

November 1, 2005

30 Years Later, Still Run Citywide

By FRANK LITSKY

The idea started with Ted Corbitt and George Spitz, two distance runners with vision. It was refined by Fred Lebow, who became marathon running's extraordinary idea man. It caught the attention of Percy Sutton, then the Manhattan borough president, who found seed money from the Rudins, the real estate family.

As a result, in 1976, the New York City Marathon changed its route and became a race through all five boroughs. Since then, it has grown into one of the world's most important races.

On Sunday, for the 30th year, the 26 miles 385 yards of the marathon will start on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in Staten Island, wind through Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan and the Bronx and bend back to Manhattan for the finish line in Central Park.

At a luncheon in Manhattan yesterday, Spitz, Sutton, Bill Rudin and others told of the transformation of the race, which was run entirely in Central Park from 1970 to 1975.

In 1976, Corbitt had an idea to incorporate all the city's boroughs into the race, perhaps as a five-borough competition among runners. Spitz went a step further, proposing a course to include all five boroughs. Lebow did not like the idea, and when Spitz asked him how much money he would need to finance such a race, Lebow said \$20,000, figuring that was far too much to raise. Sutton said he would find the money, and the Rudins did even more by putting up \$25,000.

At first, Lebow, who died in 1994, said that he "thought it would be an exercise in futility." He changed his mind, and he found many obstacles.

It turned out that there was no timing setup for the finish line, so Allan Steinfeld, later Lebow's successor as race director, volunteered; he recruited his dentist and a high school teacher to help out. When Lebow feared that the draw on the Pulaski Bridge would open during the race, he parked his car on it.

In the mid-70's, there were perhaps only a thousand serious marathon runners in the country. Lebow knew he needed marathon stars, and he got them. One was Frank Shorter, the Olympic champion in 1972 and a silver medalist at the 1976 Games. Another was Bill Rodgers, considered America's rising star.

Rodgers recalled yesterday that he knew little about the race before he ran it.

"They said it would end at Tavern on the Green, and I knew where that was," he said. "They said it would start on the Verrazano Bridge. I think I had driven over it, but I didn't know where it was. I thought the race was a great idea. The sport was growing and the running boom was happening."

Before the 1976 race, Rodgers discovered he had forgotten his running shorts. He borrowed a pair of soccer shorts and won the race in 2 hours 10 minutes 9 seconds. He also won it the next three years, by margins of a quarter-mile or more.

That first five-borough marathon attracted almost 2,100 runners; 1,600 finished, including 63 women. This Sunday's race has 37,000 entries, and thousands were turned away.

Rodgers will be there for the race, but as a spectator at the finish line.

"I'm one of the old-time fans of the marathon," he said. "I love to see the race, the nitty-gritty."

He promised he would not run a marathon again. His 58th and last was in 1999 at the Boston Marathon, which he won four times (1975, '78, '79 and '80). In 1999, he dropped out atop the infamous Heartbreak Hill, with fewer than six miles to the finish, because the conditions had drained his energy - it reached 70 degrees that day.

"I can always do a marathon," he said, " but I don't want to race a marathon. Last year, I couldn't even run shorter races because I never took time off to give my body a break, and it caught up with me."

With the same youthful look and long, sandy and unruly hair, the 57-year-old Rodgers still runs 40 to 60 miles a week. His pace is eight minutes a mile, the equivalent of a 3:30 marathon.

"I'm not a marathoner anymore," he said. "All I know is that I was a beat-up marathoner who bombed out. You never really forget."