

A brief history of marathoning in Juneau

The Juneau Parks and Recreation department sponsored marathons in Juneau from 1971 through 1988. Each race started at the Mendenhall Glacier, but course layouts changed several times. Jack Beedle won the first marathon in Juneau, on a course that traversed the Loop Road twice, included a section of Montana Creek Road, and returned to the glacier. Jack was entering his junior year at JDHS at the time, and was running less than 10 miles at a time. His time of 2:53:43 remained a record for several years. Pat Watson won the first women's race, though Carol Hogin's time of 3:31:10 the next year (1972) reset the women's record for several years.

One youth in the running scene at this time was Kevin Strain, whose father Floyd supervised the Juneau Park and Recreation track program the early 1970's and was a PE teacher at Floyd Dryden. In 1972, five-year-old Kevin ran the marathon in 6:56:39, setting the age-class *world record*. Returning in 1975, Kevin ran 3:34:30, setting the world record for 7 and 8 year-olds, and edging out another young standout runner, Rick Thibodeau (then 17). Careful observers of the Juneau running scene have noted that Rick never ran another marathon.

Around 1977, Dave Hayes and Steve Davis arrived on the Juneau running scene, and quickly became known for their high mileage, fast-paced workouts. Dave won the marathon in 1978 in a record 2:32:00 and Steve won in 1980 with a 2:34:30 (a logistical mishap in the 1978 race led to a glass of Kerosene being served to 3rd place runner Tom Loatman at an aid station!). Not to be outdone by these fast times, Guy Thibodeau won the 1981 race with a record 2:31:53. But, this high mark fell again in 1982 when Coast Guardsman Tom Bernard ran 2:30:56. Also, Rosemary Gute (39) ran her first marathon in 1981, setting a mark of 3:03:52 which remains the fastest time by a woman in a Juneau marathon. Sadly, a series of knee-ligament ski injuries that began in 1982 curtailed Rosemary's running career.

The last two "Park and Rec." marathons in Juneau (1987 and 1988) were won by Glenn Frick, making his tally of 3 wins in the series (he won in 1975 as well) equal to that for Guy Thibodeau (1972, 77, 81). Glenn's time of 2:42:27 in 1987, at age 48, is the Masters (over 40) record for a Juneau marathon.

In the late seventies the marathon route changed, to traverse the Loop Road but once and include out-and-back traverses of the Fritz Cove and Engineer's Cutoff roads. Then in 1981, the course traversed the Loop Road 1.5 times, and finished at the Lena Recreation area. In the mid-late 1980's, the course was from the Glacier Visitors Center to town (circling Centennial Hall) and back. No courses were certified, and the unpredictable route changes sometimes left actual race distances in question.

Participation in these early Park and Recreation marathons was not high, typically 6-14 men and 0 to 3 women. However, half- and quarter-marathons accompanied most marathons and drew many more participants, and equally impressive race times from dedicated local runners.

One constant between 1980 and 1988 (the last marathon for several years) was the participation of Juneau architect and marathon enthusiast Frank Maier. A favorite story about Frank involved his first marathon training plan. Trying to make the plan simple, Frank undertook to add 1 mile to his daily mileage *on each daily run*, to reach his 26-mile goal. Though easy at first, the plan slowly took its toll; around mileage-17 day, Frank failed to return home from his daily run as usual, and alarmed, his wife Judith set out by car to find him walking home and pondering a gentler path to marathon fitness.

The current version of the Juneau Marathon began in 1992, about a year and half after a fishing accident claimed Frank Maier. As a tribute to Frank, the Southeast Road Runner Club planned a race in his memory, noting the marathon was “the only race Frank cared a damn about”. The Frank Maier Marathon (FMM) was thus decided to be an out-and-back route that started at Sandy Beach, in Douglas town, and followed the Douglas and North Douglas Highways to just beyond the False Outer point parking area at the north end of Douglas Island. The first FMM event included a half marathon and an 8 KM race. Bob Deal certified the new marathon route through the United States Track and Field (USTAF) organization, via a process requiring precise, calibrated measurements of the course. Bob admits to two significant ‘miscalculations’ in laying out the race: one, vastly underestimating the labor required to measure and re-measure a marathon for the USTAF certificate, and two, a preliminary calculation that placed the marathon turn-around point just shy of the *beginning* (rather than the top) of the big hill at False Outer Point.... While the 8KM race was run only once, the Douglas Island Half Marathon (DIHM, utilizing the first half of the marathon course) was run every year since 1992.

Juneau runners John Day and Joan Herbage won the first FMM. In 1993, US Army National Guard Marathon Team runner John Snoozy won the marathon in 2:44:14, just ahead of 44 year-old local Jim Douglas who ran 2:45:56 (a FMM record for runners 40 and over). Also, 35 year-old Rick Thibodeau bested older-brother Guy (then 42) to win the DIHM in 1:13:51 (Guy’s 1:14:16 is still a FMM record for runners 40 and over). From 1998 through 2000, Juneau runner Paul Pusich raced and won the FMM 3 times, and Anchorage runner Bridget Storm raced and won twice, setting the women’s record at 3:19:04 in 1999.

Recently, 22 year-old local Shawn Miller torched the FMM course in 2:34:45 in his *first attempt at running a marathon* (2002), and then ran it in 2:31:30 in 2003. In 2004 Shawn turned to the DIHM (1:11:37) prior to returning in 2005 to best Ramon Colon Malave’s 1996 DIHM record with a 1:09:33. 2005 saw Glenn Frick, then 66, run 3:08:25 to win second place overall behind a determined Seattleite, Peter Cleary. Local Merry Ellefson, 39, set the DIHM open division mark at 1:25:19 in 2001, and the record for women 40 and over (1:27:26) in 2007.

The latest addition to FMM and DIHM was a Wheelchair Division, championed and first raced by veteran wheelchair-racer Don Juan Brandon, known for founding the 397-mile Midnight Sun Marathon Wheelchair Race from Fairbanks to Anchorage. Remarkable athlete Seth McBride (24), in his *first attempt at a marathon*, rolled the FMM course in 2:27:21, and then in 2008, Holly Koester (48) rolled the course in 3:27:17, marking the end of her quest to be the first person to complete wheelchair marathons in all 50-states.

Participation in both FMM races has grown steadily over the years, from 8 marathon finishers in 1992 to 53 in 2005, and from about 50 half marathon finishers in 1992 to 119 in 2008. In the early years, most runners were locals. Now, both races attract many non-Alaskans; in 2005 for example, 34 (64% of 53) FMM runners and 14 (13% of 103) DHM runners were not from Alaska. Most of the non-Alaskan runners I talked to fly in largely for the race and a few days of sightseeing. Several out-of-state marathoners have returned on two, three, and more occasions for what they say is one of their favorite races. In 2006, two runners (Chuck Engle and Dane Rauschenberg) working to complete 1 marathon a week, each in a different state, competed (Chuck won in 2:47:28) and both achieved their 50 state marathons in 50 weeks goal. The historical ‘first-Saturday-in August’ date for FMM attracts many “50-States” and “Marathon Junkie” runners because there are very few other marathons in the US or Canada on this weekend, and the weather here at that time is nearly ideal.

While USTAF certification has been one key to success for the FMM, the lack of certification has not impaired the success of the DIHM, especially to the 100 local runners who annually consider this their biggest local race and/or a benchmark for gauging efforts for the Klondike Road Relay almost exactly 1 month later.

Another key to the success of the FMM and DIHM has been the wide community support. Annually, 25 or so volunteers run an aid station; 20 or so set up or take down, monitor the course, or greet or photograph or time runners at the finish line; and, a perhaps a dozen more help with registrations, buy food for or operate the fabulous BBQ and award ceremony, and contribute time in some way. Financial sponsorship (MRV Architects, Valley Medical, Valley Lumber, J.M. Walsh Co.) helped keep entry costs reasonable and encourage participation, and provide for benefits fitting a “real” marathon: a distinctive tee-shirt and metals (important remembrances to many), a post-race BBQ that rivals the pre-race “pasta-dinners” common in most marathons, and quality glass awards nicer than those found in most marathons. Important non-financial sponsorship by the Gastineau Hatchery or Taku Smokery (salmon for the BBQ), GU sports (GU), McDonalds (beverage containers, ice, and thousands of cups), the Douglas Volunteer Fire Department (large grill), and others like the Zach Gordon Community Center have made the many odd details of the event come together. A most notable volunteer is Ben Van Alen, who survived as Race Director from 1993 through 2000, and then remained “in charge” of the critical finish-line timing task through today.

There is a richer history of marathoning in Juneau than could be summarized in this hastily constructed article. Comments, statistics, and stories toward an expanded history are welcome.

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