

Homeless man jailed for picking up London Marathon number and crossing finishing line

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4 July 2018

A 38-year-old homeless man, Stanislaw Skupian, has been jailed for 16 weeks. His “crime”?—picking up a discarded London Marathon race number, crossing the finishing line and collecting a finisher’s medal.

In the race run April 22, Jake Halliday, who was taking part, paused to remove his T-shirt some 300 metres short of the finish and in doing so lost his race number. Skupian, a keen jogger who had gone to watch the race, spontaneously joined the race at the 12-mile mark.

Polish national Skupian had been living in England for 11 years. At the end of last year, his life began to fall apart. He sustained a neck injury following a serious car crash. The injury rendered him unable to work, and he lost his catering job. Subsequently, he separated from his wife and seven-year-old son and became homeless. He resorted to living at Heathrow airport, where police arrested him.

On May 18, police took Skupian to Uxbridge Magistrates Court, where he was charged with fraud by false representation for picking up the marathon race finishers’ medal. He was also charged with theft of three inconsequential items, found in his possession when police arrested him at Heathrow. Among these were a primary school worker’s ID card and a pink diary holding overtime hours worked by airline staff. He found these items at the airport, which his solicitor Jameela Jamroz said, given his predicament, he effectively treated as his home. Skupian pleaded guilty to all the charges at the earliest opportunity.

In court, it was revealed that Skupian had suffered a mental breakdown shortly before the marathon race episode. Jamroz told the court he had had ambitions of running in the race and had begun training.

“He wanted to be there, he was excited...to see the runners...by chance he saw a race identifier on the floor. In his excitement he picked [it] up...thinking this was his opportunity to compete in the marathon...a dream come

true.

“He joined in the marathon and completed the latter part of the race. At the time, he hadn’t fully quite appreciated that he was doing anything wrong. He dedicated the completion of it to his seven-year-old son and to homeless people to inspire them that good things can happen to those that are less fortunate,” said his solicitor.

He wanted to present his finisher’s medal to his son, but the spur-of-the-moment decision to pick up a race number brought Skupian into direct conflict with powerful corporate interests.

Established in 1981, the London Marathon’s current main sponsor is multibillion corporation Virgin Money, which has sponsored it since 2010. Several other brands are associated with the race, which provides brand identification and lucrative marketing opportunities. Among these are Lucozade Sport, Fuller’s Brewery, Audible, Adidas and Renault. Main sponsors in the past have included Mars, Gillette and Flora.

The London Marathon race is one of the biggest fund-raising events on the planet. It has long been criticised, however, for the high charges asked by the organisers for guaranteed places for runners.

Civil Society News, a media site dedicated to charity news, stated in an article May 4, “Charities are unhappy after being asked for up to £22,000 to guarantee places for runners in next year’s (2019) London Marathon. ... Charities which lose out in the ballot [for places] can buy advertising packages through London Marathon’s online partner RealBuzz, which includes advertising slots, email marketing and guaranteed places to the marathon.

“Documents seen by Civil Society News show that there are nearly 20 different packages on offer, starting around £2,500 for a package that includes one guaranteed place, and going up to £22,250 for a Gold Package, which includes eight guaranteed places.

“These packages are beyond the reach of many smaller

charities, and at least one large charity has said it will walk away from the event this year. Small charities are understood to be unhappy about the lack of a level playing field, and one urged London Marathon to rethink its model.”

Other criticisms include the amount of money making its way to charities via the race. In April 2010, Channel 4’s investigative news programme “Dispatches” claimed only 25 percent of the money raised in the 2009 race went to charities. A *Daily Mail* article, using the “Dispatches” findings, stated, “[T]hree quarters of the £17.8m received last year (2009) by the company (that runs London Marathon) is eaten up in salaries and costs, many of which are not detailed, while little more than £4 million went on grants to good causes.

“This money comes from charities and individuals who pay London Marathon organisers and an associated company in order to place their runners in the hugely popular race. ...

“Around 20,000 runners secure places in the marathon through a ballot. These places cost £35 each, while 600 charities buy thousands of further places for runners. These cost £300 per place—all of which goes to the London Marathon Company.”

The London Marathon Company raised a series of 38 complaints with broadcasting regulator Ofcom regarding the programme. Reporting in 2011, Ofcom found that “Dispatches” had dealt with the issue fairly and only upheld one of the complaints.

A *Guardian* article in April 2011 revealed that in 2010, London Marathon paid a £250,000 salary to former athlete and then race director Dave Bedford. The article noted that although the London Marathon Company is a relatively small concern with a turnover of around £20 million, the salary paid to Bedford far eclipsed salaries paid by much larger charities such as Oxfam and the RSPCA. The article continued, “Its 2010 profit of £4.6m was given to the marathon charity, which hands out grants to support sports, leisure and recreation activities in London. The remaining £14.5m was swallowed up in costs—including the enormous payment to its best-paid employee.”

Sentencing Skupian, Magistrate Michael O’Gorman said, “The offences are so serious [that] only a prison sentence will suffice.” The comments were echoed by the current chief executive of the London Marathon, Nick Bitel, who pompously declared, “It is good to see that justice has been done.”

Skupian was sentenced to 13 weeks for the fraud and 3

weeks for the theft offences, to be served consecutively. In addition, he was also given a criminal behaviour order banning him from Heathrow Airport for three years unless he had a pre-booked flight ticket for that day. These convictions could impact negatively on his future employment prospects and even his immigration status.

This harsh and unjust punishment meted out to Skupian is not unusual. An April 13 article published on the Criminal Justice Alliance web site points out: “Currently 30,000 people each year go to prison on sentences of less than six months. This represents half of all people sent to prison to serve a sentence. The majority of people serving sentences of less than six months are in prison for non-violent offences. Some common offences that receive a short time in custody are theft and drug offences, linked to underlying problems such as poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, domestic abuse and coercion and poor mental health.

“These sentences can be destructive and harmful, disrupting housing, treatment and family ties. Yet the use of community sentences, which can include requirements such as treatment for mental health or alcohol and drug misuse, has been declining—substantially and rapidly.”

A continuing lack of resources, due to ongoing austerity measures inflicted by the Conservative government and Labour before it, can only exacerbate the situation.

Skupian is a victim of vindictive class justice, punished for his poverty and for problems that spiralled out of his control. While he is in prison, serious, big-time criminals remain free. The London Marathon takes place in the same city where the financial swindlers of the City of London operate. None of them have been brought to justice for the financial skulduggery that contributed to the collapse of the UK and global economy on 2008. Far from being brought to account for any criminality, they were rewarded, with the Labour government putting in place a £1 trillion bailout of the banks.

London is also the location of Grenfell Tower. More than a year on, not a single person has been charged, let alone arrested, for the social murder of 72 people in the capital, despite a mass of evidence already in the public domain pointing to criminality of the political and corporate elite responsible.



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