

My Road to Boston, the Story of a Family

by Karen Connolly

My road to Boston began with my grandfather, Reginald H. Harris. Though we don't know exactly what sparked his interest in distance running and the Boston Marathon, my father, Robert H. Harris tells me, "He was captured by the legends." As such, Reginald followed the accomplishments of running legends such as Clarence Demar at his first Boston victory in 1911, Paavo Nurmi (the Flying Finn) achieving his world and Olympic record races in the 1920's, and Johnny A. Kelley's Boston victory in 1935 (though his first Boston was in 1928).

As a child (age 8-9) my father remembers listening to the race day coverage on the radio. One year (in the 1940's) he remembers he and his father driving from Boothbay Harbor to Boston to watch the race from Copley Square, at a time when traveling such a distance "just wasn't done". My aunt from Lexington told me she remembers going to watch the race, and recollected the following concerning the finish area and the race in general. "At the time it was very unusual in New England to see anyone black. Or Latin. Everyone looked just like us. It seemed so very exotic to me to see these extraordinary thin, tall, black men from remote regions in Africa (which also sounded so very strange and far away) come to Boston... and win the marathon. These guys also had extremely strange sounding names. There were many stories told about how they lived in remote highlands where everyone ran from village to village, and that all their people thought nothing of running incredible numbers of miles. When we went to the race, there were not all that many people there. I mean, it was a big crowd, but by no means a crush. As I recall, you could walk up and see the finish. I remember seeing the finish. The amazing thing is that these people did not seem particularly tired. Dad (Reginald) talked a lot about the strategy and the Newton Hills, etc, but these guys looked like they could turn around and run back."

My great grandmother lived on the third floor of a brownstone on Beacon Street, and the race passed in front of her every year.

I have a copy of a partial clipping from the April 19, 1950 issue of one of the local newspapers of the time, the *Boston Evening American*. It lists the "Complete marathon names and numbers"

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for all registered runners in the 1950 Boston Marathon, as well as where each runner was from - 167 in all. It shows most of a course diagram (including "checking points") and the course record of 2:25:39 set by Yun Bok Suh of South Korea in 1947. It also notes the top ten finishers from years 1940-49, and has some partial pictures. My grandfather wrote notes on the clipping about the finishing places and times of the runners he was following.

In 1959, yours truly spent the first six months of life not far from mile 18 and the dreaded and much celebrated Heartbreak Hill. Odd how even my earliest days of life were near the course. Do you suppose it was something in the air? The water? It seems like fate.

As I was growing up, family tradition dictated a yearly trek to Lexington from Maine for Patriot's Day weekend events. We would stay with my grandmother in Lexington, go to the Lion's Club pancake breakfast, attend the military reenactments, watch the parade at noon (the drum & bugle corps was a big hit), and then, of course, go to the race. The funny thing was, we never knew anyone who was running, but we wanted to be part of something so historic and awe inspiring. My dad always knew what road to go down to find a good parking place, and would get us there before the first runners came through.

Fast forward through the years. As children grew older and began having children of their own, the trips to Boston for Patriot's Day weekend events continued. Available family members and friends would arrive in Waltham before noon, to eat at the same pizza shop, and watch the start of the race on their TV. The group would then drive to select locations to get far enough ahead to watch the lead runners go by. My dad knew the secret side roads and hidden parking spots so we could make our way down the course around road closures and traffic delays. We would stand and cheer for 60-90 minutes as the runners just kept coming. A portable radio would keep everyone in touch with the race progress and status of the leaders. Over the years, some of the faces and events changed, but a new generation was exposed to our family history, and the race was always part of it.

In 1998 I became a runner, and in 1999 a triathlete. Once I made the transition from spectator to runner, the dream of "maybe someday" being a participant instead of a spectator at Boston took a step closer to reality. Sadly, despite training and trying as hard as I could, the magic number on the finish line clock never reflected a pace

I can't imagine running a mile dressed as a chicken, a hula dancer, a viking (complete with horned helmet), etc., but they were there, and they did it all. I could go on and on about all I saw and felt (and would be happy to share with anyone that would like to hear more!) Suffice it to say, the opportunity the MTC Board of Directors gave me, and my family, will never be forgotten. I trained hard, ran as well as I could, and crossed the finish line as an official finisher of the 110th Boston Marathon.

My family tradition with Boston started in 1911 when my grandfather took notice of Clarence Demar's 1st victory, and went on in great detail from there. No one before me had ever run in it, however. I dedicated the race to my dad (I think my running meant almost as much to him as it did to me!), and my grandfather's memory.

Thank you all for your encouragement and support, and for this once in a lifetime opportunity. It was everything I had ever dreamed and more.

Boston Marathon...

fast enough to grant me entry to the ranks of a official Boston qualifier. Running as a bandit was never an option, so I volunteered, and watched, and dreamed (and kept trying!)

When the Maine Track Club received the two Invitational Entries to Boston, I thought long and hard about entering. I talked to my dad and my husband, and decided I had nothing to lose. I could certainly think of many club members more deserving than myself, but felt I just had to try. Family tradition, don't you know.

The day that changed my life was Monday, January 16th, 2006. My husband and I arrived home from a weekend away to find a message from Mark on the answering machine, telling me I had received one of the two Boston Invitational Entries. After I recovered from the shock of the message, stopped jumping up and down, crying and yelling and squeezing my husband so hard he almost turned blue, I called my dad. Telling him first was the most important thing I could do. His reaction? Priceless.

No one in my family has ever been where I will be on April 17th, 2006. I have been blessed to have a "village" of training partners, a coach, family and friends to help get me to the start line. I could not have done it without them.

My first marathon in 2000 was dedicated to my mom, who died unexpectedly in 1999 and never saw me fulfill my dream. While I know she will be with me on race day, I dedicate my running of the 110th Boston Marathon to the memory of my grandfather and to my dad. I will run for my family, my friends, and myself. Some family members will be watching from the sidelines, and will meet me at the finish. Other family and friends will follow my progress from home. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for us all, and I will treasure every step of the way.

Dad, this one's for you.....

..... Running the Boston Marathon - what an experience. I never thought I would have the opportunity, and barely believed it when my dream came true! I saw a sign in the athlete village that morning that read "Boston...26.2 miles that will change your life forever". That is so true.

The pre-race expo was overwhelming. I could barely believe race weekend had finally arrived. I was so lucky to have my family with me to share in all of the experiences and events. Race morning, it was amazing to see so many people in the athlete village, and realize I was only seeing half of all the runners! I could not get over how many people were there.

The spectators were amazing, as were the costumes some of the runners were wearing.



Clarence Demar 1928 (top)
Johnny Kelley 1935 (bottom)

