

# First Women of the Race

By Thomas E. Belyea

Copyright by Thomas E. Belyea 2009.

GateHouse News Service

Posted July 02, 2009 at 12:25 p.m.

Reprinted with permission from the Hingham Journal

When Hingham Marathon Chairman Paul Hickey reported that "Two Girls" had crossed the finish line in 1972, it was a first, and history in the making for Hingham's fourteen year old July 4th Road Race. Hickey carefully recorded, "A field of 34 runners, including two girls, went to the line under ideal conditions.

Two sisters, running for the first time in Age group II were Charlotte Lettis, a UMass student, and New England Intercollegiate Cross Country Titlist, crossing the line in 24:17(4.3 miles), and her sister Paula, a Hingham High junior, checking in at 30:38." Hickey knew this was a first, since he had been "Marathon" Chairman since 1968, and had helped prior Chairman, James Kersey, run the event. Other than this brief acknowledgement, these "Two Girls" were never honored as the first women to break new ground for this achievement. Gender categories by age groupings had not yet been established.

The entry of the first women in Hingham' road race coincided with the establishment of the Hingham High girls track program, and nationally with the emergence of American women in distance racing. The Boston Marathon officially recognized women in a separate, competitive gender category in 1972. However, it was Bobbi Gibb (1966, 1967) and then Karen Switzer (1967) who disguised their gender and broke the barrier by beating men before Boston seriously considered women as competitors.

The Lettis sisters' first of firsts was an introduction for what was to come, and any perceptions that yesteryear's women in Hingham's road race were not quality runners would be put to rest. The Lettis sisters came back separately in later years to win the Women's Overall decisively and receive full recognition as champions. Charlotte's remarkable 26:25 win at Hingham in 1977 was on the same course as today's race, but was four tenths of a mile longer than today's 4.6 mile distance. Her time remains as one of the best ever for the event. Moreover, it was a warm up for her second place showing that August in the five year old, 7 mile, Falmouth Road Race, besting an aspiring Olympic Gold Medalist and Boston Marathon winner, Joan Benoit, but behind the winner of the day, Kim Merritt. All three top women runners that year set a new course record at Falmouth, which even then was a reality test for the best in competitive running. Although her sizzling times at Hingham and Falmouth were breathtaking, Charlotte Lettis drew national attention just two weeks before her 1972 win at Hingham, becoming the first woman ever to win the prestigious and grueling Mount Washington Road Race.

Charlotte's sister Paula came back to win the Women's Overall ten years later in 1982, the 24th year, as Paula Lettis-Meyer. Her husband, Greg Meyer, won the Men's Overall that year also, making them the first husband-wife duo on record to take home such an honor. Greg Meyer went on to win the Boston Marathon in 1983, becoming the last American to win the nation's most prestigious race.

The phenomenon of women runners as athletes was emerging slowly at the local level. The Lettis sisters' presence at the finish line gave the go ahead for more women to enter Hingham's Road Race. Searching for the right way to properly recognize women as competitive runners was further demonstrated when Wendy Anderson, a Hingham High senior and product of the girls' track program, was given a corsage for her 31:43 victory in 1973, in a field of 32 male and female entrants. In 1974 she placed second behind Nina Lamborghini, a high school athletic standout. In 1975, in the best of sportsmanship of the day, Wendy and her sister Allyson tied in a 33:10 "Dead Heat", reminding us that victory has more than one meaning. No women were recorded in 1976 as having entered or completed the race.

By 1977, the 19th year, women runners were a regular feature in Hingham's Road Race with 18 female entrants, and the first separate women's category was established. This same year the all time champion with the most wins ever was about to surface. Leila Staunton Walden came in second in 1977, but went on to win the Women's Overall in '78, '79, and '80. Her record of three Overall Wins and nine wins in the 30-39, 40-49, and 50-59 age group categories, spanning a 24 year period and ending in 2002, remains unmatched today, in both male and female categories.

The event has showcased notable Hingham female athletes who went on to become key figures in women's intercollegiate sports. In 1985, Nina Lamborghini (1974 winner), field hockey and lacrosse coach at Tufts University, coached her lacrosse team to become the ECAC No. 2 team in the nation. She also served as coach in the U.S. Olympic Field hockey Development Camps for a number of years. The 1998 Women's Overall winner, triathlete Kelly Amonte, is lacrosse coach at No.1 Northwestern.

Charlotte Lettis became a national caliber runner in women's distance racing in the seventies. In 1975 she placed 5th in the National Cross Country Championships, and won the inaugural all women's L'Eggs Minimarathon in New York city.

Ranking nationally in the mile and 1500, she made the 1976 Olympic trials.

Today Charlotte Lettis Richardson coaches women of all ages in distance running. Her experiences in breaking the gender barrier led her to become a filmmaker. Her 2005 documentary, "Run Like A Girl" is about three generations of women distance runners, covering the fifties to present day. She resides in Portland, Oregon.

The last Women's Overall Winner from Hingham was Christina Seremetis (2005). Her 26:57 time is third best behind Linda Shesky(25:37-1988) and Charlotte Lettis(26:25-1977). In 2003, Hingham's own Jennifer Fay won in 29:03. Her best time(28:15) came in a 2004 heartbreaker, and was not enough to edge Scituate's Holly Madden(28:10), who repeated the Women's Overall crown in 2008 with an ironic 28:20. High school standout Allison Donovan had back to back victories in 1999(30:23) and 2000(28:39).

These were the first women of Hingham's Road Race. The above information was retrieved from microfilm copies of original Hingham Journal accounts written shortly after events occurred. Additional information also came from: The Hingham Journal's "Yesterdays" column, Falmouth Road Race records, public domain and other sources, including Hingham High School yearbooks.

Copyright 2009 The Hingham Journal. Some rights reserved.