. I've also used the G2110 series a lot in the past which I really liked.

"For speed training and races, I've used the Tarther series a lot. They are lightweight and make me feel fast but also provide more stability than some ultra-thin racing shoes. My tailor-made race shoes from ASICS all use the Tarther sole. I have also used the GS trainer successfully in the past, which again provides good stability in a light shoe."

Wide feet

Shoes command a lot of her attention. She says she has very wide feet and has had trouble all her life finding shoes to fit her. ASICS already does width fittings, but Mara Yamauchi is one admirer of the brand who would like to see more "slight variations in the standard size system" because everyone is unique. The same could apply to clothing, like the petite lines some womenswear retailers use. "Otherwise I think the key to product development is to make clothing and shoes that simply look good and do their job well, so that athletes can focus on their performance without worrying about what they're wearing," she observes.

Marathon runners often wear very little clothing while competing, but not every city has a climate like Nairobi's and heavier clothing for early-morning training runs is essential. Ms Yamauchi says the ASICS Inner Muscle range has become her favourite wear for training. It's a range of specialist baselayer clothing with specialist support for core stability, to aid posture, flexibility and movement, enabling top performance and helping protect athletes against injury.

Mara Yamauchi's assessment is: "It fits well, is very lightweight, and can be used on its own or in layers on cold days. I find it dries out quickly which is great, for example when stretching after a run because you don't get cold."

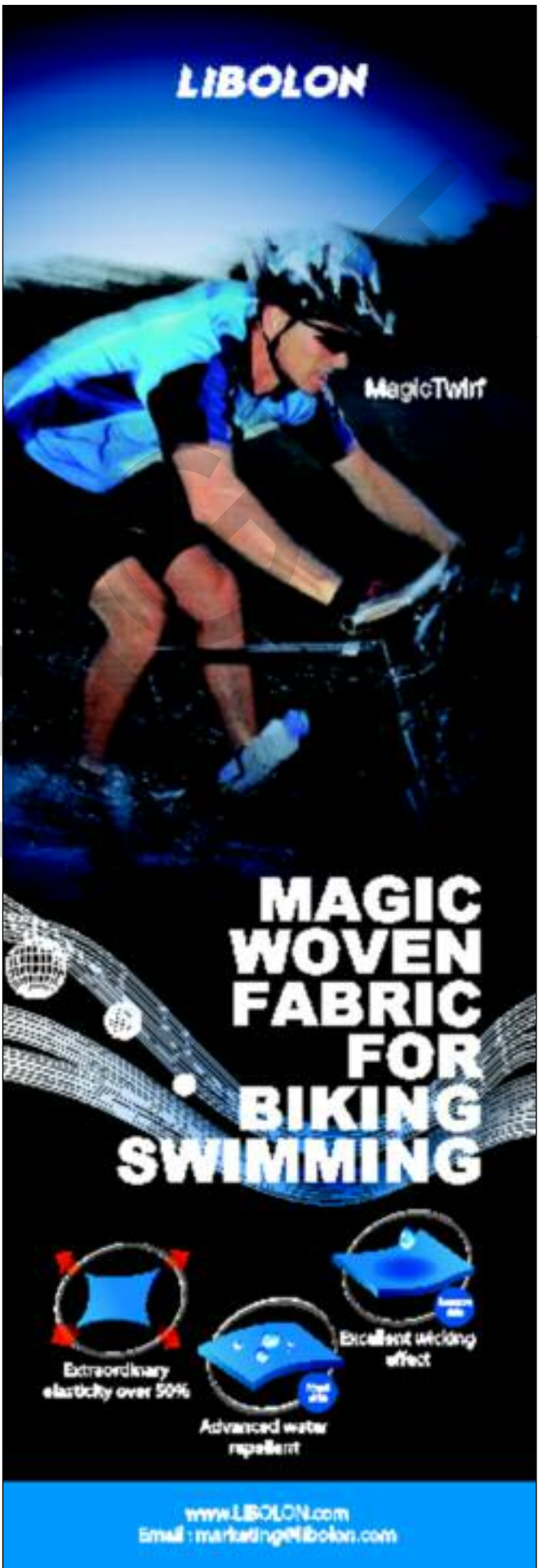
Jacket required

In winter she says she loves running in ASICS jackets "because they're fitted and lightweight so you feel protected from the weather without feeling weighed down by something too heavy". She is also a fan of the "nifty little pockets" in products such as the Storm Shelter jacket, which she finds useful for carrying keys or money; fluorescent markings for running in the dark are another important feature.

"I have started using ASICS's ultraviolet protection ranges too," she continues. "Marathon training means you're outside for long periods of time and if that's in the sun you can easily end up getting burned. ASICS's lightweight UV tops are cool enough for running on a sunny day but make sure you are protecting your skin too. I always wear a peaked hat when training to keep the sun, wind and rain off my face. ASICS have hats in all colours so I mix and match depending on what other colours I'm wearing."

For competitive action, she wears vests and shorts from the brand's top performance range, which she says she can hardly notice during a race, allowing her to focus completely on her performance. "The best competition wear I've ever used was a tailor-made outfit from ASICS. It was unique to me, just the right size, and well-designed. I ran my personal best in it so it definitely did the trick."

Perhaps she should ask the sports company to run her up an up-to-date version for London next summer. 



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