For S'pore marathoners, a long, lonely run

BY NICHOLAS FANG

WHEN it comes to the number of runners, the Standard Chartered Singapore Marathon is fast closing the gap with more established races around the world.

This Sunday’s race will see a record 30,000 participants, 9,000 of whom will do the grueling full distance of 42.2 km.

It took just eight weeks for all the places to be taken up, and registration for the 2006 Standard Chartered race closed six weeks ahead of schedule.

The marathon drew 21,000 runners last year, also a record high. It started with just 6,000 in 2002.

This year, 7,500 runners are from overseas. The Singapore runners include Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan, Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and MCYS Parliamentary Secretary Teo Ser Luck.

This year’s record number is similar to the turnout for legendary marathons in Berlin, London, New York and Boston.

But when it comes to spectators, Singapore lags well behind the big community support those other races enjoy.

The Singapore Sports Council (SSC), which organises the local race, said spectator numbers have climbed from 10,000 in 2003 to 33,000 last year and are expected to reach 52,500 last year.

The SSC is expecting close to 77,000 spectators to turn up from 6 a.m. Sunday to cheer the runners.

But with the number of spectators not at the level many would like and by having race officials check with counters on the day itself.

The SSC expects to break the 77,000 mark, but not by a significant margin.

Tour de France cycling champion Lance Armstrong, 35, who completed the New York Marathon for the first time last month, called the race the “hardest physical thing” he had ever done.

He said he would not have succeeded if not for the cheering of the crowds along the route.

The SSC’s chief of high participation and industry development, Mr Daniel Metcalfe, said: “Supporters are an integral component to the marathon as they add colour, energy and passion to the event. Runners need emotional and spiritual support, especially in the middle of the course.

The sight and sound of your family and friends will drive you on.”

He added that the SSC’s goal was to ensure the same sort of support for all the runners.

Mr Metcalfe said: “The SSC’s mission is to create a more engaging and inclusive experience for all runners and their families.”

Marathon veteran Jet Jon Shepherd, 50, explained why people do not turn up to support runners.

“It’s actually very tiring to spend the whole day cheering,” said Ms Adeline Lok, 23, a third-year student and member of the winning team in the past two years.

“When we’re out there cheering the runners on, it’s great to see the acknowledgments on their faces and that they are responding to our encouragement,” she added.

“The SSC has been running an initiative to encourage more people to cheer on the runners and we’ve noticed an increase in the number of people cheering this year.”