



FIRST TIME IS A CHARM

NEWCOMERS LOZANO AND STRIZHAKOV TAKE MASTERS TITLES

By Ragnhild Connell

One's first Boston Marathon will always be a memorable one. With its rich history, excellent competition, and enthusiastic spectators, it's sure to be an unforgettable event. For the 2007 Boston Marathon masters champions, it was no different. Both were first-timers, and like the other 23,000 entrants, they worried about the pre-race weather forecasts that predicted heavy rains and wind gusts up to 50 miles per hour. This was one they would never forget.

For 44-year-old Heidi Lozano, the women's master division winner in 2:56:03, the nor'easter conditions were particularly worrisome. A native of Colombia and currently a resident of Houston, TX, this was far from her normal hot and humid training environment. "The conditions were definitely not ideal for me," Lozano said at the press conference after the race. "I was very pleased to conquer the weather. You just have to change your plan altogether and take it mile by mile."

It was a similar situation for Oleg Strizhakov, 43, who captured the men's masters title in 2:28:55. He is a Russian citizen currently residing in Gainesville, FL, where he, along with several fellow Russian long-distance runners, normally enjoy warm and sunny days. Yet both Strizhakov and Lozano emerged as the strongest competitors in their division by wisely running tactical races. Their reward was the most prestigious masters title in the sport, a beautiful trophy, and \$10,000 in prize money.

What worried Strizhakov more than the weather was the strong masters field. It included last year's winner, Sammy Nyangincha, 44, of Kenya; former Boston champ Abebe Mekonnen, 43, of Ethiopia; youthful Israeli Ayele Setegne, 51, who still competes in World Championships; and strong American contender Paul Aufdemberge, 42. Even in this strong field, Strizhakov remained one of the favorites going into the race. He is a past Olympian in the 10,000 meters (Barcelona in 1992) and he recorded his personal best of 2:12:21 at the Rotterdam Marathon in 2000.



STRIZHAKOV: VICTAH SAUER/PHOTO RUN; LOZANO: MARATHONPHOTO

Strizhakov decided early on to run his own race in the rough weather conditions and let the lead pack go, even while several of his competitors in the division stuck with it. "I began to run with a group of elite runners. After 10K, I decided to slow down because it was hard for me to keep breathing steady," Strizhakov said after the race. His conservative strategy would pay off. At Heartbreak Hill he passed Nyangincha, who had led the masters field for most of the race, and ultimately cruised to victory in 2:28:55, more than two minutes ahead of surprise runner-up Robert Weiner. Weiner, a 42-year-old Jefferson County, CO, district attorney, also came from behind late in the race, passing in the final 10K both Nyangincha, who dropped to sixth (2:34:21), and Aufdemberge, who finished third (2:33:04).

In winning his first Boston, Strizhakov kept up the Russian and Kenyan dominance in the masters division. Not since 1997, when Frenchman Dominique Chauvelier won, has there been a masters champion from another country. Similarly, the Russian women have

dominated the women's division, winning the last five Bostons. When Lozano crossed the Boylston Street finish line as the top woman over 40, she was the first American division winner since 1998.

For Lozano, a chiropractor in Houston who started running in her 20s to relieve stress, the race outcome was a surprise. This being her first Boston, she wasn't sure what to expect – and to win her division was far from her mind. "Not in my wildest dreams could I think I would come out of Boston with the masters title," she told a local Houston newspaper after the race. Lozano, who has a personal best of 2:51:56 from the California International Marathon in 2006, led her division from start to finish. Lisa Goldsmith of Colorado was second in 2:59:38, and Sheila Mason of Williamstown, MA, was third in 3:02:32.

Despite the conditions, the Boston Marathon proved to be everything Lozano hoped it would be. "The fans were absolutely wonderful out there. I just loved the whole experience," she said. ■