

Rob Rose Column - 10/18/07

It seems that the only time that a running event gets the attention of the general public is when something goes terribly wrong. Competitions such as Olympic marathons, the Boston Marathon and the World Championships, although pinnacle events, appeal to a specific audience and are confined to the sports page. But when catastrophe strikes, it suddenly takes center stage, front page.

That's what occurred last week when disaster struck the Chicago Marathon and the Army Ten Miler in Washington, D.C. In both races, a runner collapsed and eventually died. In Chicago, the runner had a preexisting heart condition that contributed to his death. The cause of death of the Army Ten Mile runner, who collapsed within 200 yards of the finish line, has not been determined yet.

Chicago has long been a destination marathon for Attleboro area runners and 18 locals journeyed there last week. Most experienced the most unusual race of their lives.

"All I can say," said North Attleboro's Dave Santoro, "it was a mess." Chicago had a myriad of problems as record high temperatures wrecked havoc with the race. Over 10,000 of the 45,000 entrants never made it to the starting line, deferring to the ninety degree heat and extreme humidity. "When I arrived in Chicago the local news reports warned of a warm day but the race director said they were prepared for all conditions," said Foxboro's Kevin Coughlan. That turned out to be a case of bold overconfidence.

"I was running with (Foxboro's) Rich Leslie and was sweating profusely by three miles," said Coughlan. "I realized at that point that there was no point in running for a particular time." Several hours into the race, conditions worsened and race resources were quickly extinguished. "The water stops were overwhelmed with runners taking several cups of water to drink and pour on their heads," said Coughlan. "I'm sure that contributed to them running out of water. I began to see several runners in great distress on the course and many seeking medical assistance. There was a constant sound of ambulance sirens throughout the race."

Approximately four hours after the race started, race director Carey Pinkowski in coordination with the medical director, canceled the race. Runners who did not make the half way mark were diverted back to the start / finish area. Those who got beyond that were ordered to stop and walk or take a bus to the finish. Locals such as Coughlan, Santoro, Mansfield's Leah Myers and Norton's Steve Salzillo were at different points in the race when that occurred.

Santoro was close to finishing. "I was very surprised when I tried to take the right turn onto Roosevelt Avenue, 300 yards from the finish line," he said. "There was a line of police trying to divert us and telling us that the race was over. I muttered some expletives about the race not being over and went right between them along with a number of other runners. I can understand trying to help those that haven't made the halfway mark by noon but trying to stop runners 300 yards from the finish line is absurd."

"By mile 16 I was walking and the police and firemen were telling runners over a bullhorn to stop running because the race was canceled," said Coughlan. "They said that they couldn't guarantee everyone's safety since all ambulances and water supplies were exhausted. They instructed runners to walk it in or get on a bus. They said the clock was off (not true) and everyone would still get a medal."

Salzillo, competing in his first marathon, was at twenty miles as was Myers. "As we progressed one saw more people walking than running," said Myers. "Runners sitting on the curb with their heads in their hands feeling defeat but found it within themselves to keep pushing. At first you hear that the race was canceled, waves of emotion surface, from 'Thank God' to, 'You have to be kidding me' ... the weeks, hours and personal accomplishment wasted."

Santoro (3:53:41), Salzillo (4:57:51), Coughlan (5:10:50) and Myers (5:53:22) survived to complete probably their slowest marathons and all but two locals finished. Santoro, who ran Boston several years ago under similar adverse conditions, was in good position to make a comparison. "Boston actually felt worse due to the midday sun beating on you the entire race and the hills taking their usual toll on the legs."

One would believe that after all the turmoil, Chicago's reputation would be tarnished and it's destination appeal would suffer. Not in Coughlan's opinion. "I thought that the directors and volunteers did an admirable job under the circumstances," he said. "I would certainly participate in the Chicago Marathon in the future." Hopefully it won't make front page news.

Footnotes - Congratulations to North Attleboro's Joyce Barrett, who continued her prodigious streak last week when she ran her 31st consecutive Tufts 10K; she is one of only 15 women to have completed all the races in the series This Sunday, the NC Pacers will host their joint training run with the Wampanoag Road Runners and Hopkinton Running Club at the Big Apple in Wrentham; runners can choose to run four, eight or twelve mile routes; check out the NC Pacer website (www.ncpacers.org) for more info and directions; all runners are welcome the Wampanoag Road Runners have begun their 10th 'winter' training run season; runners embark at approximately 6:15 p.m. from DB

Sports on Kelley Blvd. in North Attleboro for a six mile out and back trek through the 'Cliffs' and the North Attleboro Industrial Park; call Sean McNamara (508-222-5561) for more information; the event is held every Wednesday until daylight savings returns in the spring; runners of all abilities are invited to attend ...