

THE MANCHESTER TRADITION

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

47 year-old John Treacy of Ireland was back in town, lacing the shoes up to hit the streets of Manchester on this balmy Thanksgiving morning in celebration of his course record win 25 years prior. Amby Burfoot was here too. It was Amby's 7 straight wins and his Manchester best of 22:21 in 1971 that stood as the benchmark for Treacy and his Irish contingent to measure themselves against. Amby would finish 317th in 31:03 for his 42nd consecutive race here. Amy Rudolph was also here to race, herself a five time winner and like Treacy, a Providence College grad. She was expected to face a stiff challenge from Kim Smith, a 23 year old New Zealander who was wearing her PC colors. Defending champions Peter Nthiwa of Kenya and Emily Mondor of Canada were also back. Then there were the tailgaters, the local high schoolers, the Blues Brothers, the Plaiders, the middle aged ladies in leopard skin, the "I run one race a year and this is it" crowd, and those runners who ingest a pre-race donut and Budweiser in the Army Navy Club. There were nearly 10,000 runners in total, plus spectators, all here on Main Street in Manchester this Thanksgiving. One look around signifies that the Manchester Road Race, now in its 68th running, is more of an event than a footrace.

Then there's the race itself. Soon after the 10:00am starting gun, a lead group of approximately 15 runners cruised through a 4:38 opening mile. The contenders began to emerge on the climb up the Highland Street hill, and a 5:10 uphill second mile brought the lead group down to 10. Nthiwa and fellow Kenyan Eric Chirchir moved aggressively to the front, shadowed by British Olympian Karl Keska and top American Ian Conner. Keska led briefly at the crest of the hill, but the Kenyan pair quickly assumed their positions at the front and began to press. After falling behind, Conner rejoined the group on the downhill, and it quickly became a four man race. Chirchir, wearing an unseeded bib number, looked the most comfortable of the bunch. Having outrun Nthiwa in a 10K in Philadelphia just days earlier, he was clearly a threat to win it all. Passing 3 miles in 14:20, Nthiwa and Chirchir dropped the hammer a second time, quickly building a 20 yard lead. The pair hit the four mile mark in 18:50 (a split of 9:02 for 2 miles) and turned the last corner heading for home shoulder to shoulder. Anyone who has ever raced here knows that Manchester's final stretch can be deceiving; the finish is clearly in sight but there's still a lot of ground to cover. At the tape, it was the Nthiwa, who had bested 2002 winner Andrew Letherby of Australia by a mere second in 2003, outleaning Chirchir by a step and a half for the win in 22:16, a relatively modest winning time for the 4.748 mile course, Nthiwa became the first back-to-back winner since Phillimon Hanneck in 1994-95. Keska followed in 3rd with a strong performance in 22:20, with Conner, the former Ohio State All-American, 4th in 22:25. Conner, part of the Zap Fitness training group out of North Carolina, had outrun both Nthiwa and Chirchir in an 8K race in Richmond just 12 days prior. His only mistake that day in Richmond may have happened after the race, when he told Chirchir about the Manchester Road Race.

Providence's Amy Rudolph may have mirrored Conner's very same mistake. The Friar Alumni had earned five Manchester victories, including a win in her debut effort fresh out of college in 1995. It was that PC connection that led her to invite Providence senior Kim Smith to Manchester to compete for the first time in 2004. Smith outran Rudolph for top female honors, finishing 25th overall in 24:47. Rudolph was 2nd in 25:14, with Yale grad Laura O'Neill 5 seconds back in 3rd. Defending champion Emilie Mondor of Canada dropped out just after two miles with an ankle injury. Smith, 23, would have had a credible reason for being tired. The New Zealander has just won the NCAA Cross-Country championship in Terre Haute, Indiana on Monday. The Manchester race marked the debut effort as a professional. "I was a little tired," added Smith in reference to her NCAA race. "But it was my first open race, and the weather was perfect. I was very happy with my race today". Smith will next gear her training towards the World Cross-Country Championships and the opportunity to represent her country in March. Rudolph, a Manchester fan favorite, also posted a terrific effort for runner-up honors. "I had an upset stomach before the race and was a little nervous about it," explained Rudolph. "But I tired to zone it out, and I felt pretty good. I've had a difficult season with injuries and I came into the race with no expectations, so I was pleased." The 31 year-old Rudolph, recently engaged to Irish Olympian Mark Carroll, will turn her attention to the Indoor Track season next.

Others offered their thoughts on why the Manchester Road Race is special. Clem McGrath, 65, has been coming to the race for 48 years now. "The Manchester Race is a tradition," said McGrath on his way to the Army-Navy Club for a post race beer or two. "I've run about 30 Manchester's," recalls McGrath, "and this year is probably one of the warmest on record. I was overdressed." In his Manchester debut in 1956, McGrath, then a senior at Norwich Free Academy, would place 16th overall to claim top high school honors just weeks after winning the State Open Cross-Country championship.

Joe Swift, 41, doesn't race competitively anymore. In fact, the lingering aches and pains from his racing days have forced him to turn to the bicycle and the weight room for his exercise. But Swift, along with his brothers, still makes the trek to Manchester each Thanksgiving morning. "I come here to see old friends, and to drink beer," Swift joked. "It's tradition." Swift has raced here since the mid 80's, and has run 22:49 on the course. He has placed a high as 8th at Manchester.

Pawcatuck's Curtiss Thompson, 50, has been coming to Manchester since 1990. By comparison to many, he still considers himself a relative newcomer to the event. One of the special features at the Manchester Road Race is the seeded starting corrals for the top runners. Any runner completing the course in less than 30 minutes receives a card allowing entry into this elite area at the front. Thompson posted a time of 29:50, accomplishing his goal of a sub 30:00 performance. "I think of it (running under 30 minutes) as the poor man's Boston qualifier," joked Thompson outside the Army-Navy club.

Manchester native Brendan Prindiville, 27, currently a 3rd year dental student at Tufts University and competing for Reebok Boston, finished 17th overall in 23:52 and was pleased with his effort. Besides his hometown affiliation, Prindiville has other ties to the race; his Dad is the Race Committee President. "It's like hosting the Super Bowl in your own back yard, and they let you play," said Prindiville of his decision to race Manchester. Whatever their reasons, 10,000+ runners each year continue to make the Manchester Road Race a part of their Thanksgiving holiday.

Racing Roundup

The Annual Tommy Toy Fund Run takes place on Friday evening, December 10th, beginning and ending from Billy Wilson's Ageing Still on 57 Broadway in Norwich. The event begins promptly at 7:00pm and consists of a 2 loop, 3 mile group jog with Santa. Entry fee is an unwrapped toy, and the event is open to the public. The pace is very pedestrian, and non-runners are also welcome. Make every effort to get out and enjoy this evening for a great cause.

Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at www.moheganstriders.org. He can also be reached by e-mail at kdcsikorski@netzero.net.