

July 23, 2009, Page C1

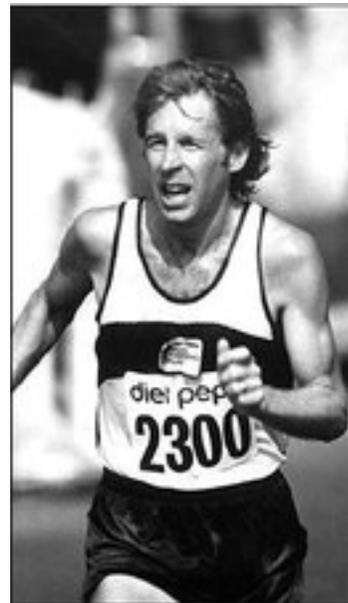
America's greatest marathoner coming to city for Bob 5K



WATERBURY — He was the face of American running. For a time, he was the face of running, period. Thirty years later, he is still America's most famous marathoner. Bill Rodgers, born in Hartford but called Boston Billy by fans of racing, is the greatest distance runner these shores have ever produced. If you need proof, he won the Boston and New York marathons four times each in a five-year period.

He held the American marathon record. He won 22 marathons in his career.

Even more importantly, he won the Litchfield Hills Road Race twice. Here is something better than that: Boston Billy is coming to Waterbury.



If it would be a thrill for you to run a few strides with the greatest road racer of his era, then sign up for the Bob Veillette 5K Road Race. The fourth annual Bob 5K in beautiful downtown Waterbury is Sunday, Sept. 13, at 1:30 p.m. The race starts and finishes at Library Park. Not only can you run with Rodgers, you can chat with him when the race is over, and get an autograph on that back issue of Sports Illustrated with Billy on the cover. He graced the front of SI twice, after winning in New York in 1978 and again in 1979. The only other marathoner to make the cover is Alberto Salazar, once.

In American road racing, there is Boston Billy and no one else.

If you do not know the history of the Bob 5K, then you should. Bob Veillette worked at this newspaper for more than 40 years. As the managing editor of the Republican-American, he was more than just a wrangler of reporters. He was a renaissance man. He tickled the keys of grand pianos throughout the region. He spouted Shakespearean verse when the mood lighted upon him. To relieve stress, he juggled oranges at deadline. I never saw an orange hit the ground.

In April 2006, after playing piano at a Bronson Library function, Veillette suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed.

In three years, the Bob5K has raised \$89,000 for the Veillette family.

“If it wasn’t for the newspaper employees, dad would probably not have come home and stayed home,” said Bob’s daughter, Stephanie DeLuca.

“They have given our family so much support, financially as well as emotionally. Their efforts are beyond words.”

And their efforts have also brought Billy to town.

Rodgers, now 61, still looks like a Billy. The familiar flowing blonde locks still flow. He remains highly visible on the road-running trail, making four to six appearances a month.

Once the world record holder for both 25K and 30K road races, Rodgers set the American record for marathons 30 years ago in Boston (2:09.27).

This year’s Boston winner, Deriba Merga of Ethiopia, won in 2:08.42. No one else in the 2009 race ran faster than Boston Billy did back in 1979.

That is how fast he was 30 years ago.

Rodgers comes to Waterbury for the Bob5K because running is what he does, but also because of Veillette’s story. Race organizers reached out to Rodgers when they learned that Veillette, an avid runner and frequent entrant at Litchfield, made it a point to meet Rodgers at the LHRR more than 25 years ago.

“I was moved by Bob’s story, that a fellow runner’s life was changed so much by a twist of fate,” Rodgers told race organizers. “I’ve always felt road races bring people together in a powerful way. They’re a place where religion, race, politics and income mean nothing, but where goodwill is king. To me, that’s what Bob’s race is all about.”

Newspaper employees stage the race as a tribute, and as a benefit, to a mentor and a friend. Many of the 300 runners come here because they like to race, and even more show up because this is a way to support a man loved and respected within the community. Now, there is a third reason to run the Bob5K: to jog for a few paces alongside Boston Billy, America’s marathoner.

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