

Thousands of runners pounding through the streets of New York,  
not for fame, fortune or even to win.

# The Marathon Mystique

By DAN LITTLE

The last two years I have had the good luck to be a very small part of the New York City Marathon, one of the biggest athletic events in the history of man — 16,000 runners, 26.2 miles, three million spectators, worldwide television and two world records.

The first part of the race began this year on June 2 at 1:01 a.m., the earliest time a runner may mail a request for an application to participate. There were 63,000 applicants for the 16,000 running places. On June 26, the applications were mailed back to all runners at the same time. The first 8,000 places were won by the first 8,000 completed applications to reach the mail box in New York City. The remaining applications went into a lottery from which the last 8,000 applications were drawn.

Starting from a long-established five-miles-per-day running base, my serious training began in August. The months of September and October brought alternating five-mile and ten-mile runs through the week and a long 20-mile run on the weekend. Such training makes life completely interesting; after all, if you are not doing something interesting, you fall asleep.

One nice thing about running a marathon is that the heavy training stops one week before the race. If you are going to train correctly the last week, it is your duty to rest, relax, eat plenty of carbohydrates and save up energy. It is a great time for a vacation in New York City.

The race begins at 10:35 a.m. on the last Sunday in October, but for the runners the day begins much earlier. Most participants get up about 5:30 a.m. to go to Central Park, where a fleet of buses takes them to the Ft. Wadsworth Park on Staten Island. Only runners are allowed in the park area, but with 16,000 entrants, it



OU Regent Dan Little crosses the finish line in his first New York marathon.

seems like a mob. Many runners arrive as early as 7 a.m., and all runners must be there no later than 9 a.m. For two to three hours 16,000 runners move about, stretching and trying to stay warm. The temperature this year was about 40° with a brisk north wind. As you can well imagine, with 16,000 nervous runners, who have been drinking liquid since early morning to increase their hydration, there is a great demand for toilet facilities. Much of the time is spent waiting in line. Even this part can be fun, because you get to visit with runners from all over the world who happen to be standing next to you.

Last year I was standing next to a gentleman who was obviously older. I asked his age. He was 72. I asked how many marathons he had run. He had run 12. I asked how old he had been when he ran his first marathon. He had been 62. I was impressed by what he already had said, but I happened to ask when he had run his last marathon. He had run his last marathon the weekend before. I stood in reverent silence.

I did not know how that man had finished last year, so I was hoping very much to see him again this year. He was there, and I learned that he had finished last year in 6½ hours and, sure enough, this year he had run another marathon the weekend before.

About 10 a.m. the runners start moving into line on the bridge. The fastest, world-class runners line up at the front, with the others in descending order next to time poles according to their expected finishing times.

The nervous excitement of that last 10 to 20 minutes, packed in like sardines with 16,000 runners, was intense. When the cannon finally boomed, there was a tremendous yell from the runners, but the yelling quickly turned to laughter for most of the 16,000 because it was so crowded we could not even begin walking. This year it took me 3 minutes, 36 seconds to reach the starting line.

The Varrazona Bridge arches high over the ships in the Hudson Bay, and from the top, one could see in the far distance the Empire State Building near where the race would end. The bridge itself is nearly a mile long, but when I reached the top there already

were runners as far ahead and as far behind as I could see.

The route quickly turned into a Brooklyn neighborhood. The crowds lined the streets, sometimes five and six people deep. The people were cheering and laughing, and the young kids especially were holding out their hands to be touched and slapped by the runners going by. All kinds of people of all ages were hanging out the windows in the apartment rows.

At this point, I felt so great that I had to keep remembering to pace myself, because I knew *THE WALL* would come later, no matter what. The most common mistake made by marathon runners is to run the first 20 miles too fast.

Somewhere close to 20 miles, most marathon runners hit "The Wall." In oversimplified terms, hitting "The Wall" means the body has exhausted all the stored glycogen, which is our usual source of energy. Once all the glycogen is gone, the body must change energy systems and must start "attacking" itself.

Hitting "The Wall" can happen quickly. A runner may be running smoothly, right on pace, and feeling good. A mile later, the same runner may be in terrible pain, hardly moving, and having to fight to stay mentally oriented.

A few runners hit "The Wall" and just cannot go farther, no matter how badly they want to finish. Most runners who have trained long and hard enough can keep going, although at a much slower pace. It is the type of prolonged pain and agony which tests body, mind and spirit. You want to quit so badly!

The run through Brooklyn and Queens was 14 miles. That part of the race was pure fun. The crowds kept cheering and laughing, and the runners just kept grinning. An estimated three million spectators lined the route; it was a street party. At the 10-mile mark, a large band played "Rocky's Theme" again and again. At many corners there were loud stereo systems.

The neighborhoods changed greatly as we ran through one ethnic neighborhood into another. The most interesting was where the Satmarer Hasidim Jews lived. In this most orthodox, strictest sect, the men had

very old-fashioned black suits, black hats and huge beards. The young men wore the same black suits and hats but their heads were shaved except for two shoulder-length curly sideburns. They watched politely and curiously but did not yell or cheer.

At the 14-mile mark, we left Queens with an uphill climb over the Queensboro Bridge onto Manhattan Island. The crowds were still cheering and yelling, but the runners were becoming much more serious.

Instead of listening to and talking with the spectators, we began to listen to our own bodies, watching for warning signs. Some runners were developing problems; a few were dropping out.

The race turned north into the Bronx and Harlem, where the crowds again became more noisy and fun. There was a lot of music and jiving. Several street groups looked like they had been partying since Saturday night.

After going five miles north into Harlem, we reached the 20-mile mark and began the long, long final six miles back to Central Park. It has been said — and it is so terribly true — that the first 20 miles of a marathon is the easy first half, and the last six miles is the terrible second half.

Nearly all the runners had pain on their faces, and many runners were in serious trouble. The medical aid station was crowded, and a military vehicle was full of sad and sick runners who would have to be trucked to the finish line and family reunion area at Central Park.

The crowds through the last stretch in Central Park are very helpful. Even though you are one of many runners, it sounds like they are yelling and cheering just for you. When they are all yelling, "Keep going, you can make it!", how can you quit just then?

The very last mile is a strange mixture of ultimate pain and the joy of knowing that you will make it and the agony will soon end.

A marathon is really two types of races in one.

The first race determines the winner. Of the 13,500 men and 2,500 women entered in the New York City Marathon, not more than 100 would have the slightest hope of winning.

These world-class runners perform a feat which is hard even to imagine. Last year, Alberto Salazaar set a world record of 2 hours, 8 minutes, 13 seconds, running an average of 4 minutes, 54 seconds per mile up and down hills, through streets with chuckholes, and over bridges with open metal gratings. A five-minute mile will win many high school track meets. Salazaar averaged for 26 miles only 1 minute more than the golden four-minute time for the one-mile race. Last year, Allison Roe set the women's world record of 2 hours, 25 minutes, 29 seconds, averaging 5 minutes, 33 seconds per mile. This year, a strong wind kept the world record from being broken, but Alberto Salazaar had to run shoulder to shoulder with Rodolfo Gomez nearly the entire distance. Salazaar finally won at the very end by 10 yards.

The second race is composed of the individual races of the other 15,900. With no hope or thought of winning, we were racing only against ourselves and for ourselves. Most of us were as serious as if we had a real chance to win, but some were seeking other goals. One runner bounced a basketball the whole way; another ran backwards. Some had funny costumes and gimmicks to arouse loud cheers from the crowd.

Other runners who didn't win were true champions. A blind man finished. The oldest man to finish was 83 years of age; the oldest woman was 81. The last person took more than 11 hours to finish. She was a girl on crutches because of cerebral palsy. Afterwards, she made the statement that she finished the last 11 miles only through an act of God, which means that she must have hit "The Wall" early at the 15-mile mark. I still get goose bumps when I think how brave and courageous she was to endure the last 11 miles and the last five or six hours it would have taken her to finish after she hit "The Wall". In addition to everything else, she fell flat on her face 15 times.

The feeling at the finish line cannot be described. Last year I had wanted to finish under four hours, but I hit "The Wall" so hard that my time was 4 hours, 14 minutes, 31 seconds. I had wanted to finish in the top 10,000, but I dropped to 10,436.

Did I feel like a winner? I had trained hard and had given the race everything I had inside myself. I felt so good that I do not know how Alberto Salazaar could have felt better. I even felt tremendously proud that I had run in the same race in which two world records had been broken.

This year I finally did break the four-hour barrier, finishing in 3 hours, 56 minutes, 30 seconds, moving up to 9,108.

When I crossed the finish line last year, I was so deliriously happy and thankful that all I could do was weakly shout my joy. I must have looked deliriously crazy because three different doctors came over to ask if I were okay. This year I had a tremendous feeling of deep thankfulness that I had been able to run in the New York City Marathon again.

The ordeal was not completely over when you crossed the finish line. There were so many people finishing at the same time that the runners had to go into a long chute. Doctors checked us and took some to medical tents. Because of the strong north wind this year, it seemed that more runners were in trouble and requiring medical attention than last year. Finally, I huddled and shuffled my way through the long chute to the family reunion area.

It can be a real problem to find your family among the thousands of runners and family members in this area. At the same time, there were many runners who were cramping, nauseous and unable to find their families, and then there were the cries of joy and hugging by other runners when they did find their families. Only at that point was the entire race finished. Then you could think about getting back to the hotel, taking a hot bath, and going to bed.

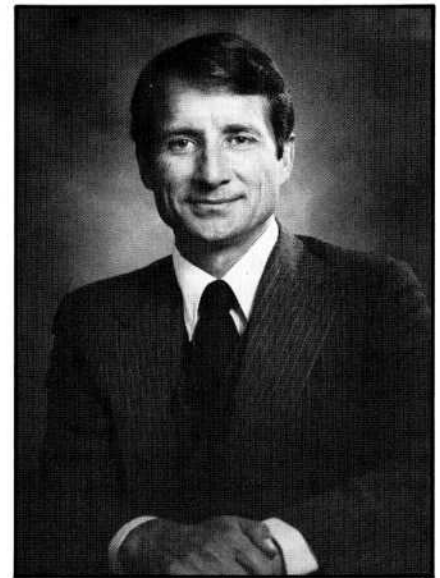
It is surprising how many people are running marathons. University of Oklahoma marathoners I know about are William Matthews, zoology; Craig St. John, psychology; Larry Toothaker, sociology; David Kay, mathematics; Stan Neely, chemistry; Henry Eisenhart and Tom Cross, health, physical education and recreation; and Tom Coniglione, Pat Wilkinson, Hal Balyeat, Ron Elkins and Randy Eichner, College of Medicine.

The Sooner marathon family award would have to go to Alan and Dawn Davis of Oklahoma City and their daughter, Kristin, who all ran in the 1982 Dallas Whiterock Marathon.

To win a marathon requires tremendous athletic ability; to finish a marathon requires only patience, endurance and perseverance. I personally have met a number of persons, and have read about many, who in their 40s, 50s and 60s were overweight, smoked and drank too much, and were having very serious health problems. Several years later, the same persons were running marathons.

It has been said about life in general, "Half the fun is getting there." Well, it does take a long time to train for and to run a marathon, but if you do not give it a try, you will never know how much fun you are missing.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** *When OU Regent Dan Little is not running for pleasure, he is practicing law for profit in Madill, Oklahoma, with his wife, Prudence; his father, Reuel, and Lynn Windel. Dan, Pru and Lynn are all 1968 OU law school graduates. Regent Little began running to "stay in shape" in college and got serious about the sport five years ago. After two New York City marathons, he has set his sights on competing in the Boston Marathon, which has a more limited field and more stringent entry requirements.*