

# THE GREAT RACE

## Fit and Fabulous at 40



BY MARY GILBERT

In September 25, 1977, some 400 intrepid men and women clad in shorts, T-shirts, and athletic shoes congregated just outside Frick Park along Beechwood Boulevard near South Dallas Avenue. They had assembled to take part in a new venture—running the 6.2-mile Great Race.

Then-mayor Richard S. Caliguiri, a Greenfield native who conceived of the 10K road race as a community fun run, purposely situated the start line outside his own front door.

Following a mostly downhill course, runners passed through Squirrel Hill and Point Breeze, fringing Shadyside via a quick turn from Forbes Avenue onto Morewood Avenue. They proceeded down Fifth Avenue through med-and-eds-dense Oakland and the Lower Hill, taking in the sweeping panorama of the Monongahela River from Boulevard of the Allies before finishing Downtown in the grassy flatland of Point State Park.

Carl Hatfield of Phillip, West Virginia, was the winner. Finishers received numbered popsicle sticks as timing devices to inform them of their places, a precursor to the numbered Frisbees used the following year.

Fast forward to 2017. The Great Race—officially renamed the Richard S. Caliguiri City of Pittsburgh Great Race in 1993 to honor its founder, who died in 1988—is celebrating its 40th anniversary on September 24.

While elements of the Great Race have changed over four decades, the East End still wholeheartedly offers the unwavering support critical to its longevity, from anchoring the start, to businesses providing cheering sections, to residents setting up bands on their front porches and even allowing runners to use the bathrooms in their homes. Runners, volunteers, and spectators alike hail from East End neighborhoods.



Mayor Richard S. Caliguiri (in track suit) leads the pack at the start of the first Great Race, September 25, 1977.

**Opposite:** Great Race participants take off each year at the start line on Beechwood Boulevard in Squirrel Hill, near the Frick Environmental Center.

Pam Forth, courtesy City of Pittsburgh

# THE GREAT RACE



**Above:** The race route takes runners down Forbes Avenue, through the heart of the Squirrel Hill business district.

**Right:** Barry Goldmeier of Rockville, Maryland, has made several appearances juggling down the race route.



“The success of the race is a testament to how the East End has embraced it and allowed it to grow,” affirms Brian Katze, race director and special events manager for Pittsburgh’s Department of Public Safety, the agency that oversees the run.

The last Sunday in September date is enshrined on the city’s annual events calendar.

Currently the largest 10K road race in Pennsylvania and ranked one of the top 20 in the country, the Great Race draws participants from over 40 states and seven countries. The course has remained essentially the same since its inception, save for necessary alterations due to construction projects and acts of nature like Hurricane Ivan in 2004. For more than a decade, Highmark has sponsored the Great Race in support of community health and wellness.

This September 24, up to 16,500 participants—a maximum 11,000 in the 10K and 5,500 in the 5K run/fitness walk—will retrace the steps of the initial 400, honoring the Great Race’s 40-year history and propelling it

onward. (The 5K race, which entered the line-up in 1993, starts at Fifth Avenue and Atwood Street in Oakland and follows the 10K course to the finish line.)

Ideally, all 21 runners known as Perfect Great Racers will continue their uninterrupted streak of completing every Great Race. When the event was cancelled in 2003 because of the city’s fiscal crisis, most, if not all, either participated in the privately organized Great Replacement Race in Schenley Park or ran the normal route to keep their tradition alive. Hatfield is part of that esteemed group. By virtue of his win in 1977, he always wears bib number one.



John George of Shadyside is among 21 runners known as Perfect Great Racers who have participated in all of the previous races.

Perfect Great Racer John George of Shadyside is determined to be at the start line again this year. “I don’t know how to stop it at this point, and I don’t want to,” he says. “It gives me a goal every year. We keep our fingers crossed because we all want all the guys who’ve done it to continue.” His favorite point in the race is cresting at Duquesne University, with only a mile or so to go.

Back in 1977, George was preparing for his first marathon and used the Great Race as a training run. In those days he ran for speed, and he still sets time goals for himself. He’s kept every race T-shirt and jokes with his kids that his collection will be their inheritance.

The inaugural Great Race was the first race ever for Perfect Great Racers Rob Ruck and Dick Monheim.

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Rob Ruck of Squirrel Hill, another Perfect Great Racer, preparing to hit the trails in Schenley Park, where he runs regularly.

Besides reveling in the camaraderie of his fellow Perfect Great Racers, Ruck, who resides in Squirrel Hill, feels a personal attachment to the course itself.

“On that day, the streets belong to the people, and it’s exhilarating,” Ruck enthuses. “I run near where my son was born, where I’ve lived, and where I work at the University of Pittsburgh. It’s not an anonymous course. I’m running on something that’s part of my life.”

Monheim, who lives in Edgewood, will be 76 when race day rolls around, the oldest of the Perfect Great Racers. “We just refer to ourselves as perfect,” he quips. “It’s a big deal not to be the next person to drop off.”

To promote the race’s 40th anniversary, renowned pop artist Burton Morris—who

grew up in Squirrel Hill and graduated from Carnegie Mellon University—has designed a graphic of the city skyline with an industrial vibe in shades of white, black, grey, and blue. An imprint of the illustration will appear on the runners’ black T-shirts and on the publicity poster. In addition, finishers in both the 10K and 5K will receive medals for the first time, as keepsakes of their achievement.

Perhaps this year the men’s 10K course record of 27:09 or the women’s course record of 31:02 will fall. Long gone are the early rudimentary timing systems. Nowadays, runner bibs carry disposable digital chip timers that enable organizers to post finishes in real time on the race website.



Dick Monheim of Edgewood, the most senior of the Perfect Great Racers, during a training run near the race start line.



In recognition of the 40th anniversary of the Great Race, renowned artist Burton Morris, a Squirrel Hill native now living in Los Angeles, created this poster.

Environmentally conscious, the Great Race diverts more than 90 percent of its waste away from landfills, earning green certification from the Council for Responsible Sport.

At 40 years and counting, the Richard S. Caliguiri City of Pittsburgh Great Race is looking to the future, having brought on Pittsburgh Three Rivers Marathon, Inc.—better known as P3R—as race operators to partner with the city. Katze calls the move inevitable as the race matures.

“We hope to put together a more powerful product,” Katze explains. “Runners will see new things, but the core race experience will be the same.”

George sounds nostalgic as he contemplates the 40th anniversary of the Great Race. “After all these years, it’s still a big event,” he says. “When else can you run down the middle of the Boulevard of the Allies? It’s quite a view.”

For more information about the Richard S. Caliguiri City of Pittsburgh Great Race, visit [rungreatrace.com](http://rungreatrace.com). SA





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