

AT THE RACES: THE MANCHESTER ROAD RACE

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For many runners, the Manchester Road Race represents true Thanksgiving tradition. Much like turkey, football, and Black Friday, the Thanksgiving holiday wouldn't quite be the same for these runners without an early morning drive to Manchester for the state's oldest road race. This year's race was another classic, with sunny skies and cooperative temperatures in the mid 40's greeting the nearly 10,000 runners for the 67th annual event. Here's a look at what transpired:

9:50am and Main Street is crowded with thousands of runners jostling to get their position on the crowded starting line. Manchester's recent efforts to seed top runners within two corrals up front based on past finish times helps, but the system is still somewhat flawed. Pens designating sub-30 and sub-35 minute runners require a red or yellow card for admittance. Cards are issued based on past Manchester performances; the problem is, cards are mailed to non-registered runners with past credentials, and thus become easily transferable runners that don't possess these same credentials. Still, access to these starting positions is considered a privilege, and the wide streets make for a smooth, 10:00am start. It takes 8 minutes and 43 seconds for the very last runner to cross the starting line.

The elite field is loaded with talent, comprised of national and world class runners and top collegiate athletes. Some are experienced Manchester race veterans; while others are young runners looking to measure their fitness levels against some of the world's best. Manchester has historically attracted a strong contingent of Irish runners, but an injury to 2-time winner Mark Carroll sidelines Ireland's best chance in 2003. The gun goes off on time and thousands are off and running. As the runners make a left turn onto Highland Street, they are joined by three men painted from head to toe, wearing only underwear and running shoes (with all the paint, the underwear part could not be verified). The leaders pay little attention to this publicity stunt, as a pack of two dozen men establish themselves up front with a brisk opening mile split of 4:27. But those familiar with the Manchester race know that the running has just begun, as the 2nd mile climb up the Highland Street hill separates the contenders from the pretenders. Alan Webb, the 20 year-old Nike prodigy who owns the fastest high school mile time ever run, has the attention of everyone around him, and as the lead group jockeys for position, Webb's miler speed is clearly on the mind of the marathon guys. Only one American has won at Manchester since 1980 (Seekonk's John Gregorek in 1993), and Webb clearly has the credentials to become the next. Anthony Famigletti of Medford, NY is the first to get restless and moves to the front at the bottom of the hill. But most of the lead group covers the move, and defending champion Andrew Letherby of Australia soon begins to establish himself, quickly whittling the lead group down to seven with a 5:04 uphill 2nd mile. Webb is comfortably tucked behind Famigletti, Letherby, and 20 year-old Patrick Nthiwa of Kenya at the front of the group.

As the runners turn left at the hill's crest, the racing begins to get more serious. A 5 person break quickly takes place on the steep downhill stretch, with Letherby maintaining his paper thin lead and Nthiwa shadowing his every step. Webb slides into 3rd and looks poised, with recent Arkansas grad Dan Lincoln and Brookline, MA native Jonathan Riley giving chase. Letherby, nearing the final stages of his preparation for the December 7th Fukuoka Marathon, knows what it takes to win at Manchester, and he knows that marathon runners need to force the issue at this point. Wait too long and the track runners will have you for a Thanksgiving lunch on this course.

Letherby is relentless in his quest to break away from his contenders, hammering through a 3 mile split of 13:59 with only Nthiwa in tow. Webb, Lincoln, and Riley valiantly give chase, but an 8 second deficit might be too much to make up given the downhill remainder of the 4.748 mile course. At Mile 4 (4:24), no positions have changed for the top five, and the runners make the final turn back onto Main Street for the deceiving long final home stretch run to the finish. With less than 200 meters remaining, Nthiwa emerges from Letherby's shadow and makes his final charge. But Letherby isn't done yet, and he digs down to find one more gear and matches Nthiwa stride for stride. But Nthiwa gives one final response, and moves back past Letherby for good, hitting the tape in 21:37, a second up on the defending champion. Webb, with a clear view of the battle that just transpired in front of him, holds on for 3rd in 21:53. Riley just misses nipping Webb at the tape and settles for 4th (21:53), with Lincoln, the NCAA 10K and steeple champion while at Arkansas, claiming 5th in 22:02.

Meanwhile, Emile Monodor is having a field day with her competition in the women's race. The 22 year-old Canadian 5,000 meter specialist took command on the Highland Street hill and never relinquished it, chasing only Cathy O'Brien's mark of 24:06 the rest of the way. Monodor finished in 23:59, the fastest time ever run at Manchester and good enough for 30th place overall. Australia's Natalie Harvey is a distant 2nd in 24:32, with recent Yale graduate Kate O'Neill 3rd in 24:46 (believed to be the fastest time by a Connecticut resident ever at Manchester). Defending champion Amy Rudolph had been struggling with injuries and finished 6th in 24:56, while 13 year-old sensation Briana Jackucewicz of Farmingdale, NY runs 26:26 to finish 14th female and wins her division by over 7 minutes. Top area performances include former Stonington High standout Tyler McCabe (20th in 23:05), Lebanon's Eric Blake (28th in 23:54), and Waterford's Carolyn Verdon (160th in 28:24). The newly implemented chip timing system makes for great improvement to the normally hectic finish line congestion.

Post-race comments were complimentary of Manchester's competition, crowd support, and tradition. "It was an awesome race", said Webb of his first ever professional road race appearance. "They (the race) treated me awesome; my host family

(the Cardiff's) were great. I'm not used to racing long uphill stretches, but I'm happy with my race today." Webb plans to compete in the U.S. 10K Championships a week later before concentrating on building a base for next year's track season and a possible shot at the U.S. Olympic team at 1500 meters. But don't be surprised if Manchester is on Alan Webb's race schedule in 2004: "I'd like to comeback again next year and hopefully win it one year", proclaimed Webb. Ryan Bak, last season's Division III National XC Champion while at Trinity who finished 15th overall, had returned home to Connecticut from his Team USA training group in Monterrey Bay, California and was also impressed with Manchester's atmosphere. "It was an unbelievable atmosphere," commented Bak after his first Manchester. "It was probably one of the strongest fields they've had, and my opening mile might have been a little too quick, but it was nice to have the support of the hometown fans".

Manchester's storied history is also what keeps many of the runners coming back each year. Former Fitch High School standout Amby Burfoot, the 1968 Boston Marathon winner, Executive Editor of Runner's World Magazine, and owner of a record 9 Manchester victories between 1968-1977, completed his 41st consecutive Manchester race. "There's a lot of history here," commented Burfoot, whose goal of breaking Charlie Robbins streak of 51 straight is in his radar. "This race has always had the tremendous support of the entire community. Even when there were 200 runners competing, it was always the Boston Marathon in the spring and Manchester in the fall that were the most important races on my schedule". Burfoot finished in a very respectable time of 32:15. Way Hedding, 54 and John Brown, 45 again donned their Blues Brothers outfits for Manchester. "We've often been imitated but never equaled," proclaimed Hedding as he enjoyed a post race beer in the Army-Navy Club. "The reason we run as the Blues Brothers every year is because we're blood brothers at heart," explained Brown. "Those two have been around this race more often than clothes in a Maytag dryer," commented Uncasville's Kevin Gallerani, who ran his 25th consecutive race. Too bad the Blues Brothers' suits haven't seen a Maytag washer in all those years. Clem McGrath, a former State Open XC Champion, plans on racing Manchester at least through 2006 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his first Manchester race in 1956, where he finished 16th to earn top high school honors. "Thanksgiving turkey wouldn't taste the same without running Manchester first", said McGrath. This year's race had 10,879 entries (accepting no race day entries for the first time) and 9,978 official finishers. If your holiday schedule permits, make the Manchester Road Race part of your Thanksgiving tradition in 2004.

Racing Roundup

NCAA Cross-Country action came to a conclusion last month. Colorado sophomore Dathan Ritzenhein outdistanced Stanford junior Ryan Hall to win the men's' race, while Marblehead, MA native Shalane Flanagan of North Carolina successfully defending her NCAA title in the women's race. The Stanford men dominated their race, posting a 2-3-4-5-10 finish to easily outdistance runner-up Wisconsin (174). Stanford, lead by Sara Bei's 3rd place finish, also claimed the women's team title by 8 points over Brigham Young. Local standouts that competed included Danbury's Andre Laboy at St. Joseph's (76th), Yale's Lucas Meyer (102nd), and former E.O. Smith standout Hunter Spencer at Kentucky (144th). Killingly's Meghan Owen finished 170th overall as a freshman at North Carolina.....Congratulations again go out to Griswold senior Gavin Coombs, whose 3rd place finish in the East Regional race of the Footlockers XC Championships in Van Courtland Park earned him a place in the national finals in San Diego on December 13th. Conard (West Hartford) senior Ahmed Haji, a 2-time New England XC Champion, finished 8th to also make the cut, with the top 8 runners from each of the four regions earning All-America honors and the right to compete in San Diego. Maine's Ben True, who finished one seconds back of Haji in the New England race, held off Massachusetts Victor Gras to win the race, with a mere 8 seconds separating the top 8 finishers. Ledyard's Dave Holliday (72nd), East Lyme's Matt Warren (92nd), Griswold's Tradelle Ward (120th), and Woodstock's Kevin Graham (162nd) were the top area finishers. Fitch senior Betsy Boucher finished 119th in the girl's race.....One last reminder that the annual Tommy Toy Fund Run takes place on Friday, December 12th at 7:00pm starting and finishing at Billy Wilson's Ageing Still on 57 Broadway in Norwich. Entry fee for the event is a new, unwrapped toy. See www.moheganstriders.org for more information.

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