

Cape Town, South Africa, Is Chosen to Host the Eighth World Marathon Major: Upsides and Downsides



Few landscapes are as varied as Cape Town, South Africa. In foreground is the DHL Stadium (until 2021 the Green Point Stadium), where World Cup matches were held in 2010, and where the Sanlam Cape Town Marathon starts and ends. //Handmade Pictures | Shutterstock//

The Sanlam Cape Town Marathon has much to recommend it as the eighth and newest Abbott World Marathon Major (AbbotWMM). The landscape, as attested by the photograph above, is as unique as it comes. The city is a magnet for international tourism, and is no stranger to international sports competitions: it hosted matches in the 2010 World Cup and the 1995 Rugby World Cup; is the annual venue for the Cape Town Cycle Tour included in the International Cycling Union's Golden Bike series; and will host the 2027 Cricket ODI World Cup (scoff not, American readers: cricket is big in the UK, Australia, India, and Pakistan among many others, and on the global stage is arguably the most popular sport after football (soccer)). Cape Town was one of four cities, along with Rome, Stockholm, and Buenos Aires, in addition to the eventual winner, Athens, to be considered for the 2004 Summer Olympics.

The choice of the Cape Town Marathon has both symbolic and practical significance. Symbolically, the choice of Cape Town as the first African host is a big step toward establishing the reputation of the AbbotWMM as a truly global phenomenon. Since 80 percent of the top 50 marathoners alive today come from Africa, the awarding of a Major is

a nod toward the incalculable contribution African runners have given to the sport. As a measure to redress past neglect of the continent by the AbbottWMM, the race has reserved two-thirds of the total participation for African runners, affording a never-before opportunity for average as well as elite African runners to participate in a supremely world class event.

This is a positive development in terms of prioritizing African athletes on their home continent. However, there are downsides to the choice of Cape Town as a WMM, starting with the raw numbers.

Downsides

What are the downsides to the Cape Town Marathon's ascent to World Marathon Major status? Two come immediately to mind.

Downside One: scale. There were 27,000 finishers in the Cape Town marathon in 2026. The smallest of the existing Majors is Boston with 29,033 finishers in 2026. Boston, 129 years old, is so entrenched in marathon lore and has such a high level of elite competition and strict entry requirements that its size is a negligible factor in its standing among the Majors. Sydney is the next smallest of the Majors with 33,000 finishers in 2025; next step up is Tokyo, with 36,513 finishers in 2025.

To live up to its stature as a Major, Cape Town might be pressured to grow its participation to accommodate the demand that will come once the Nine Star medal replaces the Six Star medal as the lodestone of WMM medal seekers (expected if Shanghai gets acceptance as the ninth in the series in the near future). (There will be no Seven or Eight Star medals.) In addition, the rising prestige of Cape Town as a WMM will increase demand, whether or not it comes from chasers of the Nine Star medal or other runners for whom participation in *any* WMM enjoys a wow!

There were about 23,000 Six Star holders as of December 2025, and according to [The Running Channel](#), there were more than 10,000 owners of Five Stars. There are more than 4,500 runners who had seven stars by the end of 2025, due to the introduction of Sydney.

Cape Town will eventually have to embrace thousands more runners to cement its reputation as a World Marathon Major. How many more thousands in the short run is guesswork for the public at this point; the general “ballot” (lottery) for the 2027 event closes on June 24, 2026, and applicants will be notified of acceptance on June 26.

The numbers become particularly important if reserving two-thirds of entries for Africans stays in place. If the 2027 field were to rise to 30,000 total, that leaves just 10,000 slots for out-of-Africa entries. The existence of the ballot means many WMM “Star” hunters will be shut out simply by chance, no matter where they come from. Say 20% of the 37,500 Five Star, Six Star, and Seven Star holders were to knock on the Cape Town Marathon’s door (not

to mention those on the lower rungs of the WMM Star ladder), that door would be knocked on at least 7,500 times.

The arithmetic suggests the Sanlam Cape Town Marathon has made a hard tweak to the WMM mold. [As Jessy Carveth in *Marathon Handbook*](#) puts it:

That two-thirds rule is the most underrated number in this announcement, because it tells you what the race wants to be. Not a tourism Major dressed up in African scenery. A Major where African runners are the dominant field, the dominant story, and the dominant footage on the global broadcast.

Downside Two: the potential for extreme weather and the demands placed on infrastructure. The most memorable instance is the disaster in October of 2025, when the race was canceled on 4:45 am race day due to the damage high winds did to race infrastructure with gusts more than 60 km/h (~37 mph), and the threat it posed to runner safety. Overnight winds had destroyed marquee tents, and ripped branding from fences and scaffolding to the extent that the structural engineer could not certify the race infrastructure as safe. The prevailing southeast wind is strong enough and frequent enough to have a name: the Cape Doctor. The race course requires over 16 kilometers of fencing, extensive road closure signage, and temporary structures across the area, all of which are vulnerable to winds exceeding 40 km/h (~25 mph).

Canceling a race of 24,000 people at 4:45 am on race day—which occurred in 2025—has negative consequences of the kind every race director dreads. The Cape Town organizers satisfied the WMM by the way they handled the disaster sufficiently to keep their bid secure. Sanlam has stuck by the event by committing sponsorship through 2030.

The threat of extreme weather has been mitigated by moving the date from the traditional October date to May 24th of this year. The confidence of the running public is reflected in the participation of 27,000 runners this year, up from 24,000 in 2024. Autumn weather in Cape Town is generally calmer and cooler than spring weather. Still, the location exposes it to frequent high winds, calling for permanent engineering solutions to protect the marathon course.

Despite potential downsides, the loyalty of the sponsor, the increases in runner participation, and the completion of an exhaustive years-long process of qualifying for Abbott World Marathon Major status bode well for the coming years of this unique race.