

## Winnipeg and the Running Boom

By Dennis A. Lang

What I would like to share with you in this article is the story of the Running Boom in Winnipeg, as I experienced and remember it. My involvement with running began unexpectedly in 1964, when I was just 13 years old. This gives me over 40 years of historical perspective to draw on for this review. I caution that the recollections of events and trends are mine alone and are subject to the limitations of one individual's interpretation and memory. I apologize that I could not include everyone and everything worthy of inclusion in such a short narrative. With that said let us head back in time to October 1964, when it all began for me.

I was an active 13-year-old in grade 8, at St. John's Junior High School, in the north end of Winnipeg. Like most youngsters at the time I enjoyed playing lots of sports. This was an era before video and computer games, the Internet, and specialty TV channels so most of our activities were done outdoors. I played soccer, baseball, football and especially hockey. It was the typical Canadian boyhood at the time. The only organized running I did was an occasional sprint event at some field day. I knew nothing about the sport of running or cared to. This would change providentially one-day when I came home from school, turned on the TV to watch my usual programs before dinner and found something on CBC called the Olympic Games from Tokyo, Japan. As destiny would have it the coverage was on track and field and the men's 800m final. There was a Canadian runner named Bill Carruthers in the race, so I decided to watch and route for him. Well he finished second, in a thrilling race, winning an Olympic medal for Canada. Experiencing this for some reason had a profound effect on me. A seed was planted that day that would grow into a lifelong passion for running. After dinner I couldn't wait to go outside and practice running around the block, dreaming that I was running for Canada in the Olympic Games. So began my life as a runner.

That winter I read with delight every book in my local public library on Track and Field and the Olympic Games. When spring came I took my first tentative steps at training for athletic events, with the goal of competing at my school's annual field day, to be held on the crushed gravel track of Sargent Park. I came away with a chest full of ribbons and knew I'd found my calling. As summer vacation started, I turned my sights on training for school cross-country races in September. I took out my favourite book on Athletics and set about developing a training program for July and August. The book had sections on sprinting, middle distance and long distance running and sample training programs for each. I decided to do all 3 programs based on the principle all 14-year-olds understand well, that if one is good three must be better. Fortunately I was a tough 14-year-old. So I diligently set out to train everyday and somehow managed to survive the summer with my body and enthusiasm still intact. Friends and neighbours on my block thought I was crazy running round and round the big playground in front of Machray School on Mountain Avenue. But their jeering and laughter would not deter me. This was 1965 and you rarely saw people running anywhere except at a track meet, so the site of a teenage boy running laps around a big field because he wanted to, was bizarre to say the least. Fast forward 20 years to 1985 and the situation is remarkably different. Running now had become an inextricable part of the North American culture with millions of people enjoying the activity; with the support of a billion-dollar running industry. How had things changed so fast and what was Winnipeg's response to this continent wide running explosion?

At the start of the 70's there was very little organized road running being done in North America or Winnipeg. Running generally meant competing in track and cross-country races usually through your school or university, and very few athletes continued to train after graduation. Jogging, as a form of regular exercise, was just taking root and athletic shoes had begun to improve in quality from the old black canvas sneakers we all wore as kids. Fashion not fitness was driving sales in the small athletic shoe industry, as it became trendy for kids and teens to wear sports shoes for casual wear. PR and certified course were not a part of our lexicon yet and the only local road race I knew about and entered a couple of times was the Icelandic Festival 10-mile run from Winnipeg Beach to Gimli, which attracted maybe 25 entrants. While preparing this article I learned there was a 10-mile road race held in 1971, in conjunction with the Red River Ex, then called Manisphere. It ran from the Winnipeg Arena west, down the sidewalk of Portage Avenue, to a turn-around point and back. I also remember a marathon being held in the spring of '72, in Bird's Hill Park and even gave thought to running in it. Some friends of mine did and nearly killed themselves by going out way too fast. We had no clue how to run a marathon, providing you lost your mind and could find one to run in. I was a knowledgeable fan of world athletics at the time and the only marathons on my radar were the

Olympic Marathon and the Boston Marathon, which then had a tiny field of male only mainly elite runners. I remember meeting another runner while training at Sargent Park track one weekend, who stated he was "training for the marathon." This sounded so strange to me at the time. Nobody trained for the marathon. Even among the small community of runners back then, I think marathoners were considered a bit odd.

In the fall of 1970 I entered the University of Manitoba oblivious to the opportunities for me to develop as a runner there. I had been doing some running that summer, on my own as usual, and thought I was in pretty good shape. I entered a 2-mile race at a student track meet I'd seen advertised somewhere, just to see what I could run. This was another intervention of fate in my running life as Jim Daly, the track and cross-country coach, took notice of me and invited me to join the University's cross-country team. This opened up a new and important chapter in my sporadic development as a runner. I had the desire to be a better runner but my progress was inconsistent and retarded by a lack of opportunities to get coaching, encouragement and group training with appropriate partners and role models. For the first time in my running life I was in such an environment but the benefits received from it would be years away from being realized. My university experience with running continued to be inconsistent and unproductive, as I did not take advantage of what was available to me.

However, I did experience an exceptional group of people that came together at the University of Manitoba, in those early 70's. Their collaboration and synergy would go on to make a significant contribution to the running movement in Winnipeg as top competitors, role models, coaches, race directors, organizers and builders that continues to this day. This critical mass of dynamism included Jim Daly, Chris McCubbins, Bob Walker, Wayne McMahon, Alphonse Bernard, Grant Towns, Sheldon Reynolds and Carl Sproll. Four of them are active in coaching young people today, over 35 years later.

Unknown to me at the time, a second critical mass of people was coalescing in 1970 to form the Manitoba Road Runners Association, the MRA predecessor. I was very surprised to discover, while preparing this article, that the MRRA was started as early as 1970. This was well before any recognizable signs of a coming running revolution. I first became aware of this neophyte running association around 1973 or 74, through new road races and road relays that began appearing in and around Winnipeg. I do not have first hand knowledge of these dedicated pioneers or the early history of the MRRA, but will mention three individuals who are credited with getting road-running up and going in Winnipeg. They are Charlie Paillie, Victor Wilkes, and Laurie Logan.

The spark that ignited the mass participation running movement in North America came in 1972, at the Munich Olympics. An American runner named Frank Shorter won a story book victory in the Olympic Marathon, while millions watched back home on television. This single act of destiny has been recognized as the watershed event that started what would become known to history as the Running Boom. Of course the boom did not happen instantly but rather progressively throughout the balance of the 70's. 1979 is often cited as the year that the running boom became "official".

It seems to me that an amazing coincidence of history also occurred in 1972. An American running shoe manufacturer with an odd sounding name was founded and launched its first line of shoes, just before the Munich Olympics. NIKE would go on to become a key sponsor of the running movement.

There were other cultural influences gaining momentum at this juncture of history. In 1968 Dr. Kenneth Cooper released his landmark book called "Aerobics" in which he persuasively argued the case for jogging as a form of regular cardiovascular exercise to combat heart and other diseases, that were showing an alarming increase in our sedentary North American population. Running for the "average Joe" was becoming culturally acceptable, even desirable, and more and more joggers and runners began appearing on the streets and in the parks. In 1977 Jim Fixx would release his treatise "The Complete Book on Running" which quickly became a best seller and added further momentum to the movement. What began as a trickle would grow into a tidal wave, in a little over a decade.

By 1973 road races were becoming more common in Winnipeg through the efforts of the MRRA. I remember my first race in Assiniboine Park that spring. My recollection is that it was a 4-mile run, on a sunny Sunday morning under very soggy footing, as the snow was still melting. Thirty five years later I am still running spring road races in Assiniboine Park thanks to the solid foundation laid down by the dedicated builders of the 70's. Job well done and now the MRA has provided a means to recognize those and later

accomplishments with its Hall of Fame. Marilyn Fraser and Ron Chopek were so honoured from this early group.

Looking back now I consider it a great personal misfortune that I was out of touch with running between 1975 and 1982. These would have been very exciting times to be around the running movement, as it grew out of its infancy. This was a time I spent in career building and did not keep in contact with the local running scene. Fortunately I never lost in my interest in running. These formative years saw enormous growth in the running movement and Winnipeg was no exception. In 1979 Winnipeg joined the craze of North American cities hosting a major marathon. John Robertson was the driving force in getting this project going, but many Winnipeggers contributed to its success. Our first Manitoba Marathon started near the Winnipeg Stadium and finished inside. The course included a section out to Headingley, on the East Side of the Red River, then back to Winnipeg on the Trans Canada Highway and down Portage Avenue to the Polo Park finish. If you talk to anyone who ran this course you will get an earful about how awful that last endless stretch from Headingley to the stadium was. A mind boggling 4500 runners entered this marathon only event. The next year the marathon moved to its current start/finish location at the University of Manitoba. In 1983 a half-marathon and marathon relay were added. Other events were included over time and today the Manitoba Marathon is the province's largest mass participation event.

It was during this period that Winnipeg got its first running store, on the corner of Stafford and Grosvenor. It was called Phidippides and was opened in the early 80's by well known local runners Ron Chopek and Doug Sammons. The store sponsored the Phidippides Running Club, which served as a melting pot for Winnipeg runners of all ages and abilities. The Yellow Snow Athletic Club was also formed around this time comprised mainly of elite runners coming out of the University of Manitoba. Led by running guru Chris McCubbins, its focus was on performance racing. As an American McCubbins won a gold medal in the 3000m steeplechase at the 1967 Pan American Games in Winnipeg and had the misfortune of being injured for the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. He later moved to Winnipeg and entered the University of Manitoba in 1970, where I would meet him. He became a Canadian citizen in time for the 1976 Olympics and competed for Canada in the 10000m track event. Having an Olympic caliber runner in your midst was a boon for our elite runner community. Chris was very generous with his encouragement, advice and time and attracted a talented following of athletes around him. His impact on the Winnipeg running scene cannot be overstated and continues to this day.

When I came back into running in 1983, after an eight year hiatus, the running world had completely changed and everyone seemed "marathon crazy." In fact that is what drew me back into running, a desire to complete a marathon. I had never done a marathon in my previous experience as a runner. As alluded to earlier, there were few marathons being contested in North America, they weren't well known and the small fraternity of marathoners was considered a bit eccentric. By 1983 this was all flipped around. Marathon running had become a cultural phenomenon and an enormous running community was fixated on this 26-mile test of endurance and running prowess. Now if you didn't run the marathon, you were considered a bit odd by other runners. Men and women of all ages, shapes and walks of life were training for and completing marathons and enjoying it! To accommodate them there were well-publicized marathons galore. It really was a remarkable transformation over such a short period of time.

What else had changed? Running shoes, from "no-tech" to "hi-tech". In 1970 we had available to us a small selection of featureless, all purpose sports shoes from two German manufacturers, Adidas and Puma. There was also an obscure company from Japan, called Tiger, whose shoes you could get by mail order, if you knew about them. I started using Tigers in 1971 after seeing the cross-country team running in them. This brand offered a unique line of innovative training and racing shoes that foreshadowed shoe trends to come. I recently learned that the co-founders of NIKE had collaborated closely with Tiger in developing some of these shoes and after a falling out, NIKE was created and launched its own line of Tiger cloned shoes. Tiger would change its name to ASICS in the mid 80's.

By 1983 the number of running shoe models and manufacturers had grown exponentially, in response to exploding market demand. I counted 15 brands and over 40 models from a 1984 running magazine. Intense competition between the brands also drove research to develop shoes that better met the needs of a diverse and growing running community. We now had great looking shoes, in men's and women's versions, with significant improvements in durability, cushioning and stability, as well as a choice between straight

and curved-lasted models. My favourite category was the featherweight racing flats, of which I've had a considerable indulgence.

Running wear grew even more exponentially and technologically than did shoes. From the standard gym shorts, cotton t-shirts and baggy sweats that we wore in the early 70's, there was now a plethora of fashionable clothing designed for running, for use in all kinds of weather. The moisture wicking fabric polypropylene was developed to keep runners comfortable in heat or cold. A breathable material called Gore-Tex kept you dry in rain and warm in winter. And yes, men were wearing Lycra tights, to display their now slimmer derrieres. To show off your hi-tech running shoes and meticulously coordinated outfits there were road races everywhere. It truly was the best of times to be a runner.

As I confessed earlier, it was the lure of the marathon that pulled me back into running. I started training in January of '83, on the small indoor track above the gym, at the old downtown YMCA. My sights were set on running the Manitoba Marathon, to be held on May 29 that year. This would be the only one of 29 Manitoba Marathons to date that was not run on Father's Day. It was held earlier, to accommodate hosting the Canadian Marathon Championships and selection race for the Canadian team to the inaugural World Track & Field Championships, later that summer. In April I tested my fitness by running my first ever 10K-road race, on something called a certified course. It was an enlightening experience for me when some very fit women runners finished ahead of me. The few road races I had run in the early 70's were all male fields with maybe a women or two, although I don't remember any, and measured in miles probably by the race organizer's car odometer. The run was held in West Kildonan Park and was part of the Tri-Park Grand Prix Series, which was a 5K race in St.Vital Park, then a 10K in Kildonan Park and finishing with a 15K race in Assiniboine Park, all in April. Sound familiar? The name was later changed to the Puma Grand Prix Series, after its long time sponsor, when it became more practical to hold all races in Assiniboine Park. The Puma 5K traditionally kicks off the road race season in Winnipeg. The race series is still going strong today, which is a testament to MRA Hall of Fame member Pat Riddell, who has been a key organizer since its inception in 1979.

There is nothing quite like your first marathon. It starts with a period of preparation beginning months before race day and ends hours, even days after you cross the finish line. Building up those weekly long runs to previously unimagined distances, encourages and sustains you, as you watch your mileage climb and your confidence grow. As race day nears time seems to slow down to an agonizing crawl as your anticipation builds. Finally it's here, marathon weekend, and you feel as excited as a 5 year-old at Christmas. You pick up your number and race packet with butterflies in your stomach. Race headquarters is jammed with people and you know you are part of something very special. You have one more sleep to go. You check and re-check your shoes and clothing for tomorrow. Everything is laid out or packed meticulously. You have your final carbo-loading meal then try to relax for the rest of the evening. Bedtime comes and you try but can't fall asleep. You toss and turn for what seems like an eternity and then the alarm goes off. Regardless of the time you jump out of bed wide-awake like you've just had the best sleep of your life. You are primed and ready to go. After a light snack and hydrating beverage you head to the race start. The butterflies return as you line up for the gun. The air is electric with excitement and you know you have made the right decision in sacrificing for this moment. There's a loud bang and a mass of humanity begins to move forward in unison. Your marathon odyssey begins and unfolds with a rapidity that defies description. Before you know it you're at 10 miles, then 15, then 18 and you start to think about the marathoners' bane, the dreaded wall you've heard so much about. You tentatively approach 20 miles and nothing, 21 miles still good, 22 miles and now you know you are going to make it. Your body and mind are exhausted but you are almost there and nothing will stop you now. You cross the finish line euphoric, as a marathon conqueror. The feeling will stay with you for days after. As I said, there is nothing like your first marathon.

I had such a great time training, buying shoes and running in my first marathon that I decided to keep it going. Have you ever noticed that running is about the only place where men have more shoes than women do? That summer a runner friend invited me to some workouts being held at "the dump" by the Prairie Sky Road Runners, the new name for the Phidipides Running Club. This was another fateful event in my running life, as I soon became a club member. Joining with Prairie Sky would quickly re-ignited my dormant passion for running. Befriending and training with the great people in that club taught me a lot and elevated my enjoyment of running to new levels. Ray Garrity and Ken Perchaluk became my role models, for their dedication and training ethic. Doug Sammons provided coaching and workout routines. Allan Parkin brought contagious enthusiasm to our group. Ron Chopek wore many hats and was an extraordinary organizer.

Rick McClennan kept us laughing and Mike Gwynn looked after the details as club president. Many club members would serve with distinction on the MRA board. The club hosted the Bird's Hill 20K for many years and its membership generously donated their time and energy supporting the running community. The Prairie Sky Road Runners would go on to leave an indelible mark on Winnipeg's running history.

Another thing that changed dramatically by 1983 was training philosophy. It was now hard/easy or the hard day easy day method that prevailed. Stress – Recovery – Improve was the mantra of the running movement. Previously the mindset was hard day every day or you're not working hard enough. By incorporating sanity with the principles of progressive loading and recovery just about anyone could improve and enjoy their running. The other component of training that made "average Joe marathoning" possible was the "long run". By incorporating a longer run into your training program once every week or two and then gradually lengthening the distance over time, runners could safely build themselves up to the marathon distance. These principles were popularized largely through running guides written by Olympic runner, turned Running Boom sage, Jeff Galloway. I believe Galloway made a significant contribution to the success of the running movement through his books and continent wide speaking engagements and has to be considered one of the luminaries of the era. I know he had a big affect on the way we trained for the marathon in Winnipeg.

I've written a lot about the changes I observed from 1975 to 1983, as the Running Boom swept across the continent. But was there anything that hadn't changed much. Yes, a runner's desire to improve and go faster. When I returned to running in 1983, personal records or PR's were being sought after like nuggets of gold and you could always tell a runner who got a new PR after a race, by their lit-up eyes and ear-to-ear grin. As before, runners needed goals to sustain them in training and push them in races and the most coveted of all prizes was a new PR.

I went on to run four more marathons in the next 3 years in Ottawa, Toronto, Chicago and San Francisco. By then the mystique of the marathon had run its course in my life. I would run only one more marathon. In 1991, at the age of 40, I ran my second Manitoba Marathon, as a masters athlete. Between my first marathon in 1983 and my last in 1991 I would run about 90 other road races, around North America. My most memorable was the 1989 Bay to Breakers 12K in San Francisco. 90,000 people lined up for the start of this event, many in elaborate and outrageous costumes, and many more tethered together in teams of 12 people, to run as centipedes. At one point in mid race I passed two male participants that were running in nothing but their birthday suits, except for shoes, with mud smeared all over their bodies. This was the strangest thing I ever witnessed as a runner.

By the end of the 80's another running club appeared on the Winnipeg scene that would manifest a new phase of the running movement's evolution. The After Five Running Club was initially formed by a small group of mainly fitness runners who got to know each other running after work, on the small basement track of the Sargent Park Recreational Complex. From this modest beginning the club would grow to become a pillar of the running community in Winnipeg during the 90's. The running revolution had matured by this time. The heady years of the 80's were behind it, the marathon craze was mostly over and the running movement seemed more laid-back now. Running was developing a recreational side to go with its competitive nature. As numbers grew the After 5 Club became as much a social fraternity as a running club, with lots of group activities for its diverse membership. A small nucleus of performance oriented runners followed Ken Perchaluk into the club, including myself, and we soon had a training group going which became known in the club as the "racing division." We pushed each other hard in training and at races and got impressive results. This period was one of the most memorable and enjoyable of my running life. The After 5 Club would put many members on the board of the MRA, including several presidents, host the Grand Beach Sun Run for many years, and be a fixture at local races as competitors, volunteers and spectators.

In 1989 the running association introduced something new with its annual race calendar, the MRA Grand Prix Series. Selected races were designated as Grand Prix events and runners would earn points for their finishing positions. At the end of the race season your total points accumulated would determine your Grand Prix standing, in your respective age group. I had a great time competing in this new season long event, jockeying in and out of the lead with my age group nemesis, the notorious marathon man Ken Perchaluk. The next year the Timex Canadian Road Race Series was introduced nation wide with cash awards and watches to local winners. The grand prix series of races was a progressive development that added a new

dimension to our enjoyment of the sport. The Timex Series continues as a fixture on Run Manitoba's race calendar and the MRA has the ASICS Grand Prix Series on its calendar.

In 1993 Chris and Lynn Glowach brought the Running Room to Winnipeg when they opened up a franchise store on Portage Avenue, across from Assiniboine Park. Founded by dynamic Edmontonian John Stanton, the Running Room soon injected new energy into the Winnipeg running scene. Chris himself would go on to become something of a local legend as a runner and spiritual guru, winning the Manitoba Marathon several times. The Running Room hosted a popular Saturday morning brunch, on marathon weekend, which brought many celebrities from the running world to Winnipeg, as guest speakers. They included Frank Shorter, Bill Rogers, Joan Benoit, Jeff Galloway and Dr. George Sheehan. You could usually meet these icons of running at the store and often join a group to go for a run with them. The Glowach Running Room organized and sponsored many road races and running clinics, as well as socials and other running related events. Its legacy lives on today through the high standards it set. Today we have five running stores generously supporting the Winnipeg running community. Three Running Room locations, Ken Friesen's Stride Ahead Sports, in the Grant Park Shopping Centre and our newest store City Park Runners.

By now you must be getting tired of seeing the name Ken Perchaluk. Bear with me because there is one more chapter to go in which he figures prominently. By 1994 my 12-year love affair with road running was on the decline. I accomplished mostly what I had wanted to. I was running with a stubborn and painful upper leg injury, which made training difficult and racing unpleasant. As well, other life activities were competing for my time and attention. 1994 witnessed my last racing campaign and it sure looked to me like my competitive racing days were over. The hunger just wasn't there any longer. Ken and I had been training partners and race combatants since 1983 and Ken had been running since 1979, except for a period of several years in the 90's, when he struggled through a debilitating back problem. Even during these forced down years he never lost his passion for running and continued to participate in the running community however he could. I think it was during this time that the coaching bug bit him. By now he had collected a wealth of knowledge and experience about training and began to share that resource with other runners, who wanted to improve. Gradually, through the late 90's, a growing number of runners were showing up at Tuesday night group workouts, to train under his guidance. They eventually would formalize the relationship by adopting the name Roadkill and a new running juggernaut appeared on the local road race scene. For about the last decade Roadkill has been the pre-eminent torchbearer in Winnipeg, for the continuation of the Running Boom into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and worthy bearers they were.

Now you're probably wondering what became of me? Yogi Berra, the much-quoted Yankee's catcher from the 1950's, is credited with the saying "it ain't over 'till it's over!" From 1995 to 2002, remarkably another eight-year period, I had been largely out of running except that this time I kept in touch with the local running scene. I even managed to do some running most years and got in an occasional road race for fun. In the winter of 2003 I had a revelation about the role of running in my life that would soon start the fire in me again. Initially I just wanted to get back into shape and to use running as a part of a physically and spiritually healthy lifestyle. But it didn't take long for the racing bug to strike again. I joined up with Roadkill, one thing lead to another and in 2005 I was honoured with Run Manitoba's Male Road Runner of the Year award.

After competing in some track and road races at the 2005 World Masters Games in Edmonton, I had another revelation, which would lead to unimaginable achievements. By seeing what runners from around the world at my age could do, I became consumed by the possibility of racing fast on the track at age 55 and above. That fall I made the decision to go for it and joined the Bison Track and Field Club, to be coached by Claude Berube and to workout with talented young athletes from the University of Manitoba. The pieces quickly began to fall into place. My track training went well and in the summer of 2006 I achieved my goals of setting new national masters records at the 1500m and 3000m distances, for age-class 55-59. In December 2006 I broke the national masters indoor records for the same two events and ended up the year ranked ninth in the world in the 1500m, for men 55-59. In the summer of 2007 I would win four gold metals at the Canadian Masters Track And Field Championships. I had always wanted to be a successful track runner, since my epiphany with running at age 13, but was never able to realize the dream until I turned 55.

So we come to the end of my story. For now! Remember "it ain't over till it's over!"