

DESPITE RAIN, MANCHESTER TRADITION LIVES ON

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Simon Bairu had that look in his eye. The look that says "I'm running fast because I want this thing to be over". And from the Hungry Tiger Café to just past the 4 mile mark, Bairu led the 70th Annual Manchester Road Race and looked like he would be the first runner back to the warmth of the elite runners quarters in the Carter Chevrolet showroom. It's not that Bairu was unaccustomed to the chilling temperatures and torrential rains that pelted the nearly 10,000 runners during the 4.748 mile footrace, a Thanksgiving Day tradition. The Saudi Arabian-born Bairu was raised in Canada and was a two time NCAA Cross-Country champion (2004-05) at the University of Wisconsin, so he was used to battling less than perfect weather conditions. But even with a mid-race lead that grew to nearly 10 seconds at the top of the Highland Street hill, Bairu felt liked a marked man. He has broke down the early lead group of 15 runners and was out in front, but a talented field gave chase and looked to make up ground.

Ian Dobson, a nine-time All-American during his days at the University of Stanford, was one of those runners in the chase pack. Dobson had remembered Bairu from his collegiate days. In fact, Bairu, Dobson, and Alistair Cragg, the 26 year-old Irish Olympian who was a runner-up in his Manchester debut a year ago, all competed against one another in college. So it was just like old times when these three runners, along with Kenya's Linus Maiyo, were shoulder to shoulder down the final Main Street stretch. In the end it was Dobson who would ultimately become the first American to win the race since John Gregorek claimed victory in 1993. Dobson's winning time of 21:39 was impressive considering the harsh conditions. He had Bairu's ferocious front running to thank for that. Bairu showed true grit in fending off Cragg for 2nd (21:40 to Cragg's 21:42) while Maiyo hung on for 4th (21:49).

Dobson came to Manchester possessing impressive credentials, including a 3rd place finish in the 1999 Foot Locker Cross Country Championships his senior year of high school in Oregon. He also has plenty of foot speed, a prerequisite over Manchester's predominantly downhill course, with personal bests of 3:53 for 1,500 meters, 8:18 for 3,000 meters, and 13:15 for 5,000 meters. It was that extra gear Dobson reached down to find that would give him the win in his Manchester debut.

On the women's side, Shalane Flanagan of Marblehead, MA, a former NCAA champion at the University of North Carolina and 2004 Olympian, claimed victory in a time of 24:30. It was the first true test of the 25 year-old Flanagan, who was racing for the first time since a foot injury sidelined her in August 2005. Mary Cullen of Ireland, a former standout at Providence College and last year's runner-up at Manchester, was just 3 seconds back, while five-time Manchester champion Amy Rudolph, also a former P.C. standout, was 3rd in 24:43. Flanagan has a connection to the area, as her Dad Steve is a Brooklyn, CT native and UConn graduate, who finished 3rd in the 1973 Manchester Race.

Dan Dillon of New London was the top local Master's finisher in 26:07, good enough for 59th place overall. "I think I did really well," remarked Dillon, the husband of former world class marathoner Patti (Catalano) Dillon and a former All-American distance runner himself. "I was figuring that if I had a really great day, I could break 26 (minutes). But that would be if it was a really perfect day." While many runners choose to end their competitive season with Manchester, Dillon hopes to have more left in the tank, as he will accompany his wife to the Honolulu Marathon next month. "I haven't run a marathon in 25 years," said Dillon. "I'm looking forward to that".

There were also plenty of other big name runners in the field. Four-time Boston and New York City Marathon winner Bill Rodgers, being recognized as this year's honorary race chairman, finished 967th in 35:25, while Amby Burfoot, a former Fitch High School standout and a teammate of Rodgers at Wesleyan, ran 30:47 in his 44th consecutive Manchester race. The event also honored long-time runner Charley "Doc" Robbins, a two-time champion who had competed in a total of 57 Manchester races, who passed away in August at the age of 85. Robbins, best known for his friendly words, modest wardrobe, and barefoot racing, was the influence behind Burfoot's warm-up tribute, in which two dozen runners accompanied Burfoot on a shoeless warm-up jog. And the Plaiders, a group of runners from Southeastern Connecticut who don plaid jackets and serenade the thousand of spectators with Doo-Wop classics along the race route, were in Manchester for the first time on 25 years without the good friend and long time Plaidier Steve Hancock of Bozrah, who passed away from pancreatic cancer in August. In a fitting tribute, Hancock' wife Brenda and son Steve Jr. joined the Plaiders for this years' event. Steve Jr. was even fortunate enough to obtain his own plaid jacket, which he purchased on e-Bay. The jackets had gone unwashed until this year's rainstorm helped things out.

The Manchester Road Race continues to be a Thanksgiving morning tradition for many. The field of runners totaled nearly 10,000 despite the heavy rain, and the enthusiastic crowd of spectators, many armed with early morning beers or Bloody Mary's, were again out in full force to cheer on the runners. The Manchester tradition lives on.

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