
Distance Running In Germany And Other German-speaking Countries

From the notoriety of the Berlin Marathon being one of the fastest and most famous Abbott Marathon Majors, to the successful sub-2-hour marathon attempt in Vienna in October 2019 by Eliud Kipchoge, Germany and the surrounding countries are known for their robust running scenes. This will be an investigation into how Germany and other German-speaking countries have influenced the sport of distance running and what the running culture is like in these countries today. While today's running culture is undoubtedly influenced by recent history, it is clear that the prevalence of the sport is encouraged by local physical and cultural landscapes.

I have a specific interest in this topic because I have always felt that the most powerful way to experience a new place or environment is to explore by running. Upon arriving in Germany as a lifelong distance runner, I was overjoyed to observe that many locals take to the trails, roads, and parks for running, biking, and walking in their leisure time. I have also always wondered why many elite athletes flock to Switzerland, Germany, and Austria for training and for competitions. I find this topic to be uniquely interesting as a potential participant in future running events in these countries. I will be running the Generali Berlin Half Marathon in 2020, and I have found that investigating this topic has led to a more profound understanding of the sport in this region of Europe.

With an extensive network of maintained trails and informational resources, Germany and the surrounding areas are a haven for runners and outdoor enthusiasts alike. In large cities such as Berlin, runners are ubiquitous on city sidewalks, on bike lanes, and in city parks. These countries also play host to some of the largest events in the distance running world. There are several factors, in part, that have contributed to this local running community today.

One aspect of recent history that has played a major role in the development of distance running was the importance of sporting culture in Eastern Germany during the time of the GDR. On a general level, citizens were encouraged to participate regularly in sport on a weekly basis (Redaktion). On a professional level, talented children were sent to specialized schools for their sport in order to develop them into successful athletes (Redaktion). In his 2001 book *Faust's Gold*, Steven Ungerleider states, "East Germany viewed sport and competitive games as an opportunity to gain recognition on the international political stage, while offering its athletes a chance to bring glory to a nation in turmoil" (ch. 4). An East Germany athlete by the name of Waldemar Cierpinsky was a notable distance runner during this time. Cierpinsky won both the 1976 Olympic marathon race in Montreal and the 1980 Olympic marathon in Moscow (Joyce). Due to the high level of success of the GDR in the Olympic Games and the later discovery of the "State Plan 14:25" doping program, it is thought that many of these athletes did not compete fairly (Joyce). Races in Germany started to become popularized with the "25km de Berlin" race in 1981 ("History S 25 Berlin"). Today, some of the well-known distance events in Germany include the Berlin, Dusseldorf, and Frankfurt Marathons.

Germany and the surrounding German-speaking countries play host to a variety of distance running events, including track races, trail runs, triathlon events, and road races. Perhaps one of the most popular distance events in the world, the Berlin Marathon is held in the fall every

year and is well-known in the worldwide running community to be a “fast” course. Since 2003, the men’s marathon world record has come exclusively out of the Berlin Marathon (Robinson). The Berlin Marathon has the distinction of being one of the Abbott World Marathon Majors, along with the Boston, Tokyo, London, New York, and Chicago Marathons. The Berlin Marathon began in 1974, and “on September 30, 1990, three days before reunification, the course of the Berlin Marathon led through the Brandenburg gate and both parts of Berlin” (“Berlin”). The Berlin Marathon was a “symbol of the new sense of free and open access that swept Europe” (Robinson). Today, the Berlin Marathon is so popular that the field of runners is, in part, chosen by random lottery. The largest number of participants in this race has been 44,389 runners (“Berlin”).

Switzerland is a beautiful country with a landscape that readily lends itself to a myriad of outdoor activities; while idyllic training locations abound, St. Moritz, Switzerland is one of the most illustrious. It is not uncommon to hear of elite distance runners traveling to Sankt Moritz, to prepare for major competitions, but what makes this area so popular with athletes? This location has several factors that contribute to its reputation as an advantageous training location. St. Moritz hosted the Winter Olympics in both 1928 and 1948 (“The Olympic Games Put St. Moritz on the Map”). St. Moritz is now home to a training center for athletes that was originally instated to prepare for the Mexico Olympics in 1968 (“High Altitude Training Base St. Moritz”). At 1856 meters in altitude, many runners flock to this area for the performance improvement benefits of training at altitude (“High Altitude Training Base St. Moritz”).

In very recent news, the German-speaking country of Austria was also in the global running spotlight as Eliud Kipchoge attempted and successfully achieved his sub 2-hour marathon in Vienna in October of 2019. This location was chosen due to the favorable conditions of Vienna, including everything from the flatness of the course to the air quality of the city, all factors that may play a part in the success or failure of such a rare and incredible feat (“Why Vienna Was Chosen for Eliud Kipchoge in INEOS 1:59 Challenge”). Vienna was also chosen due to the time zone, as it is only one time zone away from Kipchoge’s main training location (“Why Vienna Was Chosen for Eliud Kipchoge in INEOS 1:59 Challenge”).

While professional-level distance running dominates the spotlight, there is also a vibrant running scene for the everyday runner. One example of this in Germany is the burgeoning “Parkrun” community. Parkrun is a free 5k run coordinated by volunteers that recurs on a weekly basis and is open to the public (“Parkrun Germany”). There are currently 28 Parkrun locations in Germany alone, with other locations all over the world (“Locations”). As of the 8th of December 2019, a total of 17,579 runners had participated in a Parkrun event in Germany (“Locations”). In order to get a sense for one of these events, I attended the local Seewoog Parkrun in Ramstein on December 7th, 2019. The event offered free timing, photographs, and a pace-diverse group of both German and American participants. This 5k course explored the Seewoog Park area of Ramstein and featured both field and forest running. The event embodied a sense of celebration for the running community and presented a forum to both exchange running advice and to meet other runners.

From historical and current-day perspectives, the German-speaking world has played an integral part in the distance running world. The sport continues to be a pastime of many residents and visitors alike. It is clear that there is something for every runner in Germany!