

How tracking app Strava is helping people run 'virtual marathons'



Entrants for next year's New York marathon are being selected via "virtual" races.

by **Naureen Malik** in AFR on 2 Nov 2018

The New York City Marathon is so popular that hundreds of [runners](#) are planning to brave the 26.2-mile (42 km) distance on their own – no fuel stalls, no Gatorade tables, no bathroom stations, not even any cheer zones – just for a shot to take on the real thing next year.

This weekend, 500 endurance enthusiasts are signed up to take part in a "virtual" [marathon](#), which is being held for the first time by the New York Road Runners organisation.

The registrants, each of whom has paid \$US100 (\$140) range in age from 21 to 67, will be running in 28 countries.

Once they finish the mileage, logged through the Strava app (it must be outside, not on a treadmill), they will earn a real medal, specially designed for the virtual race. Even better, they'll receive guaranteed entry into the 2019 race.



The virtual marathon is organised through Strava Inc, whose app began in 2009 as GPS-tracking software for cycling but now counts runners as its fastest-growing group of users.

The existence of such virtual races underscores the rising global popularity of running as a sport – according to Statista, the number of overall participants in the US has risen 44 per cent since 2006, to 55.9 million people last year.

Because races through major cities are capped for security and logistics reasons, however, trying to get a spot in any of the popular marathons has become more about luck than speed.

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About 50,000 people will run the New York City Marathon on Sunday, but most of those spots are earned through charity fundraising or running other races to qualify.

Only 15,500 spots in the race are designated for general entry, and roughly 105,000 people applied for the lottery for those places this year.

Likewise, the 2019 Tokyo Marathon, to be held in March, received more than 330,000 general entry applicants for its 27,370 available spots.

The London marathon, held next April, received a record 414,000 applications for 40,000 slots, according to Ryan Goad, a spokesman for the event.

First of its kind

The virtual marathon is organised through Strava Inc, whose app began in 2009 as GPS-tracking software for cycling but now counts runners as its fastest-growing group of users. With 35 million participants, it's become the platform of choice for New York Road Runners.

According to Strava, this is the first virtual marathon of its kind. Participating runners will have the first four days of November to complete the distance in a single shot.

After it was announced, the virtual race sold out in a "matter of hours", says David Lorsch, Strava's vice president for strategy and business development. "We haven't done anything like this, where you have to run a marathon in a single session."

Boston's marathon, which selects runners based on qualifying times, has reduced those times in response because of high demand and growing interest, says Lorna Campbell, spokeswoman for the Abbott World Marathon Majors, which runs a series promoting the "big six" marathons.

But the company hasn't seen anyone else follow New York's lead in offering a virtual race as a qualifying factor.

At least not yet. But the Road Runners are adding more virtual options next year, starting with another New Year's challenge, Capiaso says. And Strava is already talking to other running outlets about expanding their virtual offerings.

"I think this concept has legs," Lorsch says. *Bloomberg*