

MANCHESTER REMAINS A HOLIDAY TRADITION

By **DON SIKORSKI**
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For many runners, Thanksgiving Day is not a holiday without a morning trip to Manchester, Connecticut. The traditional 10:00 A.M. road race and post-run gathering has become an annual tradition for many, as race crowds have swelled to 10,000 plus and growing, especially if Mother Nature cooperates as it did this year. From the fleet of foot that travel to Manchester for a shot at glory (and maybe a few bucks in prize money) to the back-of-the-pack casual jogger content just to finish the 4.748 mile trek, there's something for everyone at this Thanksgiving run.

Former Providence College ace Martin Fagan was one of those fleet of foot runners. The 24 year-old was following in the hallowed footsteps of Irish legends John Treacy, Eammon Coghlan, Charlie Breagy, and Mark Carroll before him at Manchester and, with plenty of mileage in his legs in preparation for January's Houston Marathon, figured it wouldn't be wise to sit and kick against a field full of track specialists. An opening mile split of 4:28 saw a pack of 20 go shoulder to shoulder before Fagan moved to the front and pressed up the Highland Street hill. A 5:04 second mile left Fagan out front with a half dozen chasers in contention. At 3 miles (14:00), it was clearly his race to lose.

One of those chasers was Australian Andrew Letherby, the 2002 champion who, at age 34 and like Fagan in marathon training mode, still had enough zip left in the legs to move into contention. With experience on his side, Letherby pulled even with Fagan as the two rounded the turn towards the race's final stretch and the showdown was on. Lacking the necessary final gear required to fend off his challenger, Fagan was unable to match Letherby in the home stretch of the 71st annual race. "He (Fagan) surged on that hill, and I've run this race enough to know you can't red line on the hill. If he would have held back a bit, he may have won. But he made a mistake and I took advantage of it," said Letherby, who trains in Boulder, Colorado, of his 1 second win in 21:54. In victory, Letherby had nothing but praise for Fagan's ability. "He will be a great runner," predicted Letherby. "Sometimes in a race like this, it comes down to wants it most. And I really wanted it".

Amy Yoder Begley held off Ireland's Mary Cullen over the final mile to win the women's division 24:39. Begley's Coach Alberto Salazar, who knows a thing or two about winning major races, offered advice that proved beneficial for his athlete. "He (Alberto) told me just to stay with the leaders until a mile to go," said Begley. "I waited and when I made my move, I was going to give that last mile all that I have". Cullen, like Fagan an Ireland native and Providence College alum, was forced to settle for second for the third consecutive year (24:52). "The atmosphere here (at Manchester) is great, said Cullen as to why this race is special. "I can't be too disappointed with finish second; she (Yoder Begley) has a good kick and ran very strong." Both were also impressed with the attention the race receives. "I don't think I've really ever been on a race course that was lined with spectators the whole way like it was today," said Yoder Begley of the Manchester crowd support.

Among the 10,000+ runners was honorary race chairman Frank Shorter, also in from Boulder and running Manchester for the very first time. Shorter's gold medal in the 1972 Olympic Marathon is credited with inspiring the running boom of the '70's and 80's in America. "The thing about this course is that it's fair, said Shorter of the Manchester layout. "You have to be really fit. It makes it really like a cross-country race, which is why someone like John Treacy could do so well here. And Amby; Amby was a great cross-country runner as well."

Amby of course is Amby Burfoot, the former Fitch High School harrier and the 1968 Boston Marathon winner who has claimed more than his fair share of Manchester wins. It was Amby's 45th consecutive Manchester race. "I'm hoping to get to 50," said Burfoot, who still logs 20-30 miles weekly, of the streak. "Beyond that, of course, nobody ever knows and not is guaranteed. In my early days, it was Boston (Marathon) in the spring and Manchester in the fall. It was a great way to end the season and it's still that way".

The Plaiders have also been an institution at Manchester for over 25 years now. Wearing plaid suit jackets, funky sunglasses, and belting out Doo-Wop classics along the race route, the group is honored to carry on in memory of their friend and teammate Steve Hancock of Bozrah, who passed away from pancreatic cancer in August 2006. "People look forward to seeing us, said Oakdale's Dean Festa, a long-time friend of Hancock. "And we look forward to carrying on the tradition for Steve." "We make money by signing autographs," chimed in Norwich's Billy Marshall, also donning an unwashed plaid jacket. The Plaiders offered a pre-race serenaded the crowd with their rendition of "Only You" with beverages in hand in the Army-Navy Club in preparation for the run that would follow.

John Brown and Way Hedding are also long-time friends that run Manchester each year. Sporting their traditional Jake and Elwood Blues Brothers outfits. "The Blues Brother are here, it's a tradition for Way (Hedding) and I. We've been buddies for a long time, and this is how we celebrate our Thanksgiving," proclaimed Brown. "Ditto," added Hedding.

Former Farmington High School and University of Connecticut standout Pete Rea has returned to Manchester each Thanksgiving with some of the athletes he and his wife Zika coach at the ZAP Fitness Program in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. Rea offers his runners a financial incentive; run faster than he did on the Manchester course (Rea ran a very brisk 22:22 back in 1990 while at UConn) and he will pay them \$122.22 (with the ladies getting an additional 4 minute cushion). This year, Rea was headed to the ATM machine, thanks to 8th place finisher Ryan Warrenburg's time of 22:20 and Allison Grace's 25:58 clocking.

With momentum gaining each year, the Manchester Road Race continues to be a Thanksgiving tradition for runners of all speeds. Shorter summed it up best. "All in all, it was a perfect day. If they invite me back every year, I'll bring the weather".

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