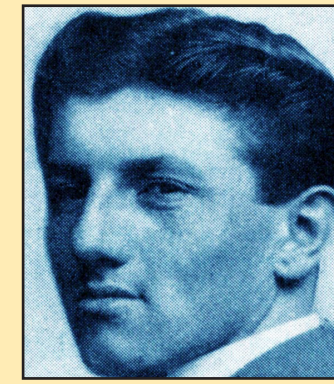


MARATHON PARK *IT ALL STARTED HERE*

1909: 'Inferno' Cooks Up Unlikely Champ



Renaud

With the marathon long established as a true test of many a runner's mettle, the 1976 race was immortalized in headlines as the "Run for the Hoses" for its scorching temperatures.

Another barn burner under an unforgiving sun with oven-like conditions, the 1982 neck-&-neck duel with Alberto Salazar besting Dick Beardsley by 2 seconds at the tape was chronicled in John Brant's 2006 book "Duel In The Sun."

Forgotten in the marathon's long and varied weather history is the 1909 race that began in here in Ashland and was labeled "The Inferno."

Jerry Nason, the late Boston Globe sports editor and respected marathon historian whose name is carved on the granite stone at the entrance to this park, later described conditions that Patriots Day: "With the temperatures at 97 degrees, the broiling sun leaving pools of melted tar and heat stricken runners on the road, it provided the greatest test of endurance of all time."

Of the 164 who toed the

line that Monday in Ashland, 91 runners, or 55 percent, collapsed from heat prostration with many rushed to nearby hospitals.

Only one man, Henri Renaud, a 19-year-old weaver employed in a Nashua, N.H. cotton mill and familiar to working 12-hour shifts manning a loom in a hot factory and thus able to endure the superheated conditions, was reported to run the whole distance to Copley Square, plodding along near a snail's pace but conquering the heat and his more experienced foes by almost four minutes.

Hopelessly outclassed by a field which included several former champions as well as many top finishers in previous editions of the race, Renaud was said to have begun competitive running only the September before.

The early "killer" pace set by Hopi Indian Lewis Tewanina and Louis Fine of Providence, R.I. brought miseries to the early frontrunners. Of the nine different men who held the lead before 20 miles

elapsed, all dropped out, spent, exhausted and dehydrated.

While others craved water, Renaud was said to have accepted only two drinks the entire race. A turtle among hares, he was 53rd at Framingham, 28th at Wellesley and 19th going into Newton's hills, often stepping over his fallen comrades.

Renaud stood third by Coolidge Corner. Only two men, New Yorkers Patrick Grant and Harry Jensen were ahead, struggling for the lead. Renaud eventually bested both, first the drooping Grant, then the walking Jensen.

The gap-toothed Renaud was said to be the only one not to walk the final mile.

The 5-8, 143-pound Renaud won in 2:53:36, the third slowest time in history and the slowest of the 20th century.

By the next "Boston", the Amateur Athletics Union mandated physicals for all competitors and also that no one under the age of 16 could enter a marathon.

Why Ashland Is the Cradle of the Running Boom

Where you now stand was once the site of Metcalf's Mill, a magical place, a talisman for those immersed in running lore.

Sitting on prime real estate alongside the Sudbury River during the Industrial Revolution, this was the site of a mill manufacturing wooden boxes to be used by a nearby shoe factory for the shipment of its products. Purchased over a decade before the Civil War by Maine native Alvah Metcalf, it evolved in a thriving business while Metcalf was a leading businessman and municipal servant.

The mill continued some 13 years under the stewardship of Metcalf's two sons after his death in 1894, but it closed in 1907. In 1912, a prominent Ashland family bought the mill and turned it into an icehouse utilizing waters from the nearby river. The mill burned down in a 1932 fire. By the time it burnt, the marathon's starting line had moved around the neighborhood several times for distance corrections and then finally up the road to Hopkinton in 1924 to meet the 1908 Olympic standard.

Meanwhile the race was slowly gaining status as one of the planet's premier sporting events.

The situation for the Metcalf's Mill site was altogether different.

Fame was fleeting in Depression Era America and the Peasant Street lot lay fallow, the mill's foundation and grinding stone overgrown with weeds, discarded. The only marker to the area's forgotten glory, a white "B 25" stone, lay largely unnoticed,



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Runners & their entourages charge up Main Street in 1899.

squatting across the road next to the railroad tracks. It remained that way for more than 70 years.

But, by 1924, when the starting line was moved one town over, Ashland had long since established its bona fides as "The Cradle of the Running Boom," even if its recognition as such would have to wait a century.

A spot in sport's Parthenon is precious. Witness the towns of Cooperstown, N.Y. and Hoboken, N.J., both which profess to be site of baseball's first organized game in the 1860s. Ditto for hockey. Two Canadian cities, Kingston, Ontario, and Moncton, New Brunswick, contend to be that game's true home ice, rivalries continuing to this day.

But, unlike those two sports, there is no doubt where the first modern

marathon-distance event was held.

That's Greece.

Athens was indeed the birthplace of the modern marathon in 1896, but New York's effort, in current parlance, was one-&-done that same year. Paris presented five marathons between 1896 and 1903 but, by the time Paris played host to the second Olympic marathon in July 1900, Ashland had sent off four marathons and continued to do so until 1923.

By April 1904, when the St. Louis World's Fair opened in tandem with the Third Olympic Games, bringing another marathon onto American soil, Ashland had already held the start to eight races.

In the beginning, the marathon's pioneers were a rough-&-ready band

of ill-equipped students and tradesmen mixed with some eccentric professionals and a few professional eccentrics, all drawn to Ashland by an obsession with the race's daunting challenges.

While there were other endurance events available to fans as the 20th century began, marathons anchoring quadrennial Olympiads or long foot races at county, state or world's fairs or even days-long dance marathons, no similar event enjoyed the staying power or consistently captivated a huge annual audience like the marathon staged for its first 27 years from right here at Marathon Park.

Distance running was gaining a devoted core of international competitors and while there were other races, most were shorter with some others unique or just plain odd.

The Hamilton Around The Bay race, 18.6 miles along the shoreline of the western crescent of Lake Ontario in Canada, actually began in 1894 and continues to this day.

During "The Ashland Era", many Hamiltonians came northeast and had great success running "Boston", with four titles over the 27 years. Fierce animosity between the locals and the Canadians also bred a rabid rivalry between the provincial gamblers and their counterparts.

Locally, the Brockton Fair Marathon started in Copley Square and finished 25 miles south at the fairgrounds during its 10 summer runs (1908-17).

The 1918 Influenza Epidemic forced that year's fair to be canceled

which also spelled the end for that marathon, but not before Clarence DeMar set its course record in 1917.

The Detroit News held a 26-mile race at the state fairgrounds during the century's early years, but it was 26 loops around a one-mile oval.

Directly following the 1908 Olympics, New York City came down with "Marathon Mania" and held five marathons, on Thanksgiving, the day after Christmas, New Year's Day, Washington's Birthday, and Lincoln's Birthday. Five marathons in 12 weeks! More than a century later, there's still no word on any survivors.

With rival races running shorter distances or with even shorter life spans, the Olympic marathon once every four years and always at a different site was the only consistent alternative to the Ashland-to-Boston race until 1924, when a race in Kosice, now in current-day Slovakia and known as the International Peace Marathon, began as, coincidentally, the starting line moved to Hopkinton.

Year-after-year for the first quarter century-plus of distance running, Ashland nurtured and nourished the sport and played host to its annual gathering of the clan some 27 times, often at W.A. Scott's Hotel, later the Ashland Hotel and now known as John Stone's Public House.

Ashland truly is where distance running scuffed up its baby shoes, cut its teeth, suffered some growing pains but finally matured and came of age, hence its label...

"Cradle of the Running Boom."