

He's in the Club

Seemingly standing alone amidst the thousands of other runners around him, he laughed inwardly in his delight waiting his turn to cross the Boston Marathon start line. He had a race bib; he had qualified. He was now a part of a select club of marathon runners dating back to 1897. He was anxious to turn right on Hereford, followed by the left on Boylston. He knew he'd smile the entire course's length.

On a clear, breeze-filled morning along Lake Michigan in October 2019, he crossed the marathon finish line, elated to have finished under four hours, though he again had not qualified for Boston in his early 60's age group. He knew to be accepted into Boston he needed a finish time several minutes below the qualification standard, no matter his age group. That realization slipped away when he found his dry clothing and reunited with his family, the day's steady wind introducing increasing cloudiness, as he and his family enjoyed the sunny afternoon. That cloudiness led to winter, winter to a short spring, followed by Covid. Racing went away.

Because of Covid Era, the Boston Athletic Association determined that anyone who ran a qualifying time from September 2019 through November 12, 2021 would be allowed to register. Following his registration and being accepted, he paid the \$205 entry fee. He received confirmation his had a race bib number waiting for him. He had been accepted into the club. He cried joyful tears. He laughed. He burst with self-pride. He was in.

He made purchased airfare for he and his family. He located a hotel in Cambridge suitable to his needs. He made dinner reservations for each night he was in Boston. He learned about Boston beer. Now nervously shifting his feet at the start line in Hopkinton, he reveled in one of his life's finer moments.

Boston's marathon has been raced 126 times, always held on Patriot's Day, the third Monday of every April, the race is the Country's de facto national amateur marathon championship; the race bib symbolizing prior training and performance to be in the race.

Prior to 1923, the race course didn't include Hopkinton, starting in Ashland instead before bounding into South Framingham. Racers and spectators, gamblers and the runner's handlers all boarded the special trains out of Boston to Ashland Station. The course was well defined, the majority of the racing on dirt roads that oftentimes contained too much dust or too much mud. Then, the course became 26.2 miles, necessitating the inclusion of Hopkinton, followed by the eventual

paving of the streets and thoroughfares making up the course. Once rural with gentle farms and town stores, the course now follows one town to the next into the city, main street businesses filling up the land on either side of the runners.

Today, thousands of volunteers corral tens of thousands of runners onto hundreds of buses to the drop off in Hopkinton, whereupon, once started, the thousands of runners stride through Ashland, Framingham, Natick, Wellesley, Newton, Brookline, and into Boston on a west to east direction. Residents of each town make up the majority of the spectators, schlepping to Main Street, Union Street, Waverly, Central, and Washington Streets, and at the big turn onto Commonwealth at the Newton Firehouse before the hills, and along Beacon Street to Hereford and to Boylston.

The less than 50 racers in 1897 are now in excess of 30,000 each year. The original starter drawing a line in the dirt road is now followed by runners corralled with waves, a thousand entrants in each corral; the elite runners usually finished before the final wave's runners start. Not that the image mattered to him or the other runners starting later; marathoners run at their own pace and in their own space.

A knife could cut the amped tension accompanying the day's sunshine-filled cool and windless air he felt in Hopkinton. Swelled with inner-pride from the downhill walk along Grove Street, past the marathon banners, the handmade yard signs encouraging him, the sunscreen station, the last pre-race urinal stop, the volunteers collecting the toss away clothing the runners were discarding, he found his start wave and his corral. He had found his people.

Gazing over the runners, he saw the church steeples, the local landmarks older than most of other states, the Country's flags gently waving proudly, and he began to comprehend just how deep ran the New England love and fervor of America. He glanced down at other runner's feet, noticing the similarity and differences in what other runners were wearing into Boston's Back Bay.

Distance runners are an internally self-disciplined lot. Their training runs fit in with their family, their work, their goals. Solo efforts are the norm with shared weekend runs being treats. Before he lost himself into the marathon haze set out in front of him, he listened to the steady rhythmic slapping of the race shoes, the crowds' ovation coming from both sides of Highway 135. This joyful sound wouldn't stop for the next 26.2 miles, even continuing beyond his finish.

Sitting on a bus earlier that morning, Framingham School District painted in school bus yellow, bellowing out school bus, he was reminded to enjoy the 50 minute ride, to take in the churches, the beautiful homes built long ago when the Boston countryside was rural but now alongside local highways and interstates. He continually reminded himself to relax, forgot about finish time and enjoy his first Boston Marathon adventure.

When the bus turned off the turnpike into Hopkinton, the pressure inside rose in anticipation of getting off, walking to the athlete's village, taking care of business, dining on pre-race nutrition, and attempting to relax, waiting for the Big Announcer to let his wave of runners head towards the start line. He forced himself to slow his walking pace from the bus: he didn't need to finish in front of the runners around him walking to the village in search of a port-a-potty, or a place to sit, and a chance for a moment to relax.

He met new lifelong running friends he would not see again. He found a spot on the ground, attempting to breathe, seeing the blend of colors, hearing the dialects blending together, bee-like drone movements surrounding him. When the time came to shed his warmup top and bottoms, which he would never see again, he merged into the crowd moving towards South Street and eventually to the corral area on a sharp hill on Main Street. To his amazement, there was a sunscreen station to which he helped himself to generous portions on the cloudless late morning and a final port-a-potty, just in case. Completing those tasks, he paused, checking that all was in place. All that remained was to stand with his racemates in the corral, and the start.

Suddenly, he was moving. He hadn't heard the starter's call or the cannon. He only felt the surge of the runners closing in tightly around him; his first of two mosh pits he'd enjoy that day.

Into Ashland, when the downhill settled into a rolling terrain all the way to the Firehouse at Mile 17, he remembered to stay to the right because he'd been told that was the shortest distance to the finish. He discovered that kids on the right side of the road enjoyed being high-fived as their part of the race experience. He touched as many palms as he could, bummed when he missed one, ecstatic when the child exchanged a happy sound, delighting in the moment.

Framingham into Natick gave him more room, allowed him to find a running rhythm, though his head was on a swivel, his eyes and ears thrilled with the never ending stream of spectators who looked at him, clapped for him, yelled to him, cheering his presence in their race. Running well within himself, he learned he was

part of something bigger than himself. The race was one of the oldest in the world and he was permanently a part of it.

He heard the sound long before he realized its significance. The scream tunnel. Wellesley. Every step closer, the roar's volume increased. Then, he saw the edge of the human tunnel, the handmade signs, the faces painted, the human tunnel sharing in the thrill of the endless stream of runners acknowledging their efforts. The private historically women's liberal arts college of some 3,000 young women seemed to swell into many more than that.

More amazing to him was the silence that followed less than a half mile further on. He again found his rhythm, until he suffered passed the Newton Firehouse at the turn onto Commonwealth. That moment was the last moment his running stride felt smooth and easy. The Newton hills will do that to a runner.

He had witnessed the countless police, military, firefighters, medics, and other personnel all along the course, each there to keep him safe. He exchanged the endless smiles with his own, touched the countless hands honoring his run, thanked each uniformed person he noticed.

And he ran. He wasn't fast and he didn't plan on running his best time for a marathon, much less this one. This one was special, to be savored and enjoyed. Like a fine wine, it was a long time coming. There was no particular reason to rush through the experience. The emotion of turning onto Boylston, the roar resounding off the tall buildings along the Back Bay and down to the finish line next to the Public Library and just before the Old South Church into his ears, was elation enough. Or so he thought.

Up Commonwealth and passing Chestnut, up and passing Homer and Walnut, eventually passing Centre and then up and passing Grant Avenue, and then cresting, but not really, until passing the Evergreen Cemetery, he ran down Chestnut Hill into Cleveland Circle. It was all a blur of runners passing him up the hill, him passing them down the hills, and all of them slowly suffering together into Boston. Where was that Citgo sign, again?

Somewhere along Beacon street, on the left of him where he saw trolley tracks, he heard the crescendo of sound and youth that became the Boston College Mosh pit, complete with beer. Feeling it would take until Tuesday to finish, he made eye contact with the "beer garden" captain, and with a sudden sprint and a semi-leap, he girded the temporary railing, landed into the surprised collegiate mosh pit, high-fived all the hands he could reach, a can of brew pressed into his hands before he was hoisted back over the railing, beer still intact. It was consumed.

Right on Hereford. He saw the street sign! And it was uphill. Left on Boylston. He saw the sign! Glancing down the street, the finish so close and yet, so far, the spectators' final cheers, yells, and roars melding into a reverberating sound off the buildings, he saw the finish line painted into the street. It couldn't be missed. Raising his arms, tears swelling up within him, he was a Boston Marathon finisher. No one could take that from him. The medal, the jacket, the shirt, the joy.

Finisher's medal around his neck, through the blur, he saw his wife and his daughter. Together, they walked to the T, congratulated by passersby. Sitting in the train car to their stop, the passengers congratulated him. Walking into the hotel, the guests and staff congratulated him. Wearing his Boston race shirt and his medal to dinner, the patrons and wait staff congratulated him. Swelling with pride and the pleasure of recognition, he felt joyful tears coming.

He was full-fledged member of the club.