

At Women's Marathon, fastest time didn't win

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There were over 20,000 competitors in Sunday's Nike Women's Marathon in San Francisco. And 24-year-old Arien O'Connell, a fifth-grade teacher from New York City, ran the fastest time of any of the women.

But she didn't win.

It doesn't get much simpler than a footrace. All it takes is a starting line, a finish line and a clock. You fire the gun and the first person to the end of the course is the winner.

However, as the marathon officials said to O'Connell - not so fast.

While O'Connell had the greatest run of her life and covered the course faster than any woman, she was told she couldn't be declared the winner because she didn't run with the "elite" group who were given a 20-minute head start.

So what could have been a lovely Cinderella story about a young woman rising above her expectations in a race that bills itself as all about empowering women turned into a strict the-rules-are-the-rules edict. That's not the image we're trying to promote here.

San Francisco has become one of those destination locations for the new breed of distance runner. Between the San Francisco Marathon in July and the Nike race - billed as the largest women's marathon in the world - over 40,000 runners will visit this year.

It is great that these events are held here, but they are also representing the city. What we are hoping is that they leave town talking about the terrific location, the great restaurants and the perfectly organized event. Instead, we look like we don't know how to operate a stopwatch.

"That's pretty weak," said Jon Hendershott, associate editor of the authoritative Track and Field News magazine, based in Mountain View. "Think of the PR they could have had with this girl coming out of nowhere. It sounds like they got caught totally off guard."

O'Connell, who describes herself as "a pretty good runner," had never managed to break three hours in five previous marathons. But as soon as she started at 7 a.m. Sunday, she knew it was her day. In fact, when she crossed the finish line 26.2 miles later, her time of 2:55:11 was so unexpectedly fast that she burst into tears.

"I ran my best time by like 12 minutes, which is insane," she said.

At the awards ceremony, the O'Connell clan looked on as the top times were announced and the "elite" female runners stepped forward to accept their trophies.

"They called out the third-place time and I thought, 'I was faster than that,'" she said. "Then they called out the second-place time and I was faster than that. And then they called out the first-place time (3:06), and I said, 'Heck, I'm faster than her first-place time, too.'"

Just to make sure, O'Connell strolled over to a results station and asked a race official to call up her time on the computer. There it was, some 11 minutes faster than the official winner.

"They were just flabbergasted," O'Connell said. "I don't think it ever crossed their minds."

No one seemed exactly sure what to do. The trophies had already been handed out and the official results announced. Now organizers seem to be hoping it will all go away.

"At this point," Nike media relations manager Tanya Lopez said Monday, "we've declared our winner."

O'Connell said some race officials actually implied she'd messed up the seeding by not declaring herself an "elite" runner.

"If you're feeling like you're going to be a leader," race producer Dan Hirsch said Monday, "you should be in the elite pack."



So this is her fault? O'Connell was just being modest.

"I'm a good, solid runner," she said. "I never considered myself elite."

Jim Estes, associate director of the long-distance running program for USA Track and Field, did his best to explain the ruling. He's had some practice with the issue. The Sunday before last, at the Chicago Marathon, a Kenyan named Wesley Korir pulled off a similar surprise, finishing fourth even though he wasn't in the elite group and started five minutes after the top runners.

In that situation, and in this one, Estes made the same ruling: It didn't count. O'Connell wasn't declared the winner and Korir didn't collect fourth-place prize money.

"The theory is that, because they had separate starts, they weren't in the same race," Estes said. "The woman who is winning the elite field doesn't have the opportunity to know she was racing someone else."

Estes admits that giving the elite runners a sizable head start may not be the best policy.

"These are things this race and other races need to look at," Estes said. "It comes down to what a race is, and who is racing who."

Nonsense, said Track and Field News' Hendershott. He said O'Connell took her best shot, ran the fastest and should have won.

"What's she supposed to do, lay back because she's not an elite runner?" he asked. "If the elites are going to lay back, that's their fault."

As for O'Connell, she's not bitter. After all, she got her best time ever, had a nice weekend in San Francisco and comes home with a story.

But she didn't win. Maybe the best way to explain that is to say it is just another case of the elites in San Francisco giving the city a bad name.

C.W. Nevius' column runs Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. E-mail him at cwnevius@sfchronicle.com.

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