

# A THANKSGIVING TRADITION GROWS STRONGER

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At first glance, the Manchester Road Race appears to be more of a parade than a footrace. People thousands deep toe the line on Main Street wearing a variety of gear, ranging from serious road racer to casual jogger. Despite the snow and slush that greeted the runners this year, spectators still were out in force, stirring their Bloody Mary's on the crowded front lawns along the race route. Vendors are selling newspapers, donuts, coffee, and beers; some for charity and other for profit. All are a part of the state's oldest road race and hoping to catch up with friends and family in what has become an annual Thanksgiving tradition for many.

New Zealanders Nick Willis and Kim Smith were clearly the class of the field at Manchester this year. Willis battled his college rival Alistair Cragg most of the way until taking command in the final mile, winning by a 6 second margin in 21:50 over the 4.748 mile course. The 22 year-old Willis, who had represented New Zealand in the 2004 Olympic Games at 1,500 meters, was accustomed to the climate as a result of his collegiate days spent at the University of Michigan. "I was very confident based on how my training had been going over the past two weeks," claimed Willis. "I knew I was capable of that kind of run. I just wasn't sure who else was." For the ladies, the 24 year old Smith successfully defended her Manchester title from 2004, prevailing over her former Providence College teammate Mary Cullen. Last year, Smith had completed an impressive double by winning the NCAA Cross-Country champion race just three days prior to her first professional race, a win at Manchester. Smith made this year's women's' race less dramatic, cruising home comfortably in 24:23 to better Cullen's time of 25:00.

Seeing an Irish runner in the lead group at Manchester is the equivalent of seeing the Detroit Lions play football on Thanksgiving Day. It is expected. The Irish have a proud tradition at Manchester, and 33 year-old Mark Carroll, a two-time Manchester champion, had hoped to carry on that tradition again this year. Despite dropping out 20 miles into the New York City Marathon just weeks earlier, the former Providence College All-American had hoped for more Irish magic at Manchester, but it wasn't meant to be this year. Carroll ran with the lead group for the first two miles but faded to 8<sup>th</sup> overall in 22:25. "18 days is not enough time to recover from that effort," explained Carroll of his New York race. "There's a difference when preparing for track versus the marathon, and it showed. I was about a minute off of where I should be here." Carroll recently married his collegiate sweetheart Amy Rudolph, another familiar name at Manchester. However, Rudolph, a 5 time Manchester winner and the ladies course record holder, was returning from injuries and did not compete.

The Manchester Road Race also attracts some of Connecticut's best high school distance runners from the past. West Haven native and former University of Connecticut All-American Dan Wilson finished a strong 11<sup>th</sup> overall in 22:36. "I was hoping for a top 5 finish," said Wilson, who now resides and trains in Washington, DC. "But those guys got away from me just after the second mile, and once they were gone, they weren't coming back." Pete Rea, like Wilson an UConn alumni and another All-State cross-country runner returning to his home state, also looks forward to Manchester. Rea was 50<sup>th</sup> overall in 26:08 and is an integral part of Zap Fitness, a North Carolina based training facilities that has helped produce some outstanding efforts from American distance runners. "We travel to races all over the country," said Rea. "And I told everyone that the environment at the Manchester Road race is the best of them all." Hunter Spencer (18<sup>th</sup>), Brendan Prindiville (26<sup>th</sup>), and Eric Blake (29<sup>th</sup>) are also former Connecticut standouts that finished in the top 30.

Plenty of other runners have made the Manchester Road Race a part of their Thanksgiving tradition for quite some time. Amby Burfoot always makes the trek up to Manchester from his Pennsylvania home and has broken the tape a total of nine times in Manchester, including a blistering 22:21 clocking in 1971 that stood as the course record for 8 years. Although the Executive Editor of Runners World magazine no longer chases records, Burfoot was running in his 43<sup>rd</sup> consecutive Manchester Road Race. "In the early days, it was the Boston Marathon in the spring and Manchester in the fall," explained Burfoot of the two most important racing efforts of his season.

Preston's Tim Kane is also a familiar face at Manchester. The 48 year-old Kane claims to be slowing down, but his 28:26 clocking still made him the area's top finisher. "The hill is a killer," said Kane referring to the uphill climb on Highland Street that rudely greets the runners in the second mile. Wife Kris-Anne Kane also raced well in Manchester, running 30:51 to finish 4<sup>th</sup> female Master. "I'm not 21 anymore," laughed Kane. "The hill seems to be getting bigger every year. I know it's bad when a guy dressed up as a turkey passes me," joked Kane of her performance.

Others offered their thoughts on why the Manchester Road Race is so special. Keith Slonski makes the trip up from Gaithersburg, Maryland every year to compete at Manchester. A 1987 Griswold High graduate and a former standout runner for the Wolverines, Slonski continues to log 25-30 miles weekly and race competitively. He finished his 22nd consecutive Manchester race in 28:56. "It was painful out there," joked Slonski of his race effort in the inclement weather. Slonski has been attending the race for 28 straight years now, dating back to his childhood days of watching his Dad run in Manchester.

The "Plaidders" are a group of friends and runners that clearly draw the most attention along the race route. John Ficarra, Steve Hancock, Dean Festa, Tom Lee, and Pete Volkmar are usually found warming up their vocal chords with a few pre-races beverages in the Army-Navy Club. Their plaid sport coats, which haven't been laundered (or been in style) since the early 1970's, are a trademark. The Plaidders are known to make frequent stops along the course and break into song, serenading the large group of onlookers. "Were old, but we don't act like it," explains Volkmar of their annual Thanksgiving tradition.

Whatever their reasons, there are thousands of runners that continue to make the Manchester Road Race a proud part of their Thanksgiving holiday each year.

## Racing Roundup

The Annual Tommy Toy Fund Run takes place on Friday evening, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 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 single loop, 1.5 mile group jog with Santa Claus. The entry fee is an unwrapped toy, and the event is open to the public. Be sure to make an effort to get out and enjoy this evening for a great cause.

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