



BREAKING TWO

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The past weekend has been a big one for running; not only did Nike try and break the 2-hour barrier for a marathon; I ran my first half-marathon after a four-year hiatus due to a dodgy knee. Whilst Nike may have failed, I smashed it. Dragged around Skopje (*Macedonia in case you were wondering*) by my brother George, I managed to finish 25th in a PB of 1:26:52 – also clocking in as the highest UK finisher. But enough about me let's talk numbers...

By numbers I mean specifically the number 2. On Saturday morning three professional athletes, Eliud Kipchoge, Lelisa Desisa and Zersenay Tadese, set off into the darkness (*literally – they started before dawn*) as they attempted the impossible: a sub 2-hour marathon. For those of you that don't run this might not mean much so let's do some maths and break it down. A marathon is the grand old distance of 26.2 miles, also known as ridiculously far. The legend goes that a messenger Philippides ran the distance from the battlefield of Marathon to Athens to announce that the Persians had been defeated. After having exclaimed “*we have won*” he then collapsed and died from exhaustion, having not only run the entire distance, but also having fought in the battle himself. Legend or not (*and most historians believe it to be inaccurate*), I can certainly believe it. Humans are not designed to run such large distances in one go. Professional athletes we see on television make it look easy, but just think about it for a second... 26.2 miles. That's 42.2 kilometres, 42200 metres, 105 laps of a running track – that's insane.

But the distance isn't the half of it. The current men's world record marathon time is 2:02:57 held by Dennis Kimetto from Kenya and set in Berlin in 2014. That works out at 4:42 per mile... for 26.2 of them. Roger Bannister famously ran a sub 4-minute mile in 1954 (*exactly 63 years to the day before Nike's sub-2-hour marathon attempt*), which is still today an incredible feat, but that is just for one mile by itself. The marathon world record pace may be a little slower, but here we are talking about 26.2 of them, in a row, with no breaks. As I said before, insane.

If you don't know your imperial measurements (*who does these days*), the world record pace is 2:55 per kilometre or 70 seconds per 400 m/1 lap of a running track. If I remember correctly, and I probably don't, my best time at high school running the 400 m was about 70 seconds. That's me as a 16-year old sprinting flat out. To think that long-distance runners do that for 105 laps in a row is mind-blowing. We can continue and break it down even further into 100m segments. One marathon is equal to 422 lots of 100 m, and to break the world record you would need to run each of them in a time of 17 seconds. It might not sound too hard, running a 17-second 100m race, you could probably go out and do it right now if you are physically active, but that would be one. Try doing 421 more at the same pace, in a row, with no breaks... again, insane. Hopefully you get the picture by now.

Over the past 100 years the marathon world record time has been steadily decreasing, albeit at a slower pace in recent times. Nike's idea was to use everything at their disposal to plan the perfect race and go sub 2 hours for the first time in history. At the level of elite athletes, taking 2:57 off a world-record is pretty much unheard of; and this attempt was not only a test of human endurance, but of science and technology too. The team behind the '*breaking 2*' attempt consisted of world-experts in the fields of bio-mechanics, coaching, design, engineering, materials development, nutrition, sports psychology and physiology. They were meticulous in their detail, from the choice of course at Monza race track in Italy due to its favourable weather conditions, to individually designed attire for each athlete suited perfectly to their running style and technique, nothing was taken for granted. The runners were led by a group of 30-pacers that were interchanged at regular intervals to ensure energy levels were maintained. They even formed an arrow shape, with a lead man at the front, followed by a line of 2 and then 3 runners in front of the athletes, to minimise the effect of the wind.

Beginning before dawn, the three athletes set off on the journey of their lives. 17 laps of the famous circuit later, only one remained. Eliud Kipchoge completed the marathon in 2:00:25 – some two-and-a-half minutes inside the world record* but not as fast as he had hoped. It is of course unfair to label the attempt as a failure – the original BBC headline was changed from '*Nike fail at sub-two hour marathon attempt*' to '*Eliud Kipchoge goes close to sub-two hour marathon*' – as how can something so incredible be seen as a failure? Kipchoge ran 26.2 miles at an average pace of 4:36 per mile – that's only 15% slower than Roger Bannister's 4-minute mile and he did 26.2 of them in a row!

It really was an incredible effort from one of the best athletes of our time. You could see the pain on his face as he attempted a sprint finish; this was pushing the human body to its very limits and beyond. As Kipchoge said himself after the event, the next question is how can the team take another 1 second per mile off the time? Do that and the seemingly impossible will be realised – INSANE.

*To clarify the attempt does not count as a world record because of the use of pacers that were not competing in the race (*along with several other infringements of the official rules*).



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