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In her first serious half-marathon Sonia O'Sullivan cruised home in the BUPA Great North Run while Olympic marathon champion Josiah Thugwane was an equally easy winner in the men's race.

**ON THE COVER**  
 Manuela Machado and Sonia O'Sullivan shoulder-to-shoulder in Sunday's BUPA Great North Run  
 Picture: Mark Shearman

# No SW

*In her first 'serious' half-marathon Sonia O'Sullivan made winning look so easy the prospect of what she might be capable of in favourable conditions is a mouthwatering one*

**Report: Bob Frank Pictures: Mark Shearman**

**S**ONIA O'SULLIVAN ended her hugely successful season in the best possible style with victory in her first serious half-marathon.

The world 2000m record-holder won by more than a minute from twice European marathon champion Manuela Machado, although cold and windy conditions ruled out fast times.

Indeed, only once in the last 15 years has the race been won in a slower time, but that does not detract from a comprehensive victory by the European 3000m record-holder.

O'Sullivan jogged round the race last year in around 75 minutes but her first serious attempt at the distance attracted much inter-

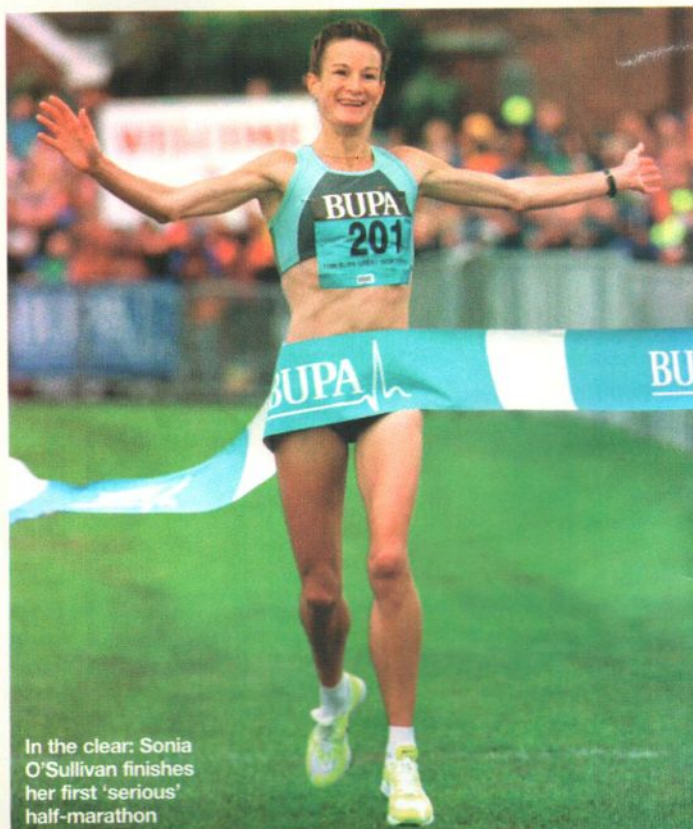
est after a year in which she tasted double success at the World Cross Country Championships (4km and 8km) and the European Championships (5000m and 10,000m).

She also set a world best over 2000m in 1998 so winning one of the world's top half-marathons was a fitting end to the year.

Many had expected O'Sullivan to simply sit on the shoulder of natural front-runner Machado and then use her ferocious finishing kick in the closing stages.

But O'Sullivan made her winning move with four miles to go and from then on there was only going to be one winner.

The opening stages saw a group of four establishing themselves as



In the clear: Sonia O'Sullivan finishes her first 'serious' half-marathon



# eat

the main contenders. Machado, third in 1994 and '95, was at the front along with in-form Bath veteran Jo Thompson, O'Sullivan and 1993 world junior cross country silver medallist Pamela Chepchumba. Recently crowned Commonwealth 5000m silver medallist Andrea Whitcombe was just behind as England international Miranda Heathcote and half-marathon debutant Amy Stiles completed the leading group.

By one mile (5:11), the leading quartet had opened around 10 seconds on Whitcombe and Heathcote and it was already clear the conditions were not going to favour the runners.

Last year near gale force winds blew many to PBs and runners enjoyed a backwind for virtually all except the final mile. This time the cold wind faced the athletes and, combined with the strung out field which meant several ran solo for much of the way, the 1998 UK rankings were not revised as much as usual in this race.

Crossing Tyne Bridge approaching two miles (10:30), O'Sullivan and Chepchumba led with Machado and Thompson just behind, seemingly sheltering from the wind.

Thompson, who ran two sub-55 minute 10 mile races in September, was soon to drop as behind her Heathcote pulled away from three-time national cross country champion Whitcombe.

O'Sullivan, the Irish record-holder at every distance from 800m to 5000m, was looking remarkably fresh at this stage and when coach Alan Storey jokingly shouted from the lead vehicle: "Tuck in behind the big ones," a big smile spread across her face, her 5ft 9in figure towering over Machado and Chepchumba.

At three miles (15:52), Machado appeared to pick the pace up as she went to the front but the clock showed differently as the pace was indeed slowing.

But the leading trio were pulling further away from the rest and by 5km (16:26) they had 19 seconds on Thompson with Heathcote a further 12 seconds down and Whitcombe just behind the Tonbridge runner.

The conditions continued to slow the runners down and 10km



No bridging the gap: Pamela Chepchumba, Machado, O'Sullivan and Jo Thompson move clear of the field



# BUPA GREAT NORTH RUN, NEWCASTLE TO SOUTH SHIELDS, OCTOBER 4

was reached in 34:05, at which point the course turned into the teeth of the wind.

Through halfway in 35:56, the leading trio were still together and it was Chepchumba – second in this year's Gothenburg Half-marathon – who was first to drop around eight miles.

With two left to battle it out, O'Sullivan and Machado remained friendly rivals, sharing drinks as they quickly pulled clear of the Kenyan. Within the space of a mile they opened 15 seconds on Chepchumba and in the next half a mile or so to 15km (51:18) they stretched it further to 27 seconds.

During the 10th mile O'Sullivan began to show in front, and the clock soon showed why – she'd thrown in a 5:19 mile, 27 seconds faster than the previous one.

And from 10 miles onward O'Sullivan powered further away with every stride, increasing her winning margin to 65 seconds.

As she approached the final turn on to the grass finish she glanced over her shoulder for confirmation she had the race won, flashed a broad smile and then took off her gloves and threw them into the crowd. Stopping the watch on 71:50 she said: "I felt really comfortable out there and I was surprised how relaxed I was."

"The hardest part was the cold and the wind, but I enjoyed the support of the crowd. Someone offered me water and I thought 'It's too cold for that,' and then someone offered me a sponge and I was like: 'You must be joking.' I was glad I had my gloves on in that weather."

"But it's a nice way to end my year, that's it. Now it's holiday time. I ended my track season by

winning the World Cup 5000 so it's great to finish my year with a win."

There's no doubt O'Sullivan can go considerably quicker, but the conditions and the relaxed nature of her performance gave no indication of how much quicker. A sub-70 minute 'half' is easily within her capabilities, but time will tell whether she has the ability to challenge Catherina McKiernan's Irish record of 67:50.

Both athletes have had plenty to celebrate this year, McKiernan winning the Flora London Marathon and clocking that Irish half-marathon record in Lisbon. And the pair could be set to clash when the World Cross Country Championships go to Belfast in March.

"It's too early to say whether I'll be doubling up there, or in the World Championships in Seville," she says. "But the World Cross is my next big goal. I might spend some time training in Australia but I won't be doing a lot now until January."

Revealing the timing of her winning move she said: "I thought 10 miles would be a good place to go, there was only 5km to go and 5km is my territory. I didn't want to be battling it out in that final mile along the seafront, I thought if I could get away by then I could enjoy that final mile. I was going to go hard for two miles and if anyone was with me I'd relax and then save it for the finish but that wasn't necessary and I dropped Manuela fairly easily."

"I hadn't found the race too tough and when I was getting to the top of hills I felt I could carry on. That's when I knew I'd got the race under control."

"I felt good and I couldn't

believe how quick the miles were going by so when I got to 10 miles I decided to go. The toughest part of the race was at the top of the hill at 11 miles because it was so cold and windy."

"I've learnt a lot this year. I've done things that are still not the best things to do (a reference to ignoring Storey's advice not to tackle the second part of her doubles in Marrakesh and Budapest) but everything's worked out well and I've had a great year."

And O'Sullivan explained how Tyneside proved the perfect setting to finish her season. She said: "Long runs are something runners do every week and if you get a chance to do it with someone else it's so much better. I might not have been running with every one of the runners out there today but this event still brings everyone together. In soccer how many people can say they've played with Alan Shearer, but in this sport we've all run in the same race."

And having enjoyed her first serious outing over 13.1 miles, O'Sullivan revealed she will tackle the marathon in the future. McKiernan has given Irish distance running a major boost with her successful move up to the marathon but while she comes from a 5000/10,000m base O'Sullivan has come very much from a 1500m background. But she says: "I will run at least one marathon, I've no idea where or when but it's one of those things I'd like to do. It's a long time to be running but today I didn't feel like I was trying very hard."

O'Sullivan had relaxed 24 hours earlier by going to watch Sunderland's Division One match with Bradford, but runner-up

Machado is the bigger football fan. Indeed, she has a 10 per cent stake in US club Tampa Bay Cyclones.

She is also the bigger name in long distance running, with much more experience than the Teddington-based Irishwoman.

Twice the European champion at the marathon, a gold and two silvers in World Championship marathons and the confidence gained from setting a PB of 2:27:10 when defending her title in Budapest, Machado appeared on paper a serious threat to O'Sullivan.

The Portuguese veteran set her half-marathon PB of 70:18 when winning in Tokyo this year, despite losing 40 seconds around halfway when stopped by the police to give priority to traffic. The European Championships marathon may still have been in the legs of the former London Marathon runner-up, but you sensed O'Sullivan had so much more to give that Machado would have needed to smash her PB to challenge her.

Sadly the field lacked any real quality in depth and third placed Chepchumba was almost two minutes down on Machado.

In fourth, Thompson took more than a minute off her PB with a fine run, just holding off Heathcote who also set a PB (by 26 seconds).

Next in were debutants Whitcombe and Stiles as unattached runner Beth Allott and 21-year-old north easterner Kerry Matthew completed the nine athletes to break one hour 20 minutes.

## Winner's profile

**Name:** Sonia O'Sullivan  
**DOB:** November 28 1969  
**PBs:** 1500: 3:58.85 ('95); 2000: 5:25.36 ('94); 3000: 8:21.64 ('94); 2M: 9:19.56 ('98); 5000: 14:41.40 ('95); 10,000: 31:29.33 ('98); half-marathon: 71:50 ('98)

**Did you know?:** At the age of 17 O'Sullivan won the Irish junior cross country championships and then the senior title two weeks later, but she wasn't taken to the World Cross Country Championships due to exams.

## Splits

Mile	Time	Split
1	5:11	5:11
2	10:30	5:19
3	15:51	5:21
4	21:25	5:34
5	27:12	5:47
6	32:54	5:42
7	38:21	5:27
8	43:50	5:29
9	49:36	5:46
10	54:55	5:19
11	60:34	5:39
12	66:02	5:28
13.1	71:50	

All smiles: Chepchumba, O'Sullivan and Machado

