

NEW YORK CITY MARATHON

 OCTOBER 17, 1976

FORT WADSWORTH, NEW YORK CITY

10:15 A.M.

BOOM.

Finally.

Let's pinpoint the moment.

Hulking stone batteries of Fort Wadsworth overlook New York Harbor. Civil War-era military installation. Runners warm up on the sprawling grounds. Stunning views of the harbor are lost on almost all marathoners, many of whom nervously wonder what it will be like to start this race with a long mile of uphill running.

This year's New York City Marathon does not start in Central Park. It begins here on Staten Island for a five-borough tour: Staten Island-Brooklyn-Queens-Manhattan-Bronx. Back into Manhattan.

Finish line is still next to Tavern on the Green. Everything else about the race is different. As much a spectacle as a footrace. This is not Boston, starting miles outside town and finally crashing headlong into downtown for the finish. This is Lord Desborough's twenty-six point two imperial miles entirely within the Big Apple, with all its neighborhoods, ethnicities, religions, empires, social

strata, that quaint midtown haven known as Broadway, and a pair of twin towers 110 stories tall looming over Wall Street. First time a marathon has been confined within a city since Munich, although with a few thousand more competitors and a half million more spectators.

This sensational event is headlined by a marathon battle royale: Frank Shorter versus Bill Rodgers set to duel on this sprawling urban canvas. In this Bicentennial year of America's birth, today's race is running as entertainment, civic pride, and a crazy attempt to save New York City from bankruptcy.

It's that big.

Six short years after the first New York City Marathon and Gary Muhrcke's lament that no one knew such a demanding race was contested right under Manhattan's gaze, all five boroughs buzz with anticipation. Everybody knows this morning is marathon day. New Yorkers plan either to run it or watch alongside the course, pressing to the middle of the many city streets closed for the occasion, so that only a narrow funnel remains for the runners. Even Muhrcke, who skipped the past three editions, is entered and in top shape.

"As word of the five-borough marathon spread, it created a never-before-seen excitement for running in all corners of the city. Veterans like me began getting phone calls from the newbies," George Hirsch will remember. He is a marathoner, longtime member of the New York Road Runners, and will one day frame the world's view of running as publisher of *Runner's World*. Hirsch is among the small group of individuals who work to make the five boroughs race a reality. He goes on to serve two decades as chairman of the board for the NYRR. For all he does in the running community, this unforgettable October morning will be a defining memory, maybe the biggest one. Well into his nineties, Hirsch will remain keeper of the flame for the race that launched the running boom.

Billy Joel's recently released "New York State of Mind" evokes nostalgia for a better time in Gotham, but the city is beset by woe. Piles of trash line streets, bankruptcy seems imminent, tourism is

flat, the Son of Sam serial killer is on the loose, and perhaps most dispiriting of all, Cincinnati's "Big Red Machine" just swept the Yankees in the World Series.

The marathon, George Hirsch tells me years after the fact, will become instrumental in saving New York City.

Key to the five boroughs marathon is George Spitz—the same New Yorker who finished Boston last year and despaired that his hometown lacked a race of such heft.

Spitz makes a habit of running for political office and failing to get elected. The longtime runner's *Times* obituary will one day label him a "gadfly" for his relentlessness. The label is apt, but the running world can forever thank Spitz for a lifetime so annoying that a major newspaper will define his lifespan by this behavior. That obnoxious perseverance changes distance running forever. Spitz systematically pesters politicians and financiers for the permissions and funding to make his vision a reality. For once, the gadfly wins the day.

Spitz does not have a marathon in mind when he proposes a Bicentennial race. Not at first. Nor five boroughs. What he envisions is a large footrace coinciding with the Bicentennial fireworks and tall ships passing in review. New York Road Runners Club cofounder and former Olympic marathoner Ted Corbitt instead suggests a tour of the entire city.

On May 22, 1976, Corbitt writes Spitz to confirm this sequence of events: "It is clear that you brought up the idea of staging a race in NY City worthy of the 'Big Apple,' and I responded that the most unusual race would be a sweep thru all five boroughs."

Corbitt and Spitz are longtime veterans of the local running scene. One is Black and the other Jewish. It does not matter. Passion for running brings them together.

"At first, none of us warmed to see his vision, not even Fred Lebow, the president of the New York Road Runners, the largest running organization in the city. But Spitz persisted," George Hirsch will write in *The New Yorker*.

The mayor's office is next. "The idea of a citywide marathon was unheard-of. It was the Bicentennial, and the city was on the verge of bankruptcy. We went to the mayor, Abe Beame. We said the marathon could be unifying, really tying together the boroughs. The mayor agreed," Hirsch will remember.

Marathons do not spring up overnight. There are roads to be closed, police to be hired, a course to be measured, permits to be acquired, and a thousand other time-consuming and expensive minutiae that go into seamlessly guiding a mob of runners for several hours through city streets that would be jammed with traffic any other day of the year. Double that checklist in one of the biggest, bustling, and bureaucratic cities on earth. Aid stations. Medical personnel. Not just a starting line, but a starting *area*, with all the amenities runners require before they race. A finish line. And, if the five boroughs concept is to be authentic, runners must cross up and over the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, the only way to get from remote Staten Island to Brooklyn on foot. Runners can't very well take the ferry.

Fred Lebow, famous for organizing the New York City Marathon and Crazylegs and those long-ago Playboy Bunnies, adds his gift for showmanship. "Overnight, he turned into a consummate promoter. He loved the big stage, and the media loved him: a thin, hyperkinetic, bearded wonder with an Eastern European accent and an all-consuming passion, the marathon," Hirsch writes in *The New Yorker*.

Five whirlwind months of planning and arm-twisting pass in a flash. The five boroughs marathon becomes the new and improved New York City Marathon. A thin "Marathon Blue" line painted on the road from Staten Island to Central Park shows the way.

Now, as the 10:30 start time nears, some runners jog on the grass near the paved starting line. Others stretch. Some kneel apart from the crowd as if praying, covertly pulling their shorts to one side to urinate. This is not Boston with its stringent qualifying standards. Anyone who pays their entry fee is allowed. The brand-new layout is a tremendous enticement. Last year, 534 raced New York. This year's number is 2,090.

Forty degrees with winds of six knots. Overcast. Smart runners wear trash bags to keep in the warmth or wear old warm-ups to comfortably discard before the start. Trees are already festooned with cast-off clothing hurled into high branches. Those without foresight to arrive in nothing more than shorts and a singlet shiver and wait for the gun. Running will be their deliverance. They'll be warm by Brooklyn.

First mile is uphill over the bridge. Second mile and a little more is downhill into the Bay Ridge neighborhood. George Spitz and Manhattan borough president Percy Sutton got special permission to run across the bridge from Staten Island. Ted Corbitt measured the course to find precisely 26.2 miles. Race director Fred Lebow has given his life to this race. He spent most of this morning up on the Verrazzano span, hurriedly placing plywood over expansion joints after the bridge closed to traffic.

Frank Shorter does not warm up in his usual solitary fashion, looking for The Three. Instead, he jogs with NYRR's George Hirsch. Shorter will race purple shorts and yellow long-sleeved shirt under a white singlet. Race promoters paid him \$3,000 under the table to race. That's \$17,000 in modern currency. Shorter wants to see for himself if a major metropolis will shut down streets for a footrace. When the gold medalist came to New York for the prerace press conference a few weeks back, he was originally booked to stay at the New York Athletic Club. Instead, Hirsch put him up at the tonier Plaza Hotel, partly to protest the NYAC's no Blacks and no Jews policy. Last night, sidestepping any controversy, Shorter slept at Hirsch's Thirty-Second Street brownstone. The publisher is surprised when the Olympian sits down to watch TV wearing a ski parka, having "never before known someone with less than 5% body fat."

Tall and goateed, Kenny Moore is a bandit. Running for fun, feeling no need to pay the entry fee. New York is an experimental race of sorts for the writer, with its potholes, cobblestones, bridges—of which there are five: Verrazzano-Narrows, Pulaski, Queensboro, Willis Avenue, Madison Avenue. There is always the comedic potential of road closures that don't take place, which makes for great

copy. Moore's ambition is curious and journalistic, not competitive. Having failed to make the 1976 Olympic team, the former Oregon Duck's running career is winding down. Days like this are just for fun.

Bill Rodgers also warms up alone. Normally chatty, he is quiet and focused. Drove down from Boston this morning. Even as he prepares to race, his car is moments away from being towed. Rodgers finished fifth on the old Central Park course in 1974. He is now so fit, he runs faster than that 2:35 marathon time in practice. Rodgers's appearance fee is also a quiet \$3,000.

Shorter and Rodgers have raced side by side dozens of miles this year. But they rarely speak and are not friends. One thing they both have in common: 1976 has not gone as planned.

In May, just as the five boroughs marathon is being announced, Frank Shorter and Bill Rodgers are racing in Eugene. High stakes. US Olympic Trials Marathon. Top three finishers make the team. Rodgers's career is very much on the rise and Shorter feels the pressure as they pound through mile after mile just inches apart. But the Bostonian senses a foot injury with a few miles to go. Shorter offers to slow down so they can finish in a tie. The two men did so at the 1975 Virginia Ten Miler, holding hands as they crossed the finish line. Rodgers says no, realizing second place still gives him a spot on the Olympic team. Shorter coasts to the win.

Two weeks after "Bicentennial Fever" sweeps America on the Fourth of July, the Olympics kick off in Montreal.

Erich Segal and Jim McKay once again call the marathon on ABC. Technology has improved. The *Love Story* author spends a great deal of airtime focusing on slow-motion graphics of each runner's knee flexion. It rains.

Frank Shorter wins his second consecutive Olympic gold medal in the marathon.

Correction:

He should have.

Shorter makes a bold early move, just like in Munich. Victory seems assured as the pack falls farther behind. But in a stunning re-

versal, East German runner Waldemar Cierpinski catches the American and wins by 51 seconds. Frank Shorter settles for silver.

Cierpinski tells the media that his secret to success is long, brisk walks, very much in the old-school manner of Dorando Pietri and Johnny Hayes. This is a lie. In fact, he is a cheater. When the Berlin Wall comes down, Cierpinski is revealed as part of an elaborate state-run doping program. Detailed notes bear witness to years of performance-enhancing drugs. Even with this documented proof, the International Olympic Committee never strips the East German of the gold that should belong to Shorter.

A side note: Fifty years later, it is common IOC policy for athletes to lose their medal if caught cheating. Next finisher in line moves up a spot. It is only right that Waldemar Cierpinski be disqualified and Frank Shorter be given that Montreal gold.

Shorter's not getting any younger, IOC. Do the right thing. And while you're at it, move Don Kardong from fourth to bronze.



Bill Rodgers's Olympic marathon goes even worse, though by design. He runs wearing bib number 1 because his Boston time is best in the field. Tender foot still not healed. He should not be racing at all. Every heel strike brings agony. Yet Finland's Lasse Viren has once again won the 5,000 and 10,000 meters. Now he wants the marathon, too.

Rodgers is appalled at the arrogance of this "trackee." Boston Billy knows he can't win but is determined not to let Viren podium in the race Rodgers calls his own. Racing faster than his injury will allow, Rodgers maintains a brisk early pace designed to wear Viren down and take away his kick. No matter that he is destroying himself in the process.

Rodgers accomplishes his mission. Viren finishes fifth, deprived of another Olympic medal. Bill Rodgers ends up fortieth.



Lost in the Montreal marathon madness is a distance specialist named Grete Waitz—née Andersen, the same pigtailed Norwegian who didn't make it out of the first round in Munich four years ago. She has talent, as proven by her bronze medal in the 15 at the European Championships one year ago. But in Montreal, Waitz bombs out once again, not making it past the second round.

Waitz trains ninety miles a week, even in winter, running through snow, sleet, Arctic winds, and December days with just six hours of sunlight. The volume is more like marathon training than middle-distance. But with 1500 meters still the longest event for women at the Olympics, this doesn't matter. Waitz is twenty-five, married, and teaches school for a living. She is a hero in her home country but unknown outside Europe. There is no money in running. An Olympic medal looks increasingly unlikely. The 1980 Olympics in Moscow is four long years away—an eternity in the career of an elite athlete, with its chances for injury and the effects of growing older.

Retirement is a strong option for Grete Waitz.



In the midst of his own 1976 Montreal failures, Bill Rodgers has a backup plan. He has heard all about the five boroughs race. Rodgers quietly makes winning October's New York City Marathon his goal. It is scheduled for three months after Montreal, plenty of time for his foot to heal and the hundreds of miles of solid training that will allow him to race in top form.

Now on Staten Island, press helicopters hover overhead, drowning out the sound of Mayor Beame firing the starting gun. The pack can't help themselves. Fueled by adrenaline and the novelty of this morning, they sprint to ascend the slope of the battleship-gray bridge like it's the Oklahoma land rush. Verrazzano-Narrows is so tall and broad that the world's most mighty aircraft carriers and square-riggers pass easily beneath.

Cameramen in all those choppers capture vivid color images of marathoners by the thousands charging up and over the massive

span. A mighty horde. Instantly, as that scene is broadcast into homes throughout the tri-state area, it becomes one of the most inspirational sights in running—if not all sports.

Bill Rodgers and Frank Shorter trail leader Pekka Paivarinta of Finland, treading carefully on those lengths of plywood over the massive expansion joints. It is early. No one wants to twist an ankle.

Bill Rodgers wins today. His 2:10:10 is the fastest time in the world this year. Shorter second. Gary Muhrcke twenty-first in 2:25:26, a time five minutes faster than 1970. Late in the race, during an out-and-back section into the Bronx, Rodgers and Shorter will pass each other in opposite directions. “Great job, Bill,” Shorter shouts to his rival. With less than four miles to go, Rodgers’s three-minute lead is in no jeopardy. The American distance running torch has been passed. Bill Rodgers will go on to win four Bostons and four New Yorks in his career. Frank Shorter will defeat him several times at lesser distances, but never again in a marathon.

Miki Gorman of California wins the women’s race in 2:39:11. She is forty-one and seventieth overall.

Those are fine facts. There are also delicious quotes, like Boston Billy telling the press today’s new route is tougher than Boston. “This course had a few hills and fairly tough terrain. It was like running cross-country,” he playfully confesses to the New York media, which loves nothing more than believing their city’s marathon just supplanted Boston as America’s marquee race—which it has.

Race results. Sound bites. Every race has them. So what makes this day different?

What makes October 17, 1976, and the New York City Marathon the day the running boom begins?

Those who run this nippy gray Sunday will tell you they feel it first in Bay Ridge, as they descend the Verrazzano span and enter Brooklyn. “I was shocked,” George Spitz remembers. “Absolutely shocked.”

The moment comes roughly three miles into the race. In a normal marathon, this is a time of inner quiet—find your rhythm, conserve

your energy, dissociate from the reality of the distance still to run, lock in to the strength that will carry you through physical and emotional highs and lows to the finish.

This is not that.

This is noise.

Not just cheering, bedlam.

The thousands of runners are stunned. Fourth Avenue is lined by crowds of shocking size. Fourth and Flatbush is a mob. Cheering. Yelling out names of friends. Car horns honking in a good way. First-time marathoners think this is normal. Veterans have never seen anything like it.

This corridor of sound continues along the entire course. Priests in robes and choirboys in cassock and surplus stand outside a Catholic church to cheer just before 11:00 a.m. mass. Spectators hand out oranges and water to the runners. Small piles of orange peels soon litter the cobbled streets. The metal grates of the Queensboro Bridge are a distinctly New York sensation under the feet of these marathoners. Their suffering is rewarded with even greater noise and energy as the bridge drops them into Manhattan.

The Godfather of the Boom is celebrated. Munich Memories linger. New York knows Frank Shorter. "Go, Frank" and "Attaboy, Frank" cheers come loud and clear through every mile. He is the face of the marathon. Neighborhood hero. As American as fireworks and a tall ship.

Residents of all five boroughs have left their houses early on this cold October morning to bundle up, grab a coffee and the kids (because they want them to forever remember the day they watched the great five boroughs marathon), then walk a few blocks and stand with strangers in the chill to cheer on these marathoners like family. Such a far cry from the silence of the first New York City Marathon six short years ago.

Central Park takes the spectacle to a new level. Bill Rodgers follows closely behind the black limousine pace car. Locals trail behind him on bicycles. A few barricades hold back the crowd, but not everyone. The finish banner sags in a deep U, making it impossible to

read the words. Smiling children. Deafening cheers. Boston Billy holds up his hands in a small display of triumph. Someone straightens the finish banner. Then Rodgers disappears as the throng swallows him whole.

Shorter three minutes back. He had the streets of Munich to himself four years ago. He could hear himself think. Now he is engulfed by enthusiastic strangers. That 1970 image of Gary Muhrcke and his family posing for a photograph after his victory would be impossible today. The crowds are too dense, too thick, too enthralled. Too everywhere.

Kenny Moore races to the line ten minutes after Shorter. He is manhandled by NYPD and removed from the course for not wearing a number.

Euphoric age-group runners trickle in for hours after Rodgers—among them ballet dancers and politicians. “The race attracted entries from 35 states and 10 foreign countries. Politicians, psychiatrists, actors and former professional football players joined the world-class competitors; 312 men and two women finished under 3 hours and 1,192 men and 30 women under 4 hours,” reports *The New York Times*. Many more take five, six, and seven hours. Finishing is winning.

On October 17, 1976, the marathon becomes not just a people’s race, but a big-city postcard. The NYCM does not save the Big Apple from going bankrupt. Not yet. But in time, the marathon plays a key role. Video footage of runners bounding through Manhattan leads local nightly news, followed by photographs in *Runner’s World*. The dam bursts. There’s something special about images of average men and women running down the middle of big-city streets. Canyons of steel. Alone. In great packs. Shared suffering. Instant camaraderie. Time does not matter. “Water here!” cry out aid station volunteers, eager to help the thirsty. The images beckon runners to New York. From this day forward, every big city around the world will clamor to host their own marathon as a source of tourism, revenue, and prestige.

“The greatest contribution of the 1976 New York City Marathon: it launched the urban-marathon boom. Where earlier marathons

had taken place in protective parks and on quiet, rural roads, the marathon is now seen to fit perfectly with the energy, drive, and ambition of our bustling city centers," Hirsch will long remember about this day.

New Yorkers are well known for being callous and hard. Uncaring. But in crisis and communal gatherings, the collective warmth is powerful. There are moments when the city sets aside its many divisions and comes together for the greater good and that wonderful sensation of being part of something much greater than themselves. NYCM 1976 is one such morning.

"It became the most unifying day of the year," George Hirsch recalls.

"Many are overweight, smoking, drinking beer from cans or eating snacks from bags. But they all find time simultaneously to cheer on the runners for hours on end. We all know that these districts are constantly newsworthy because of the violence that takes place day in and day out in this grimy, drug-ridden theater of war: Black versus Jew, Puerto Rican versus Italian. But we can only be amazed today at the warmth that emanates from streets usually better known for violence," *The New York Times* will describe how the city feels on marathon Sunday.

Two weeks later, America elects its first running president. Jimmy Carter competed on the cross-country team at the Naval Academy. He returns to the sport during his time in office, running several miles per week with his Secret Service handlers.

The boom has begun.

The precise moment is between 10:40 and 10:50 a.m. as the lead runners and their five-minute-per-mile pace hit that wall of noise in Brooklyn.

The 1977 New York City Marathon will almost double in size to 3,664. For the first time in history, the Boston Marathon is much smaller, just 2,329 finishers.

There's a new sheriff in town.

Race director Fred Lebow is not satisfied. The consummate Big Apple promoter, he needs a new angle to keep the race fresh and its

popularity skyrocketing. The answer, he realizes, is women. Only 179 finish his race in 1977. This is a huge advance over the Six Who Sit five years ago. But a number representing just 4.89 percent of the field is clearly not representative of a gender comprising fully half the population.

It also wouldn't hurt to increase international entries.

The showman comes up with an audacious plan to change both dynamics forever.

Unbeknownst to Fred Lebow, help is already on the way.