

# MARATHON PARK IT ALL STARTED HERE

## Clarence DeMar: The Immortal

Clarence Harrison DeMar was a newspaper printer who lived in the Highlands section of Melrose, Massachusetts.

He worked on Boston's Newspaper Row, a hotbed of journalistic combat since colonial days. At the dawn of the 20th century eight newspapers — the Record, Herald, Advertiser, Globe, American, Post, Journal and Traveler — published daily near Post Office Square.

For decades, day in and day out, DeMar stood ready at the printers' union "shape-up". Once declared fit for work and assigned to a paper, he labored hard under harsh conditions in one of these human pressure cookers.

The "comp room" of every paper in the neighborhood was essentially the same, one or another variety of hell on earth.

Hundreds of printers and editors, their stubborn yet urgent chatter altogether deafening, wedged themselves into these poorly lit basement chambers wide abeam yet cursed with low-slung ceilings. Every shift these dank, dusty cellars filled with tobacco smoke and sour whiffs of liquor recently consumed.

Buildings rattled as nearby presses constantly rolled off papers, their labors humming a dull relentless tune. Editors approved hand-set racks of type then stepped aside as printers wielding hand-held sledgehammers slammed frames of tiny metal type characters into intricate metal page forms tilted onto huge slate tablets.

Hot, smoky, poisonous fumes steamed from ever-present molten lead pots, the malleable metal within dangerous, deadly and soon to slither into the nooks and crannies of the page form, locking it in, the key to success. The press bells rang and rang, and the deadline, always another deadline, bore down like a locomotive, the next edition more important than the last.

This trade, lost to a digital age, was never a labor of love. Working "hot metal" at a daily newspaper was no joke, requiring not only the

ability to perform quickly and accurately under tremendous stress and adverse conditions but also the biblical patience of Job, the strength and stamina of a circus strongman and the attention to minute details that any watchmaker would be proud to possess. Tough work, rough tools, diverse skills, unique men.

His efforts in those infernal rooms were how DeMar at first supported his mother and five younger siblings and then later his wife and his five children. But everybody needs a diversion, something to bring life into balance.

Some colleagues gambled, but many just crawled into a bottle. Not DeMar. No. In his spare time, he became an immortal.

Before the '20s roared, before Babe Ruth hit it big, Knute Rockne assembled "The Four Horsemen" or Jack Dempsey ruled the "Sweet Science, there was Clarence DeMar. Call him "Mr. DeMarathon". Everybody did.

He didn't run for the prize money. There was none. He didn't run for the fame. A religious man, a lay preacher, he considered the spotlight's glare a devil's playground.

Instead DeMar ran for the sport's simplicity, pursuing perfection through preparation. But he loved to race for the sense of self-worth it provided, of being the best at something. As a young man, DeMar took to the roads, chasing excellence, and that motivation propelled him up to the apex of distance running's pyramid.

DeMar remains there a century later but time marches on, obscuring his accomplishments.

First sporting North Dorchester AA and later Melrose Legion Post colors, DeMar ran 33 "Bostons", winning seven: 1911, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1927, 1928 and 1930, the first three starting right here in Ashland. He owns the permanent course record at the 40K Ashland distance, set in 1922 with a time of 2 hours, 18 minutes, 10 seconds.

He won his first "Boston" at age 22 and his

last at 41. A total unknown, he burst upon the Ashland scene in 1910, finishing second, and 11 times he finished in the top 3 and 15 times in top 10. He finished seventh in 1938 at age 49 and ran his last "Boston" in 1954 at age 65, finishing 78th in an open field of 113 starters.

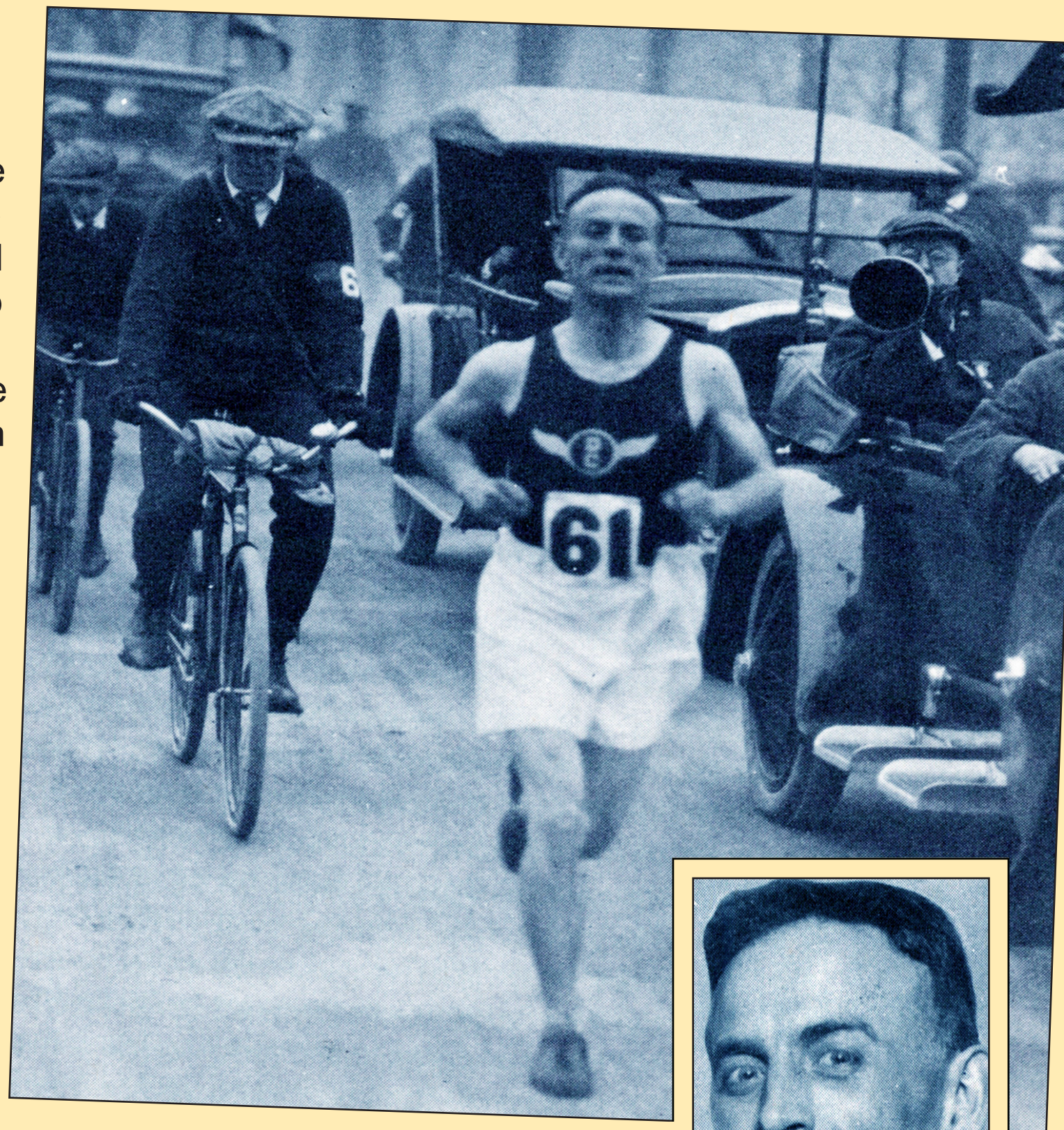
Only three other men have won "Boston" as many as four times (as of 2012): French Canadian Gerard Cote in the 1940s; "Boston Billy" Rodgers in the late 1970s and 1980; and Kenyan Robert Kipkoech Cheruiyot inside the years 2003-08.

Winning in three different decades, DeMar captured seven laurel wreaths and, amazingly, after those seven victories he reportedly worked as usual those evenings and oftentimes set the front-page headlines reporting his own victory to Boston readers.

Showing Spartan grit those ancient Greeks would admire, legend has it DeMar would run back and forth from work each day, sun, rain, sleet or snow, a distance of about eight miles each way. Donning a fresh shirt, he would toil standing up for a full shift then run back home.

DeMar competed for 49 years, until the age of 69, in over 1,000 races, including over 100 of 25 miles or more. On St. Patrick's Day of 1928, he won a 44-mile race from Providence to Boston in 5:41:37. His last race, a 15K in Bath, Maine in 1957, he finished 14th, a year before his death.

DeMar died of cancer in Reading four days after turning 70 on June 11, 1958. A few days before, he crawled outside and worked in his garden, his widow said, adding, "He just wouldn't quit."



Clarence DeMar, right, bound for record in 1922.

A perceived heart problem held him back during the peak years of his 20s. He won "Boston" in 1911 against the advice of his doctor who told him he had a heart murmur. He skipped "Boston" until 1917. Restless, he returned to Ashland and, out of form, finished third, again rebelling against doctor's advice.

He was soon drafted into the Army for World War I and underwent a stringent military physical, its findings discounting any heart problems. His military service prevented him from running "Boston" again until 1922.

At age 65, he underwent rigorous tests and his heart was found to be unusually healthy. Like another Boston sports icon, Ted Williams, one

**¶In his own way he was every bit as much a giant as Ruth, Grange, Tilden, Sandy or any of the legendary figures of The Roaring '20s. And yet, he was largely unknown — for the Boston Marathon had not caught on in America as yet.¶**

— HALL OF FAME SPORTSWRITER JOE FALLS,  
Comparing Clarence DeMar to the titans of baseball, football, tennis and horse racing of the early 20th Century in his 1977 book, "The Boston Marathon: The incredible zany story of America's greatest foot race..."

must wonder what records DeMar would hold if he had run in those eight prime years, five lost due to his doctor, three as an Army private.

When DeMar first won "Boston" in 1911 he was 5-foot-8 tall and weighed 127 pounds. After years of training, when he won his last, 19 years later in 1930, he surprisingly had gained 15 pounds, tipping the scales at 142.

In the "Roaring 20s" when a dinner of Beef Wellington chased by a few Brandy Alexanders and finished with a fat stogie was thought healthy, DeMar again chose his own path. An early believer that diet and rest could extend athletic prowess, he watched what he ate: plenty of fruits and vegetables washed down with lots of milk; and he slept 8-9 hours a night.

Always self-reliant, DeMar invariably believed in himself. He didn't like or trust coaching. He served as his own tutor, his own motivator, writing in his autobiography that "when I run, I am in supreme command of my destiny."

He chaffed under the reins placed upon him in three Olympics (1912, '24 & '28). His heart set on gold, he medaled only once, a bronze in 1924 at Paris, and placed the blame for those failures squarely on those coaches. DeMar's was the last American marathon medal until Frank Shorter's gold 48 years later in Munich.

Born into poverty on June 7, 1888 in Madeira, Ohio, he was the oldest of six children whose father was dead by the time he was 10. DeMar helped support his family by running to nearby hamlets and peddling trinkets, sometimes earning as much as 50 cents a day.

The struggling family then moved to tiny Warwick in north-central Massachusetts. Shortly thereafter, his overwhelmed mother placed DeMar at the Farm and Trade School on Thompson's Island in Boston Harbor, where he took up cross country and graduated as class valedictorian.

He then went to work on a Vermont farm and, for several years, put himself through the University of Vermont. He left in his junior year to rejoin his mother, this time in Melrose, and found the printer's job needed to again help support his family. He also took up the sport of road racing with purpose.

Determined to succeed, he dismissed critics of his alleged awkward running style writing that, in essence, distance running is "the ability to get there as quickly as possible" and to "run like hell and get the agony over with."

Said to be hard of hearing, DeMar had a taciturn manner and made few friends among his fellow runners. He was often annoyed by the antics of spectators and several times reportedly slugged fans who crossed his path during a race and once allegedly kicked a dog.

DeMar married wife Margaret at 40 and they began their family of five children. Basically shy and thus stingy in public with the spoken word, he nonetheless became a Sunday School teacher and a Boy Scout Troop leader.

He worked with his hands but was also a man of letters, attending Boston University and Harvard and attaining an Associates' degree in printing science. He owned his own print shop and taught printing and coached track at Keene Normal School, now Keene State College, while living in New Hampshire in the 1930s.

For a man who spoke sparingly, he was a prolific writer, composing many magazine articles on distance running. In 1936, DeMar penned his autobiography. As lean as his lifestyle, this extraordinary man summed up his amazing accomplishments in just 92 pages.

When one hears about running in the footsteps of legends here in Ashland, one need not look further than Clarence DeMar, a runner without parallel, a competitor without peer.

*A true immortal.*