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Garcia, Liljebblad lead record field of 13,000-plus at Miami Marathon

By SHARON ROBB | South Florida Sun-Sentinel
January 28, 2008

MIAMI - On a glorious day for running, Jose Garcia of Guatemala and American Kelly Liljebblad were on an emotional roller coaster after the ING Miami Marathon in downtown Miami on Sunday.

Garcia, 30, the 2007 Pan American Games marathon silver medalist, broke away from Kenyan Samuel Kiprotich in the last two miles for his first marathon victory and \$5,000.

Garcia, a 2004 Olympian who will represent Guatemala again in Beijing this summer, covered the 26.2 miles in 2 hours, 17 minutes and 43 seconds. Kiprotich, 33, bothered by a tight hamstring at Mile 14, was second in 2:18:14.

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"It's the best feeling," Garcia said. "God has been too great to me. The people along the course were great. I felt like I was in my own country."

Liljebblad, 35, a runner and Ironman triathlete from Boulder, Colo., overtook early leader Nadezhda Tuptova of Russia at Mile 16 to win in 2:47:13.

It was bittersweet for Liljebblad, who missed qualifying for the Olympic trials in Boston in April by 13 seconds. The 2005 Houston Marathon winner, plagued by foot injuries, returned to running this past year to try and make the sub-2:47 qualifying standard.

Tuptova, bothered by the humidity since arriving last week in Gainesville, her training base, was second in 2:47:13.

"It's always nice to win but I missed my No. 1 goal today, which was to qualify for the Olympic trials," Liljebblad said. "I saw the clock and I started fighting but my legs just wouldn't go any faster. I was trying and once I saw it turn at 2:47:01, I said, 'Well, I won the race,' and then I switched over because you can't be a crybaby."

"I was really hurting ... at Mile 20 my quads started to give out really bad. I had to really dig deep. I have been sick for a month and wasn't able to train like I wanted. I just enjoyed the fact that I won."

Early in the race, Liljebblad ran with Miami's Julia Stamps Mallon, 29, who was also trying to qualify for the trials but finished fifth in 2:55:06.

A record 10,452 finishers (13,102 were registered) from 47 countries and 50 states were greeted by ideal running weather, a marked improvement from the cold and downpours of past years.

There were 2,666 finishers in the marathon, 7,729 in the half marathon and 57 wheelchair racers. It was the first time the six-year-old race cracked the 10,000-runner mark.

The marathon broke the weather curse that has dogged many marathons in the past

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year, including Boston, Marathon of the Palm Beaches, Chicago and Honolulu. Temperature at race start was 62 degrees with overcast skies for most of the race. Humidity was 85 percent with a slight breeze and brief rain shower.

"We have been battling eight degrees in Michigan, so it felt like paradise out there," said half-marathon course record breaker Brian Sell of Rochester Hills, Mich.

How's South Florida? It was a perfect day to run for South Florida ... finally we got good weather in Miami," said Sonja Friend-Uhl of Wellington, who was seventh in the half marathon.

"This is as good as it's going to get, much better than last year or any of the other ones I've done," said Fort Lauderdale's Anton Van Zyl, 11th in the half marathon.

Organizers from the U.S. Road Sports and Entertainment Group, which recently purchased the marathon, were on hand to observe the race. Officials hope to triple the event grow to more than 15,000 runners next year.

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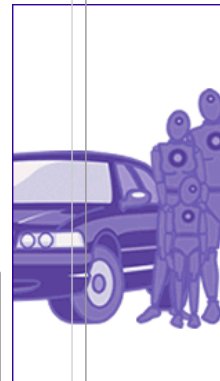
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