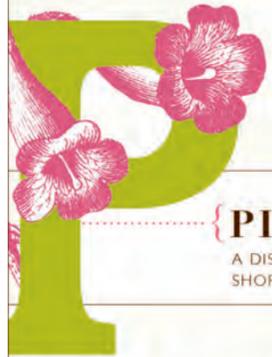


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Still Running After All These Years

BY MARY S. GILBERT

If it's true that "90% of life is just showing up,"
then these three local runners are 100% winners.



Dick Monheim of Edgewood in training on Beechwood Boulevard, near the starting point of the Great Race.

As thousands of runners gathered for the start of last year's Great Race, a heavy rain changed to a light drizzle, and then to a blowing mist. That's when Rob Ruck noted, "It's never really running on the Great Race in 32 years."

He would know. He's run it every year. Ruck, who lives in Squirrel Hill, is one of an elite group of 26 men who have participated in—and finished—all 32 Great Races since the iconic event's inception on September 25, 1977. Collectively, they have logged 5,158.4 miles on race days—tantamount to running a relay from Pittsburgh to Seattle and back. Individually, each has run 198.4 miles. Race organizers call the men the Perfect Great Racers, a name that makes John George smile.

"I wouldn't characterize myself as perfect," laughs George, a Shadyside resident. "I'd call myself a habitual Great Racer. I've changed my schedule and not gone on trips just to be here for it. One of us was extremely ill after surgery and ran it. My flirting with my schedule is nothing like what some others have done. The race is part of the city's vitality. I expect it to happen the last Sunday in September and I carve out time for it."

Officially known as the Richard S. Caliguiri City of Pittsburgh Great Race, the fall fitness classic presented by Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield is Pennsylvania's largest 10K road race, with up to 14,000 runners competing in both the 10K and 5K distances. The tradition will continue this year on September 26, when runners, walkers, and wheelchair

athletes lace up their sneakers at the start line on Beechwood Boulevard at Frick Park in Squirrel Hill and head toward the finish at Point State Park.

For Ruck, who began running while a student at Yale University, entering the very first Great Race was the right thing to do at the right time.

"Lots of my friends were running, and running was starting to pick up momentum around the country," he recalls. "I think I was pretty confident I could do the distance, but I was unsure of my time. The sense of empowerment to take over the streets and be with this mass of people was exciting."

Edgewood's Dick Monheim began running the year prior to the first Great Race at the suggestion of his doctor as a way to alleviate minor headaches.

"I started to run for health reasons and to be in shape, and I just kept doing it and have become addicted to it," Monheim explains. "The Great Race was the first race I ever ran. I just wanted the experience of taking part in an event like that. Back then there weren't many races. This one starts about a mile from my house, so I can run to it."

Ruck is a historian and senior lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh, where he teaches a sports history class. He understands the powerful role athletics can play in helping people establish their sense of self, and views running as a central part of his own identity. He even uses the Great Race as an incentive for his students, granting extra course credit for those



Rob Ruck of Squirrel Hill and John George of Shadyside, just before undertaking last year's race.

who participate. Some 20 students have gone the distance.

"In many ways, the Great Race is sport at its best," Ruck says. "Thousands are inspired to get in shape and in better shape and lead healthier lives and run in this race. The resources that go into the Great Race are important things for a society to be doing."

Race director Mike Radley says the Perfect Great Racers have a unique perspective on the race's history and growth, including when the official event was cancelled in 2003 due to the city's financial woes (the group was among those who kept the tradition alive that year by staging the "Great Replacement Race" in Schenley Park).

"They've been with us since way back, when we used numbered Popsicle sticks to determine the order of finish, up through the introduction of an electronic timing device, a running clinic, and a health and fitness expo," Radley observes.

A more personal change these Perfect Great Racers have experienced over the years is the inevitable onset of the aches and pains of middle age.

But sore knees, the occasional injury, and the need to reduce their training mileage have done nothing to temper their enthusiasm for the race. Even though their days of setting personal records are over, their competitive juices still flow—and they still run for time, all hop-

ing to stay within the sub-50- to 60-minute range this year.

Fear also drives Ruck, George, and Monheim to keep highlighting the last Sunday in September on their racing calendars. None wants to be the next one to break the streak.

Plus there are perks to being Perfect, like special dinners and other events recognizing their achievement. The runners (among them former Pittsburgh mayor Tom Murphy) are also allowed to line up at the start line at the front of the pack next to those who are seeded based on their fast times.

"It's ironic that, back when I was younger and really running for time, I had to start in the back and jockey for a good position," notes George. "Now I get to take off right from the starting line, and all I care about is making it to the finish."

Bad knees notwithstanding, George says his goal for this year's race is to finish in one piece. "The Great Race is part of the fiber of the city, and I want to be there for the long run, if you will," he says. "It would be nice to do the race into my 90s. My knees will be at the race this year because they have no choice."

For more information about the 2010 Richard S. Caliguiri City of Pittsburgh Great Race, taking place Sunday, September 26, visit www.run-greatrace.com or call 412-255-2493.



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