

An Historical Perspective of Hingham's First July 4th Road Race

By Thomas E. Belyea, GHS

From the Hingham Journal, Posted January 18, 2006

They called it the Hingham Marathon. It was the only race of its kind. It predated the Falmouth Road Race by 14 years. No precedent had been set on what to call it. The mile was considered a long distance race, even though the four minute mark had been broken five years earlier. High school athletics had no organized long distance running program beyond the mile. There was no cross-country team, nor 2-mile event in track. That would come in the mid-60s. Metric measured running distances had not arrived yet. 5K or 10K meant the number of strikeouts by a Red Sox pitcher. The thinking of the day was, if the Boston Marathon was 26+ miles long, a 4-mile road race must be a marathon also.

On July 4, 1959, Hingham's first road race was run at 12 noon on a hot, humid day. A reluctant parade committee had given the go ahead, as long as it was run after the parade traffic had subsided, at the persistence of a determined Frank Everton, chairman of the marathon that day. It was started at Queen Anne's Comer and ended on Pleasant Street at the 4-mile mark in front of the flagpole at Hingham High School. One running stopwatch logged the time of the first four runners, and the time was announced as they crossed the finish line. There were safety concerns for the 12 runners to share Route 228 with Nantasket Beach and Paragon Park traffic, so a police escort was provided. The inexperienced runners were unfamiliar with a 4-mile footrace, so Max Ricketts, a high school miler, "took an early lead in the first annual marathon ...and was never headed," winning in 24:35.

No women ran that day. That barrier would be broken 14 years later in 1972, when Charlotte Lettis and her sister Paula, a Hingham High junior, would be the first females recorded to finish. Marathon chairman Paul Hickey would record their times in a field of 32 entrants. The following year, 1973, Wendy Anderson would be presented with a corsage for her 31:43 winning time. In 1977, the 19th year, 18 women would finish in a field of 141 entrants. The Lettis sisters, would run again. In 1982, the 24th running, Paula Lettis-Meyer would win the overall women's, along with her husband, Greg Meyer, who would win the overall men's (in 1983, Greg Meyer would win the Boston Marathon). The infusion of women into the road race would continue to rise as footwear and running gear for women were introduced by the sports industry, and running and exercise became a national pastime.

Physically challenged entries would be recorded in later years. In 1983, the 25th year, "in a remarkable show of courage and strength" Hingham's Adam Linsky would complete the race on crutches. His determination would be warmly acknowledged at the finish line. He would repeat the effort again in 1984, and for years to come. In 1996, he would lead the entire road race, wearing the number 1. 1984 would also be the year that Boston Marathoner Bob Hall, and in later years, Hingham's Mike Leonard, would introduce us to the custom-built racing rig, and a new way to see a world without obstacles.

During the early years, the July 4th Road Race was open only to residents of the town. The spirit of this exclusion was to keep it an amateur event as an encouragement for residents of all abilities to participate. In 1959, on that first day, Norman Fairhurst, an African-American,

finished in the middle of a field of 12. In 1961, Hingham's third running, 10-year-old Carlo Casale would win the hearts of an approving crowd with a last-place (sixth) sprint to the finish line. In 1970, Hingham's 12th running, Jim Patterson's first-place in the 16-25 age group would be disallowed because he was no longer a Hingham resident. Instead, first place would be awarded to Richard Murphy, who reportedly ran with a hairline fracture. In 1976, the 18th running, in a display of the best in competition and sportsmanship of the day, Scott MacKenzie and Bruce MacLean, both previous winners, would run a "Dead Heat" (tie) in 21:42 (4.3 miles), in a field of 81 runners.

The starting and finish lines, race course and distance would change many times. In 1964, the sixth year, the starting line would be moved from Queen Anne's corner to Route 228 between the middle school (then called the new South Junior High) and Resurrection Parish, and would end with a lap around the high school track at Michaelson Field. In 1974, the 16th running, the finish line would be changed to Loring Hall underneath the flag (today the flag cable is attached to Hingham Institution for Savings). The Hingham Jaycees' Field Day at Michaelson Field would grow to more than 150 entries, and conditions would become unsafe for road-race runners to complete the final lap around the track. The numbers of road race entrants would grow also, from 81 in 1973 to 141 in 1974. As a result of "...brutal , hot weather conditions" in 1974, and repeated accounts of heat sickness over previous years, the 16-year practice of a 12 noon start time would be changed to 8 a.m. in 1975. Today the start time is at 7 a.m.

The terms "fun run" and "personal best" did not exist on that first day. Nor were winning categories by age and sex. Nor electronic timekeeping. The popularity of running would continue to rise, and more people would run longer distances. In 1979, Hingham's "Marathon" would become an obsolete name, and a new era would come. A new group of volunteers, runners themselves, would pour new life into the event, and would want their own identity. In 1980, the 22nd year, the race was under the auspices of the Hingham Striders, who would invite the outside world to run with us. Everyone, professional and amateur, resident and nonresident, young and old, could run and be recognized within their own age and sex grouping. In the coming years, they would bring it in step with the times, and take it to the next level, and turn it into the major, inclusive event it is today. They would obtain business sponsorships, sell T-shirts, and charge entry fees, turning it into a fund-raising event for the benefit of town recreation, and use the funds to buy band uniforms, exercise equipment and provide scholarships. Throughout the '70s the number of entrants would continue to rise upward, from 37 in 1970, to 348 in 1979. The Striders would produce 532 runners in 1980, and raise entries to a record 856 in 1993. In 1994 they would turn a finely tuned stewardship over to the Recreation Commission, and to Jill Drohan, director of Recreation.

The Striders would be the first volunteer organization to oversee the July 4th Road Race, and their intervention would be timely. With 174 entrants in 1978, and 348 entrants in 1979, and a growing number of unregistered "walk-ons," the road race would outgrow individual stewardship and an organization would be needed to manage the size of this event. It was no longer a stepchild of the town-funded July 4th Parade Committee, which would be faced with the challenge of seeking private funding sources to pay for entries in the parade. Prior to 1980, individual members of the volunteer July 4th Parade Committee would be "Chairmen of the Marathon" who would organize and run the event. They also would write the road-race results for the Parade Committee in the early Hingham Journal articles. The succession of stewardship,

or overseeing administrative management of the footrace, would occur as follows: Frank Everton (founder), 1959-1960; James Kersey, 1961-1967; Paul Hickey, 1968-1978; Jean Gilbert, 1979; Hingham Striders, 1980-1993; Hingham Recreation, 1994-Present.

This year (2006) will mark the 48th continuous year this race has been run. Records in The Hingham Journal, Hingham Mirror and Hingham Mariner verify each year it has taken place. There are two years that it was in jeopardy of cancellation. In 1964, the sixth running, there were only three runners. 1978, the 20th year, was another matter. Due to a "heavy nor'east downpour," the July 4th Parade and other festivities were postponed to the following Sunday. Everything got rained out - except "the annual Marathon ...which went on as scheduled" with 174 entrants.

There is more to be written about the history of the July 4th Road Race. The first runners from the 1959 race are now in their 60s. The answer to how we should remember them is found in how we want to be remembered. Some information - dates, times, distances and names - can be obtained from newspaper records. However, there is much more that can come from an oral history, which is buttoned up in the memory of those who ran or observed the day they were there. Eyewitness accounts, anecdotes, artifacts and documentation, including from some of you reading this article, can attest to the authenticity of the July 4th Road Race. So please come forward and share your story. Help this town leave a legacy of a full, rich and complete history of one of the oldest run footraces. Records are available for public viewing at the Hingham Library. Write to the Hingham Journal, or contact Tom Belyea at email: tbelyea@aol.com.

Frank Everton's Hingham Journal article dated Thursday, July 9, 1959, reads: "Although originally there were 20 entries in this first running of an event which it is hoped will be a permanent feature of the July 4th celebration, 12 boys, ranging in age from 15 to 25, toed the mark and all finished the race." In 2004 there would be an estimated 1,800 entrants fitting into 22 categories, including one for Ian Menzies, for ages 80-98.

This article was written in loving tribute to my brother, David A. Belyea, who on July 4, 1960, ran into history and became a champion, winning Hingham's second Road Race. It is dedicated to the many who have run, whether for guts, glory or just for fun.

Tom Belyea resides on Sycamore Lane in Bradley Woods (not Bradley Paahk). Although not a native, he has called Hingham his hometown for the last 52 of his 57 years.

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