

REMEMBERING JOHNNY “THE ELDER” KELLEY

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Johnny Adelbert Kelley had just settled in at the Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Cape Cod, his new place of residence since leaving his Dennis, Massachusetts home. It would be only three hours later that Kelley, an athlete admired throughout the New England distance running community, passed away at the age of 97. His running resume places Kelley at the pinnacle of the record books; a two-time Boston Marathon champion, beloved figure in Boston with a record 61 marathon starts and 58 finishes, a two-time Olympian, and National Distance Running and Road Runners Club of America Hall of Fame member. His Boston wins in 1935 and 1945, coupled by seven runner-up efforts and 18 top 10 finishes, made him a Boston legend. His longevity in the sport was unparalleled; he was 84 years of age when he ran his final Boston Marathon after nearly seven decades of racing. His passing on October 6th marked the loss of one of the most charismatic characters in the history of the Boston Marathon.

Born September 6, 1907, Kelley was the oldest in a family of five boys and five girls growing up in West Medford, Massachusetts. As a youngster, Kelly tried both football and baseball but was too small to recognize success in either. He tried running, and after a high school track career at both Medford High School and Arlington High School, Kelley joined the North Medford Track Club. It was the start of a running career that would demonstrate the long-term powers of hard work and determination. As impressive as Kelley's longevity was, it was the quality of his race efforts and his persistence of excellence despite early setbacks, which would set him apart. After running 3:17 in his debut attempt at the 26.2 mile distance in 1928 at age 20, Kelley would fail to finish his first two Boston Marathon attempts in 1928 and 1932. A year later, determined to be part of the lead group, Kelley paid the price for his aggressive tactics and faded badly, but managed to finish 37th in 3:03:56. Despite the disappointment, he would return to Boston and finish 2nd overall the very next year with his best effort to date, running 2:36:50. Kelley would continue to improve as a distance runner, claiming his first Boston Marathon title in 1935 in a time of 2:32:07. That race was not without drama. Approaching the race's final stretch, Kelley, who had openly experimented with various dieting techniques aimed at improving race performance, came to a complete stop in Kenmore Square and violently vomited 15 chocolate glucose tablets he had earlier ingested, costing him the course record. It was his 1936 race that coined the phrase "Heartbreak Hill"; Kelley had passed race leader Ellison "Tarzan" Brown on the Newton hills late in the race and offered a simple, good-natured pat on the back to his opponent, who was paying the price for his record paced start. But inspired by the gesture, a rejuvenated Brown would storm back to win, with a heart-broken Kelley fading to fifth. Boston Globe sportswriter Jerry Nason's reference to those final miles as Heartbreak Hill would be forever referenced at the Boston Marathon.

Kelley would go on to finish 18th at the 1936 Olympic Games Marathon in Berlin, followed by another runner-up finish at Boston that following spring. He would record his personal best marathon time of 2:28:18 in 1948, and placed an amazing ninth in 2:52:12 at the age of 50. He would complete his 58th and final Boston Marathon in a time of 5:58:00. A statue dedicated in Kelley's honor, depicting a 27 year-old Kelly winning in 1935 clasping hands with the 83 year-old Kelley finishing in 1991, is located along the very same Newton hills he had made famous. Kelley was subsequently chosen as Runners World magazine's "Runner of the Century" for his contributions to the sport.

Kelley first toed the starting line in Hopkinton alongside a total of only 285 amateur runners. By his final Boston marathon effort, there were nearly 10,000 competitors and over \$400,000 in prize money. He was the heart and soul of the Boston Marathon, with 61 starts and a majority of those raced at a national class level. Johnny A. Kelley represented the sport of distance running with honor. That honor will live on forever at the Boston Marathon each April.

Racing Roundup

For runners still looking for race opportunities after the Thanksgiving holiday, give the 1st Annual Woodstock Academy Football Fund Raiser 5K a try. The race takes place on Saturday, December 4th and starts and finishes at Roseland Park in Woodstock. Check out www.thelastmileracing.com or contact Keith Pellerin at (860) 779-3248 or KEITHPELLERIN@aol.com for more details.....Former national high school champion and Colorado standout Dathan Ritzenhein, who left the Buffalos this spring to turn professional, is reported healthy and back training at 100% effort. The 2003 NCAA XC champion is now coached by Brad Hudson, a former elite distance runner. Hudson, considered one of the top new coaches on the national class circuit, also coaches Scott Larson, who recently finished 3rd in the Twin Cities Marathon in a personal best 2:14:11.....The ING New York City Marathon continues to sign big time talent for their 2004 race on November 7th. World record holder Paula Radcliffe of Great Britain recently announced that she will race in New York, joining an elite women's field that includes Olympic bronze medalist Deena Kastor, past winners Margaret Okayo and Tegla Laroupe of Kenya, and 2000 champion Ludmila Petrova of Russia. Connecticut's Marie Davenport of Ireland will also compete. On the men's side, Kenya's Christopher Cheboiboch, John Kagwe, Timothy Cherigat, and Elly Rono will be challenged by a number of top U.S. distance runners, each hoping to become the first American to win in New York since Alberto Salazar in 1981. Meb Keflezighi, Abdi Abdirahman, Bob Kennedy, Dan Browne, Ryan Shay, and Matt Downin are expected to lead the American charge.

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