

THE RUNNER PRESENTS: THE BEST OF THE NEW YORK CITY MARATHON



KEN LEVINSON

Mr. Marathon

Fred Lebow rides a Mercedes pace car through the streets of New York, bullhorn and walkie-talkie at hand, leading the NYC Marathon toward a safe and successful finish in Central Park. Traveling through the roaring crowds and watching the blurry sea of faces, he has the impression of being sucked through a pneumatic tube, and by the time he waves his arms to urge on the winners at the finish, he has run the gamut of emotions. "There is nothing to compare with the marathon," he says.

Lebow, the 53-year-old president of the New York Road Runners Club, has been directing the marathon since 1970, when he and another club official, Vince Chiappetta, drew a starting line in Central Park, donated a few prizes and a couple cases of sodas, and waited to see who showed up. Today Lebow is the most visible figure in road racing, and heads an organization headquartered in a six-story townhouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side that has a budget of more than \$5 million. Under his guidance, the NYRRC conducts more than 150 events annually, including the Mercedes Mile on Fifth Avenue and such programs as the Rikers Island Olympics, track meets for homeless men, and the Urban Running Program for inner-city youths.

Still, there is one thing Lebow has not done. "Marathon Day is always frustrating for me," he says. "Rather than being in a car, I'd much rather run the five-borough marathon for the first time."

Sponsors\*

The seven major NYC Marathon sponsors are Manufacturers Hanover, which also supports the local and national Corporate Challenge Series; Seiko, the official timekeeper; Mercedes-Benz, which provides cars to the winners; Ellesse, the supplier of clothing for officials and volunteers; Perrier, which cracks open some 100,000 green bottles for finishers; the Rudin Family, and The Runner magazine.

The Best Dressed

Some run for fame, some for fortune, some for satisfaction. Some, however, do it for attention. Why else would Roger Bourbon decide one day to don his waiter's outfit and run the route, hard shoes and all, while holding a bottle of Perrier on a tray? Taking the cue, Gary Fanelli made the scene in 1981 in black polyester Blues Brothers garb, borrowing from the movie character, Elwood Blues. He's taken his act on the road, playing Elwood in races across the country.

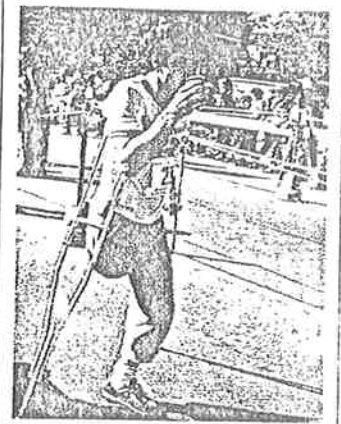
"It started as a lark and grew into something of a personal statement," says Fanelli, who is a national-class racer when playing himself. "Runners can take their sport and themselves too seriously. This is my way of saying there's a time for laughs too."



The latest in marathon fashion.

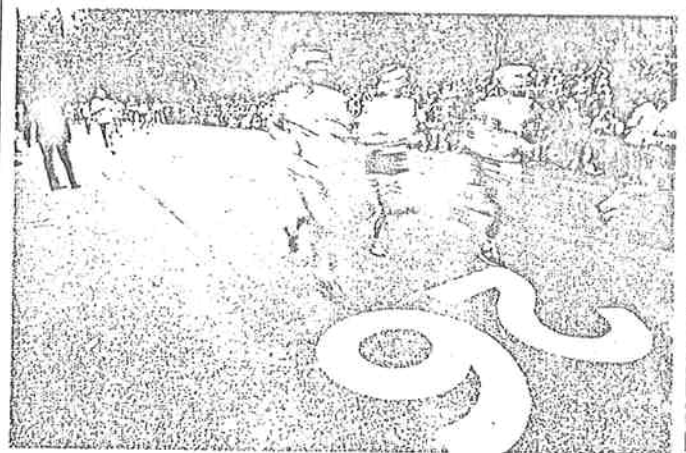
The Best Steps

John Paul Cruz was born with one leg. Linda Down has cerebral palsy. Pat Griskus wears a prosthesis. Each is a competitor and a marathoner. Each is a member of the Achilles Track Club. The Achilles Club was founded in 1981 by Dick Traum, a leg amputee who finished the '76 NYC Marathon with a prosthesis. The club's name is taken from the mythical Greek warrior who was physically invulnerable but for the small area of his heel. From a humble start of four members, the club has grown, under the aegis of the NYRRC, to more than 50 who race the marathon. They assemble early on Marathon Day and set off hours before the official start. Some move on crutches, others with artificial limbs, still others in wheelchairs. Pat Griskus, who starts at the



Achilles Track Club member John Cruz.

regular time with the rest of the field, is the most-noted competitor, having completed a marathon in 3:44 as well as a number of triathlons. The emphasis, says Traum, is on ability, not disability. The Achilles athletes are always a favorite with the crowds, who recognize the achievement in the effort.



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The Best Number

On the West Drive of Central Park, beneath the blue Perrier banner, in bold, white paint is the large number "26". To marathoners who have gone through those many miles of streets,

avenues and bridges, it means one thing: 385 yards to relief. The path to the finish is uphill, but the cheers carry the runners along, and soon they are in the chutes, draped with a silver Mylar blanket and a medal.

The Best Yet Last

Darkness descends, traffic returns to the streets, an evening of Marathon Revelry begins, and local news camera crews flash their lights at the finish line waiting for THE FINAL FINISHER. Competition for this coveted position has been fierce over

the years, with wet and exhausted hopefuls stalling in the final mile to wait out the others, figuring that if you can't be first, you can always be interviewed. And so, as the last seek to be last, the lesson to all is perhaps that to finish, even out of the money, is its own reward.

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