The Year Of The Marathon

No running sport in history has grown so quickly, so well, or so enthusiastically.

Bob Molinaro works as a supervisor for Republic Steel on Chicago's South Side. Several weeks after running in the Mayor Daley Marathon, his first race at such a distance, he encountered a fellow competitor at work one day. Molinaro was a novice who had entered only four races since starting to run competitively three months earlier, but his fellow worker was even newer to the running game. "How do you feel about the race now?" Molinaro asked him.

"Pretty good," the other replied, "but I've been having trouble with my training."

"What's the matter?" asked Molinaro.

"I've been so tired I've only trained three times in the two weeks since the race was over," said the other. "And on one of those runs, I only got as far as 24 miles."

The Republic worker typifies the new breed of American marathoner: eager, but still getting his (or her) act together. In a year during which Farrah Fawcett-Majors appeared on the cover of *People* magazine jogging with her bionic husband, the American public has taken running to its heart and marathoning to its bosom. Ken Young, director of the National Running Data Center, has collected data on marathons run in the United States in 1977. A total of some 25,000 runners completed marathons this past year, a jump of about 40 percent from the 17,300 total reported in 1976. The number of runners in *all* road races has increased phenomenally. "The typical gain is between 25 and 50 percent," reports Young, "with some races doubling or even tripling in size."

Most prominent among those is the New York City Marathon, which in only its sixth year of existence passed Boston in numbers of competitors—at least officially. New York attracted approximately 5200 entrants. The qualification is necessary, because nobody can say with any certainty how many appeared at the starting line at Hopkinton last April. Many ignored the strict Boston time qualifications and simply came. Entered runners who started near the rear of the pack could look around and see as many un-numbered runners as numbered ones. AAU long-distance co-chairman Bob Campbell stood near the finish line and counted 1000 un-numbered runners in the first hour before giving up. And despite the claims of one national magazine that the 800,000 people who watched the New York City Marathon made that the largest spectator event in the world, more people lined the sidewalks at Boston. "There were at least twice as many," states Bill Rodgers.

But perhaps the social success (and surprise) of the season occurred on the Chicago lakefront on September 24 when another mass of runners, estimated near 5000, lined up in the shadow of the Picasso statue to run the Mayor Daley Marathon, new on the calendar last season. Despite little advance publicity this race became an instant success, with 2131 finishers—the largest field ever for a "first annual" marathon. The success was largely because of the residue of interest from the First Chicago Distance Classic, the 20-kilometer race which attracted 5300 runners in *its* first year, many of them closet joggers who made their jump into competition because of the tremendous promotional effort mounted by the sponsoring First National Bank of Chicago. "There's no question about it," comments Ken Young. "The races that showed the biggest increase in numbers were the ones that were heavily promoted because of the backing of a major sponsor."

It was definitely the year of the Big Buck. Flair Merchandising, the sponsor for the Mayor Daley Marathon, spent $90,000 on that race. The First National Bank of Chicago spent more than $100,000. The various New York sponsors contributed well over that figure. As for a modestly-budgeted race, consider the Maryland Marathon: $22,000.

Runner's World editor-at-large Hal Higdon received a telephone call recently from a Midwest physician planning a major Memorial Day race in 1978. He had $10-14,000 backing from a group of insurance agents. Higdon says: "I thought to myself, 'Ho hum. What else is new?' A year ago I almost would have fallen out of my chair." Judging by the number of major organizations already making plans for major events or race series, the year 1978 may be even bigger, but 1977 was very big.

The kind of people such major promotional efforts attract are individuals such as Bob Molinaro, 36 years old from Glenwood, Ill., whose passage from closet jogger to instant marathoner seems unique but may be almost typical of the 1977 breed of runner. Married, with two children, Bob Molinaro migrated to this country from Italy as a teenager in the late 1950s, but showed more aptitude for tennis. He won several local tournaments, later taught part-time at private tennis clubs. When an injury within the last year hindered his tennis game, he started to divert some of his energy into running.

Attracted by the publicity given last summer to the impending First Chicago Distance Classic, he decided to attempt that race and several weeks before the July 3 date called his cousin, a frequent competitor in long-distance running events, for some last-minute advice. The cousin, fearful of the dangers of YMCA joggers attempting too much, tried to talk him out of running until Molinaro explained he had been running six miles a day on his lunch hour with eight- and 10-mile runs on the weekend. The cousin reconsidered: "You're in better shape than I am."

Bob Molinaro ran, finished, and three months later did 3:27 for the marathon. His wife Judy took up the sport, completed a 10-miler, and recently won her first merchandise prize (a pumpkin pie) in a Thanksgiving Day six-mile. Have Bob and Judy Molinaro become lifetime runners? Bob makes no promises. He and his wife still have not discarded their tennis rackets.

Another Mayor Daley Marathon competitor was the wife of a prominent Chicago business executive. She finished somewhere around four hours, or maybe it was five hours. "For the next day and a half she didn't get out of bed," recalls her husband. "She was so stiff she could hardly move. I might have been tempted to call a doctor or maybe move her to the hospital, except all during this time she kept moaning what a *fantastic* experience it was, how she wants to do it again next year."

That same wealthy business executive recently had bought his wife a large emerald studded with diamonds, a piece of jewelry that Elizabeth Taylor might have worn with grace. The executive commented to Lee Flaherty, president of the sponsoring Flair Merchandising Company: "You gave her a piece of paper for finishing your race that probably cost less than 10 cents, yet if she had to choose between the emerald and the

In its first year, the Mayor Daley Marathon along Chicago's lakefront attracted good crowds, clean competition.

My mom, and even my brother and me, get a mention here (sort of :-)

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paper I know what the choice would be."

Some new runners get to the starting line with a little help from their friends (Bob Molinaro had a cousin who ran), but many among those trying the marathon for the first time (often their first race for any distance) arrive with the help of running clinics that provide instruction, answers to questions, and companionship as well. Monthly clinics at Mount Sinai Hospital before the New York City Marathon frequently attracted as many as 500 participants. A like number often appears on Sunday morning in San Diego's Mission Bay Park for the marathon clinic founded by Thaddeus Kostrubala, MD, author of *The Joy of Running*. One reason why the Honolulu Marathon has doubled in size each of the last three years, with 4000 in 1977, has been the series of regular clinics for runners in that city. As many as several thousand appear for the clinics some days.

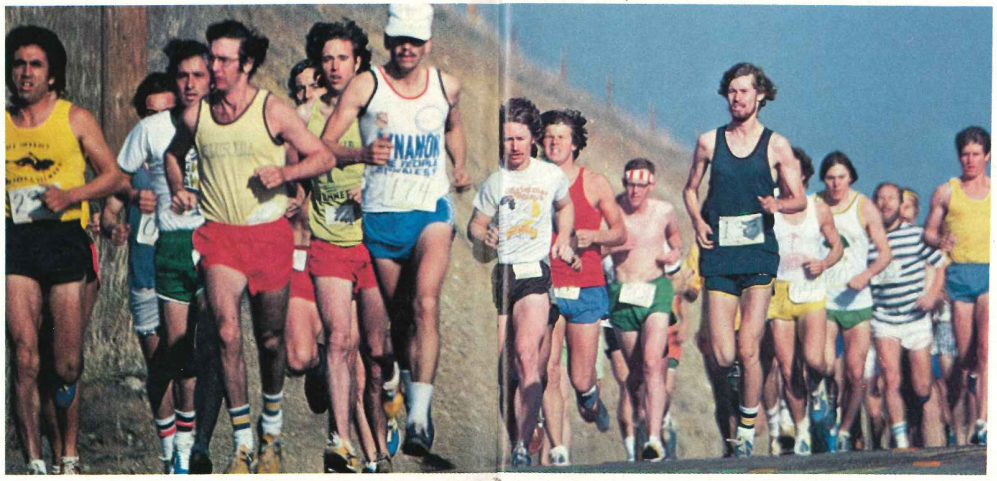
The growth of size (as well as in numbers) of marathons has posed many problems, the main one being: what do you do with all those people? For 1977 the starting line of San Diego's Mission Bay Marathon was moved because the previous parking facilities proved insufficient to accommodate the number of runners. For 1978 the field is limited to 2000. Sponsors of the Palos Verdes Marathon in suburban Los Angeles considered a similar size limitation. The Maryland Marathon attracted 1730 runners despite its cold-weather date (December 4) and extremely difficult course. "I don't know if we can accommodate too many more runners," worried co-chairman Les Kinion. Sponsors of the New York City Marathon announced a limit of 3000, increased that to 4000, then unbarred the doors permitting 5000 when it appeared they might be outdone in participant numbers by the Second City. Unlike Boston, which sets a time limit for entrants at 3:00 (3:30 for women and men over 40), the trend has been toward limits set on a "first-entered" basis. If you get your money in on time you can start despite your ability or previous record. One other exception to the open policy was the National AAU Women's Marathon Championship in Minneapolis, which for the first year was limited to female entrants. It attracted fewer than 100 runners, more women wanting to run with the men in New York the same weekend.

Perhaps the most interesting trend worth noting concerning American marathoning in 1977 is that the numbers explosion has occurred in the back, rather than in the front, of the pack. There are more fast runners as demonstrated by the *Runner's World* annual rankings on page 98.

To cite a specific example, the Trail's End Marathon in Oregon, with its consistently cool race-time weather, has shown a marked increase in runners under 2:30. In 1970 there were two: in 1973, there were 11 and in 1977, 21 runners broke 2:30.

But an analysis of the results of any major marathon indicates that the great horde crosses the finish line after 3:30, an average of around 8:00 per mile, and slower. This is in total contrast to marathoning a decade ago when runners going that speed rarely finished. They failed to finish partly because they became lonely running by themselves and partly because they knew the officials probably went home anyway. As for loneliness, a marathoner running 8:00 or 9:00 pace who tripped in one of the major races probably would not even hit the ground because of the crowds around him. And officials in certain races have become more tolerant of what one observer refers to as "meritorious mediocrity." The Honolulu Marathon prides itself on recording the time of each finisher, no matter how slow, stating its records as 2:17 and over seven hours, inviting potential competitors to "break either record."

As for the term "meritorious mediocrity," the observer meant it not in the perjorative sense but merely as an accurate means of describing a phenomenon in which most runners are (to follow the Webster definition) "of middle quality, neither very good nor very bad." Considered "very good" would be Bill Rodgers, who led the list of fast Americans with his time of 2:11:28, recorded in the New York City Marathon. His 1977 time, however, was about the same as his 1975 and 1976 bests of 2:09:55 and 2:10:10 respectively. "Very bad" would be dropping out—or maybe more accurately: not starting. Although the Gallup Poll now indicates that 18 million Americans jog, runners are still in the minority—and marathoners are a minority among the minority. Ken Young



The dramatic increase in the size of marathon fields was the major news story on the sport during 1977; even more revealing than the very numbers, though, was the realization that the increase in size came in the mid-pack.

of the National Running Data Center can identify over 40,000 runners who compelted races of more than 10 kilometers in 1977, with some 25,000 of those marathoners. But this may only be the tip of the iceberg, and accurate figures may become increasingly difficult to obtain particularly as directors of the megaraces abandon the admittedly thankless task of both recording and publishing the names of the thousands of participants in their events. The official result sheet for the First Chicago Distance Classic, for example, was a computer printout 74 feet long.

To get an idea of where runners are finishing, analysts sometimes looked to "smaller" races. "We wanted to get an idea of when to expect the largest number of runners piling into our finishing chute," says Steve Cole of the First National Bank of Chicago, "so we took a look at the results of the Revco Western Reserve Marathon in Cleveland, which attracted about 600 runners. We expected to find the typical, bell-shaped curve with a few fast runners spread apart in the front then a steady increase to a peak followed by a decline to a few slow runners spread apart in the back.

"We did find the few fast and few slow runners but in between, instead of a peak, there was a plateau. Once you got past 3:00 there was a steady procession of runners—rarely fewer than four per minute, never more than seven—until 4:30. It made us relax a bit about the problem of handling the crush at the finish."

Handling the crush at the start often was another problem as runners in the rear of the pack in other races besides Boston discovered they would have to wait three and four minutes after the gun sounded before crossing the line. And flying starts with the starter firing the gun *after* runners left on their own became common. The New York City Marathon began on a wide apron near the toll booths before the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, but once onto that bridge runners found it difficult to maneuver. Fast runners generally find positions up front often by virtue of being issued low numbers, or sometimes by shoving their way up there. Slower runners occasionally take this secondary means often for the thrill of starting near Bill Rodgers or Frank Shorter, perhaps without realizing that once the gun sounds they will become a barrier for medium-fast runners, the forefront of the meritorious mediocrity, who want to get around them. Race directors have attempted to solve this problem by establishing separate starting areas for runners planning to average 6:00, 7:00, 8:00 or slower for their marathon pace. Unfortunately, not everybody respects such stratification. "My friends and I lined up right on the 7:30 mark, which is where we figured we belonged," commented Bill Dixon, an insurance agent from Glens Falls, N.Y. "But it seemed like we were the only honest ones. It took us nearly two miles to get around the slower runners who lined up ahead of us, and by that time I had lost all chance of setting a good time."

In fairness to those "slower" runners, many probably did not even see the labeled starting areas because of the crowd and others, who might have seen them, probably did not know what the numbers meant, or how to relate to them. One factor in the 1977 running phenomenon is that many people have begun racing without any background in the sport, often not having run track in high school. Or if they did, they might be reconverted sprinters who realize there is considerably less disgrace in finishing far back in a marathon than in a 100-yard dash. In the latter you fail by being beaten; in the former you win by even finishing. Bill Dixon is a former pole vaulter who plans to solve the problem of crowds he encountered in New York by returning to Glens Falls and sponsoring a marathon next year among his friends. "We don't tell anybody about it," he hints, "and keep the field down to maybe 30 competitors."

Despite the increase in mass marathons, small races still can be found. They remain small partly because of being located far from major population centers or because their sponsors fail to (or choose not to) aggressively promote them. Ken Young points toward the Cyclone County Marathon, which in its sixth year attracted 13 finishers. The winner was Kim Sprain in 2:52:52. This was still better than 1976 when only nine finished, but least you show up in Ames, Iowa in June this year expecting an easy victory, or a small field, beware. Mere mention of the Cyclone County Marathon may have doomed its chances at anonymity. "I always searched through *Runner's World* for races that had been won the previous year in times slower than mine," admits Ken Young. "Then when I got there, usually I found a dozen runners faster than me. They were searching *Runner's World* for the same reason."

Another factor that has limited the size of fields in certain marathons is degree of difficulty. With the exception of a few high status races, a difficult course often equates with a difficult time in attracting competitors. Runners continue to seek the flat, fast courses, either through a desire for personal records or simply to make finishing their first race easier. As a result the Heart of America Marathon, now in its 19th year, has failed to match the pace of running's growth. The Columbia, Mo. race had 129 finishers in 1977 despite a scenic course over a low-traffic area. The problem is that the last half of that course contains four severe hills. The 41-year-old Yonkers Marathon in suburban New York (334 finished) offers another example of a race that might be considered underpopulated for its area, mainly because of the long uphill stretch that must be negotiated at mile 24. Some runners see such races as an extra challenge, but they are in the minority.

Yet a few races overcome such handicaps, either because of tradition or the skill of race promoters in wrapping an air of mystique around the supposed difficulty of their race. Boston has its series of four hills culminating in the famous (or perhaps "infamous") Heartbreak Hill near the 18-mile mark. And the organizers of the Maryland Marathon have done a similar promotional job around their Satyr Hill, also strategically located around 18 miles. The hill becomes part of the challenge. This is particularly true about the admittedly *most* challenging "marathon" course in the United States, that on Pikes' Peak. Eventually perhaps the newcomers to the marathoning ranks may move into increasingly hillier, and therefore more challenging, courses for their second, third, or fourth race, but one bad omen is that 1978's Cleveland Marathon (formerly Revco Western Reserve Marathon) has been moved from a

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near-mountainous suburban course to a flat one through the inner city. Runners, by their participation (or lack of it), ultimately dictate the types of courses on which they run.

The ultimate attraction for the fast-time freaks may be downhill courses. Boston overall is downhill, although its overall hilliness diminishes any such advantage. The Fiesta Bowl Marathon (1000 finishers this past year) promotes its downhillness, a drop just short of the 200-foot limit that, under RRCA standards, would disqualify the course for record purposes. The ultimate fast marathon may be one in Utah, with a 5600-foot drop out of the mountains onto the plains between start to finish. The winning time might approach two hours, but as San Diego podiatrist Joe Ellis states: "I'd like to have the foot and knee concession for that race."

One unwelcome phenomenon of marathoning 1977 has been the advent of cheaters and/or impostors, an echo of the Olympic marathon in 1972 when one strode into the stadium a minute ahead of winner Frank Shorter. In last year's Mission Bay Marathon, Thaddeus Kostrubala noticed one individual lurking on the sidewalk suddenly dart into the race and into a position ahead of other runners. "I was shocked," said Kostrubala. "I didn't think runners would do that." At the Maryland Marathon a female jumped in among some mid-2:30 male runners in the last six miles, accepting the continuing spectator ovations that normally accompany the first woman runner sighted.

The art of impostory, however, reached its climax at the Mayor Daley Marathon when three out of the first 10 runners across the finish line obviously had not run more than a few miles to get there. The runner who came across the line in third place, wearing basketball shoes and a shirt unstained with sweat, managed for nearly five minutes to convince media people gathered around him that he was the first Chicago finisher. Race director Wendall Miller estimates that out of the 2200 "finishers" who passed through the chute, at least 200 had not run the full 26 miles 385 yards to get there. Part of this may have been because novice runners turned around before reaching the final 180-degree turn at 20 miles on the double-out-and-back course and simply crossed the finish line, a no-no for old hands, through inexperience.

The Chicago race also probably set a world record for drop-outs since less than 2000 out of 5000 entrants (or of 4500 starters) went the distance. This was because the sponsors encouraged Chicago-area joggers to enter, claim a t-shirt, come out, and go as far as you felt comfortable going. A champagne brunch for a number of socialite joggers (one of whom ordered a special running suit with a cape motif from her French designer) detoured at least one portion of the field at two miles. This offended many purists among old-timers who believe nobody should enter a marathon without suitable preparation (i.e., 70 miles a week); however, promoter Lee Flaherty defends this lowering of so-called standards: "We're interested in making our race a participation event, regardless of at what level. A lot of those early drop-outs showed up at the finish line already dressed to cheer the others."

Most of the explosion in running was not, nevertheless, in full-distance marathons but rather in sub-marathons, "middle distance" events of anywhere from 10 to 20 kilometers. Bay-to-Breakers continued its imitation of a subway during the rush hour when 12,000 runners participated. Over the Fourth of July weekend 5300 ran in Chicago and 6000 in the Peachtree Race in Atlanta. The Cleveland Heart-a-Thon in September attracted nearly 2000 runners and helped raise $30,000 for the American Heart Association. Falmouth, Mass. had close to 6000 runners and Phoenix, Ariz. had a 3800-runner field.

It seems as though first-year races in megalopolis areas are drawing anywhere from 1000 runners on up. The first Mercury 10-Kilometer Run in Los Angeles drew 2150 last fall. A San Francisco race, Bridge-to-Bridge, attracted 3000 on its first try. Beverly Hills revamped its 10-kilometer run and with its large awards offering (over $10,000) had over 2000 official finishers.

In searching for a reason for the sudden explosion of mass races, one had to look toward Frank Shorter, both his appearance on television in 1976 and his appearance in person during 1977. The appearance on television was the ABC-Sports telecast of the Olympic marathon from Montreal on a Saturday afternoon with a large number of Americans sitting before their television sets. For nearly a solid two-and-a-half hours, ABC focused its cameras on the marathon. Since Shorter, in winning the silver medal, was running in or near the front for most of that time period, he received more exposure than any other marathoner in American history, perhaps in the history of the world.

Many of the people watching that telecast, a very large number, were inspired to get their sweatsuit out of the basement and emulate, if only in a lesser manner, Frank Shorter. A lesser but more significant number of race promoters were inspired to call Frank Shorter and ask him to come run in a race, thus setting up his in-person appearances in 1977. Most of those calling either had money, or had access to people with money. They could not ask Frank, as an "amateur," to endorse their product, or cause, but they could funnel their money into the promotion of races in which their product, or cause, was the recipient of great gobs of good will.

The advent of professional public relation staffs with the knowledge to tap previously unprecedented media attention became a big factor in the attraction of the masses to running as a participant sport. They focused on the reservoir of closet joggers (the 18 million as identified by Gallup) who were out there running if not competing. The appearance of Frank Shorter (or Bill Rodgers, or Don Kardong, or any one of a number of select, high-visibility runners and/or clinic speakers: Sheehan, Higdon, Ullyot) offered an excuse for these joggers to come out of their closets and compete. The year 1977, in effect, became a giant love fest in honor of Frank Shorter, who often obliged sponsors by running several road races per weekend, which undoubtedly contributed to his late-season injuries. By the time of the World Cup, Shorter had pulled a hamstring muscle and attempts to continue to meet scheduled obligations resulted in related other injuries. By September and October, he was either running slowly in, or not finishing, races. (In the New York City Marathon one bicyclist followed him all the way through Brooklyn shouting: "You used to be my hero, Frank. Now you're a quitter!" Shorter dropped out at 15 miles.) Even standing on the sidelines, the two-time Olympic medalist served as a magnet for runners and was probably the single reason for the tone of 1977 racing.

Shorter says of his right hamstring injury, "It wasn't the frequency of races that caused the injury (he ran over 32 between January and August), but the indoor training last winter. I'll stay away from those left-hand turns with speed training this season."

As for 1978, "I hope to run in Boston," Shorter says. If he runs and finishes, it will be his first completed marathon since 1976.

If the big runs of 1977 become the still bigger runs of 1978, it may be without the help of Frank Shorter who now says: "I'm getting tired of hearing myself talk. I'm going to limit my schedule and stay closer to home." If so, race promoters may turn to Rodgers, or Kardong, or Garry Bjorklund, the Olympic 10,000-meter finalist from Montreal who made a spectacular marathon debut by finishing fifth to Rodgers in New York, then hitting 2:13:46 on the hilly Maryland Marathon course. Bjorklund also demonstrated himself as a man of class by not wincing when the announcer at the awards ceremony referred to him continuously as "Jerry Borkman." Race promoters had better learn how to sound B.J.s name correctly in 1978. For the record, you sound the "J" like a "Y."

Some people suggest the running fad of 1977 was just that: a fad. That the crowds who filled fields this past year in 1978 will be into the next trendy activity, whether racquetball or TV ping pong. Maybe so, and the sport undoubtedly will shake out some of its instant runners. The closet joggers, having once competed against an Olympic champion will now return to their closets. But more than likely we are experiencing not the crest of the wave but only its swelling. Many of those who ran their first races at distances from 10 to 20 kilometers in 1977 have already begun to set their sites on the next goal, which happens to be 26 miles 385 yards long. Even some of those early Mayor Daley Marathon dropouts may cross a finish line. There may come a day when, instead of 800,000 spectators standing on the sidewalks watching 5000 participants, it may be the other way around. If that thought appalls you, the address of the sponsor of the Cyclone Country Marathon may be found on page 94. ●

In the scenic Golden Gate Park, San Francisco's marathon field gathers as much for a feeling of camaraderie as for competition, the increased number of entrants enhancing the spirit as well as the well-publicized mass of the fields.