

LOCALS WILL TAKE THEIR BEST SHOT IN THE BIG APPLE

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Today's ING New York City Marathon boasts a loaded field of world class talent, a seven time Tour de France champion, and 37,000 more runners looking to complete the 26.2 mile trek through the five boroughs of New York City. This year several American runners will toe the line in New York with a legitimate chance to be the first to the finish line in Central Park. Among those contenders is Olympic Silver Medalist Meb Keflezighi, Colorado's Alan Culpepper (two top 5 Boston Marathon finishes), 2:12 marathoner Peter Gilmore, and Dathan Ritzenhein, a heralded 10,000-meter specialist who will be making his much anticipated marathon debut in New York. No American man has won in New York since Alberto Salazar claimed victory in 1982.

While Lance Armstrong and the elite contenders have garnished most of the attention, there will also be plenty of local runners hoping for a strong marathon effort in the Big Apple. John Jacques, 45, of Norwich, will be making his sophomore marathon appearance today. Jacques and a friend from Houston, Texas both applied to entry through the New York City Marathon's lottery system, required due to the tremendous response the race receives each year. Fortunately for Jacques, both were accepted to be amongst the field of 37,000 that will run in New York. Jacques is expecting a mass of people and a crowded starting line, but has hopes that today's weather will cooperate for the runners. "I'm as ready as I'm going to be," said Jacques during the final week's countdown to marathon Sunday. Jacques ran his first marathon last Thanksgiving Day in Atlanta. Now that he has experienced what it takes to finish a 26.2 mile race, he hopes to improve on his time from Atlanta. "I finished," said Jacques of that debut marathon effort. "But I'd like to do better this time." A recent tune-up at the Mystic Places 10 Mile race two weeks ago showed Jacques that he is ready to again tackle the marathon.

Joy Sieklucki of Colchester will be competing in her 10th marathon, but it will be her first trip to New York. "I think I'm prepared," said Sieklucki of her recent marathon build-up. Sieklucki has run marathons in Maui and Chicago, but it's the tradition of the Boston Marathon that motivates her to do well in New York today. Years ago, Sieklucki ran the Boston Marathon as a bandit. She now heads to New York hoping to qualify officially for the 2007 race next April. The 33 year-old Pfizer employee will need to run under 3 hours and 40 minutes (a clip of 8:24 per mile) to earn a Boston qualifier. Her recent race effort shows that she is right on target to achieve her goal.

East Lyme's Mark Novotny is also a Pfizer employee and will also toe the line in New York. Novotny recently cruised through the Hartford Marathon comfortably in 3 hours, 46 minutes as part of his training for New York. Novotny is confident that his marathon racing experience, and a solid training regime, will put him on target for a possible sub 3 hours run in New York today. "I ran New York in 2003," recalls Novotny. "It was warm and humid that year, and I was dehydrated. But I've learned a lot (about running marathons) since then. Novotny's first marathon was in his hometown at the Mystic Places Marathon in 2001. The 50 year old East Lyme resident has since completed a total of 13 marathons, setting a personal best of 2:58:19 at the Boston Marathon this past April. He credits his participation in programs like the Marathon Training Program sponsored by Lawrence & Memorial Hospital, for his improvement. "I really enjoy the program," says Novotny. Running with (Coach) Kevin Gallerani has really helped. He's a wealth of knowledge". Novotny has had a string of personal bests this season in shorter distance races and has been injury free. He looks forward to a good race today.

Jill Vollweiler, 38, is the Cross-Country coach at SUNY-Purchase. Her family owns the Sharpe Hill Vineyard in Pomfret, where she works as Tasting Room Manager (a job that sounds like it would be envied by many). Her love of racing long distances started in sixth grade, when she and one other student were the only kids in the class to finish a yearlong challenge of running a total of 26.2 miles. Vollweiler, the women's winner at this year's Day Kimball Hospital Deary Memorial 5-Mile Road Race, is running her second New York City Marathon. She ran a 3:18 in 2004. "This New York is going to be my 15th marathon," Vollweiler said. "They've all been under 3:20 except for one." Vollweiler's personal best marathon time is 2:55, set in last year's Yonkers (NY) Marathon, where she finished as the top female. Her running pace was been a somewhat hectic one. This will be her fourth marathon since June. "I find it very challenging; very tough," she said of New York. "The bridges kind of beat you up. I think I'll be ready," Vollweiler added. "It's just whether my legs will feel good that day."

World marathon record holder Paul Tergat of Kenya and Jelena Prokopcuka of Russia are the defending New York City Marathon champion and will both return. American record holder Deena Kastor (2:19:36 in the 2006 London Marathon) will also be competing. Best of luck to these individuals in their marathon effort.

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@sbcglobal.net.