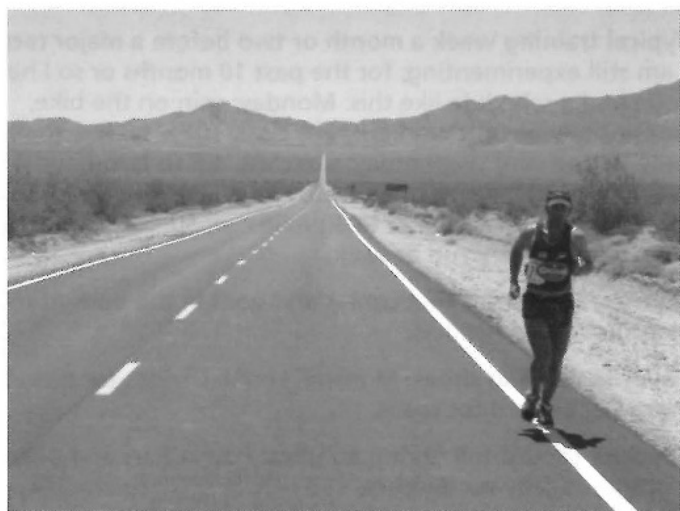


THE RUN ACROSS AMERICA: RAIN AND EMOTIONS POUR FORTH IN CENTRAL PARK

by Alan Firth, R.D.



It's a long road across America.

Photo by Alan Firth



It's over! Bob Brown arrives in Central Park. Photo by Alan Firth

As I write this, it's raining in North Carolina. It does not seem so long ago that I was in New York's Central Park. Then, as now, there was a thunderstorm, but that New York storm put this little North Carolina storm to shame. There, the sky turned black and the rain came down in sheets. That storm lasted for almost exactly an hour—the length of time it took our six finishers to run under the finish banner of the Run Across America.

Most of us who were there getting drenched had been with the race from the start in Huntington Beach, California, 71 days and 3,081 miles distant. Since then we had become a close-knit community, almost blissfully unaware that there was a world outside Run Across America. Our world revolved around shepherding six gaunt runners along the roads of the U.S.

At the halfway point there were seven runners still in the race. Conventional wisdom has it that if you make it that far you have every expectation of getting to New York. But once again, much to everyone's surprise, Don Winkley withdrew from the race, this time in Indianapolis after completing 54 stages and 2,300 miles. As well as entering Run Across America, Don had also entered La Transe Gaule, which started a few days after Run Across America finished. In 2002, and again this year, as soon as his focus switched from America to France it was all over. We were all sorry to see him go because his running this year was truly inspirational.

Other than Don's withdrawal, the last

few weeks were mostly incident-free. We did have a few detours to cope with, such as when bridges were closed, but we had come to expect these minor irritants and took them in stride. The runners took everything in stride as well. Starting each day was like going to work; there was a job to be done, so they got out and did it. If the day's distance was shorter than 45 miles it was considered a "rest" day.

Once we crossed the Mississippi we could all feel the race winding down. There was still a long way to go, but the positions of each runner were established and they were all being careful not to get injured. By then, each runner had found a pace that would carry him to the finish. There was no question of head-to-head racing, which they all knew was a recipe for disaster. Just finishing this race was more important than trying to gain an extra place. However, there could be no relaxing yet. The run would not be over until we reached Central Park. A fall, a dog bite, a careless driver, or even a wrong turn could spell disaster.

As we got closer to New York the stages got longer and longer. The race was designed so that the longest weeks would be run at the end of the race, when the runners were at their fittest. Unfortunately, these were also some of the hilliest stages as well. The 52-mile day from Uniontown, Pennsylvania to Frostburg, Maryland was unanimously voted the single hardest day of the race. Not only was it long, it was also comprised of a series of steep hills,

one after the other. The final climb before the descent into Frostburg was called Big Savage Mountain. This stage came after runners had completed 294 miles in the previous six days. No one said this race would be easy.

At last the final day arrived and at 6:00 a.m., to the strains of *New York, New York* from my van's stereo, six runners set off to complete this amazing journey. Instead of being at the back Taka Senoo was now at the front and setting the pace. After a couple of hours Bob Brown said, "I do not know how he's managed to do this day after day." Eventually the runners were all on Riverside Drive and on their way to the finish. The plan was for the runners to finish in their race order about five minutes apart, so that they could each be photographed and congratulated and perhaps interviewed by the media that Bob's sponsors and charity had encouraged to be there. We also had a few stage runners with us, mostly friends of Taka and Kaz Horiguchi, who had come to share this final day. They and Lou Rodriguez, our journey runner, had been asked not to run through the finish banner, which was for the six finishers.

So were all assembled in Central Park at last, all of the crews, family and friends who had come here for this special moment, eagerly waiting for the runners to appear. My wife Mary had the banner all ready and I had the camera set; all we needed were the runners. As we waited it got darker and darker as a huge storm

approached. We heard a shout, "Bob's coming!" at almost the exact second the heavens opened and buckets of water drenched us all. I risked ruining the camera to take photos, Reuters television cameras rolled, and everyone tried for a shot of Bob finally finishing the race. Despite being soaked through we were all ecstatic; it was a wonderful moment. Bobs duly congratulated by his family and crew and the other crews, while managing to give an interview at the same time.

For the next hour the scene repeated itself; first it was Luc Dumont St. Priest then Russell Allison, then Taka, the youngest finisher in any modern trans-continental race. But where were Kaz and Olivier Forti? Had they gotten lost in New York? No, they both arrived, greeted emotionally by family and friends. There were hugs and kisses and handshakes all around. It was over—we had done it. We were all gathered in Central Park, more than 3,000 miles away from where we started. Then, wouldn't you know it, the rain stopped. The rain has stopped here in North Carolina as well, so I can go outside and get on with my gardening. Yes, there is a world outside of the Run Across America.

Jurgen Ankenbrand adds:

On June 12, eleven long distance runners from four countries met at the ocean's edge in Huntington Beach, ready to embark on a race from coast to coast, across the U.S. on a 3,080.1-mile trek. The twelve starters were: Will Campbell, Pennsylvania; Russ Allison, Oklahoma; Olivier Fonti France; Luc Dumont St. Priest, France; Don Winkley, Texas; Louis Rodriguez, Florida; Kazuhiko Horiuchi, Japan; Graeme Best, New Zealand; Edward Dramberger, Texas; Bob Brown, Great Britain; Takasumi Senoo, Japan

Current race director Alan Firth stated that the 2004 run would be the last one that he—with the help of his wife Mary—would direct. So far, no one has offered to continue the tradition. Why? Even if the current route and all accommodations were to be followed, there are several challenges that might prevent someone else from taking on the task. For one, It takes a minimum of at least three months time, including preparation, correspondence with potential participants, securing needed permits, and several other administrative tasks that need attending to. Only a teacher, someone that is retired, or has a business in which he or she can afford to be absent for that long, could consider taking on this Herculean challenge.

Living just two miles from the start in Huntington Beach, I have seen the runners off at every Run Across America race. This year, I also accompanied the runners on day three from San Bernardino to Victorville, California, after completing the nearby 50-km trail run at Baldy Peaks. I felt that I also had to be with the remaining six official runners during the last day to the finish line in New York. I cycled alongside the runners, 33 miles from West Orange in New Jersey to the finish in Central Park.

The final stage started warm, muggy, and very humid, but with an overcast sky, making it more bearable. Riding a bike allowed me to see the countryside and take digital images of the runners along the way. With the last stage and the outcome of the race already pretty much decided, it was not to be a competitive stage; rather, runners stayed together most of the way, running, walking and constantly changing positions, the idea being that all runners would reach Central Park within an hour to comply with the park service permit.

Once all seven runners reached the George Washington Bridge I had them pose for several group pictures, to at



Tako Senoo, joyous at the finish.

Photo by Jurgen Ankenbrand

VICTORY ATTAINED, JOB LOST

Thirty-five-year-old Bob Brown, who is originally from Sennen, UK, raised a staggering 40,000 pounds for a children's charity by winning the race, but lost his job because of it. As he neared the finishing line in Central Park, Bob heard the devastating news that his contract as a primary school teacher at Stoke Climsland, near Callington, had not been renewed, as he was unable to make the job interview which took place while he was running.

His parents, Vic and Margaret Brown, who live in St Just, and who flew out to New York to greet him at the finishing line, said he was "devastated" on hearing the news. "He heard the news whilst he was competing in the run," said Vic. "He had been on a six-month contract and understood it would be renewed. But while he was running he heard the news that because he was unable to make the job interview his contract could not be renewed. It really choked him and now he will have to look for another job."

Despite his disappointment at losing his job, Bob was elated on reaching the finishing line in New York. "The last few days have been very hard physically and mentally but it is a fantastic feeling to have finished," he told reporters. "I am very pleased that I have been able to raise so much money for charity. It definitely spurred me on when I was having a tough time."

Bob was accompanied on the last section of the run by his sister Susan Bateman and his wife, Amy, who cycled some of the leg by his side. "I knew the day before I finished that I had won and that my rival could not catch me," said Bob. "It feels really strange to know that I won't be running again tomorrow."

Bob's father, Vic, a former rugby and cricket champion, said: "Everything is a challenge to him. His next goal is to have a rest and a sleep and then he is thinking about doing a speaking tour." His mother Margaret added: "He has always been competitive; even as a youngster he always had to win. He was in every team at school: football, rugby, athletics, and cricket."

- from the Cornish Morning News