

Corporate Speedster: On the Road with Russ Connors

by Will Lund



Russ Connors, "The Ambassador of Running"

After star performers in the business world retire, they are commonly called back to work on special projects. So it was for sixty year old Cape Elizabeth resident Russ Connors, although in his case the special project was the Los Angeles Marathon.

Competing March 8 against an international field of runners and representing his employer of 37 years, American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T), Connors placed first

in his age group in the Corporate Cup Challenge, and finished only a few minutes behind the overall age group winner.

Connors had set a target completion time of 3 hours, 5 minutes. What he had not counted on was the near-record 78 degree heat, which took a heavy toll on the 19,000 runners. "I quickly realized that the goal was not speed, but survival," recounted the 60-year old Connors.

The heat was so oppressive that when water stops stocked with 15,000 cups ran dry, Mayor Tom Bradley ordered street hydrants opened.

Cheered on by more than 100,000 spectators, Connors conserved energy in the early and middle stages of the race, then accelerated at Mile 21. His last 10K was faster than his first, says Connors, and he passed many cramped, blistered and dehydrated competitors on his way to a strong 3 hour, 22 minute finish.

This veteran of more than 25 marathons credits his family for introducing him to the sport. "My daughters got me into running in

1979," says Connors. Three daughters (Jean-Marie, Virginia and Sarah Jane) were all prominent track runners at Cape Elizabeth High.

"One day, I went by Jean-Marie's room, and I saw all these clothes with the 'Maine Track Club' insignia. A hooded sweatshirt, a running suit, a singlet and shorts, all for the membership price of \$34!" A practical man in need of some running gear, he immediately signed up.

The clothing was attractive, but for Connors the companionship quickly became the most important aspect of running. "Bob Coughlin, Jim Toulouse, Dick McFall, Herb Strom...all out running, supporting and encouraging each other," he said, during a recent interview.

Running steadily and building a solid base, Connors developed into an outstanding senior runner. He earned a spot on the National Corporate Team each of the last 3 years, and holds the national 5K corporate record in his age group.

Not content to excel in merely one sport, Connors recently joined the "Tsunami" Masters Swim Team which practices in the Cape pool. Connors returned several weeks ago from the New England Masters Championship, where he placed third in the 200 Individual Medley and second in the 100 Butterfly. "Not too many people take up swim racing at the same time they're approaching Social Security eligibility," says Connors, adding that he is looking forward to next year's World Seniors swim meet in Montreal.

Connor's animated conversation returns to running, and he credits Coach Brian "Ziggy" Gillespie with helping him to concentrate on his speed and form. Last June, Gillespie opened his Run to Win Team practices at the Expo Track to all interested track club members, and Connors jumped at the opportunity. "Ziggy got me running focused and fast, by establishing reachable goals," he says of Gillespie.

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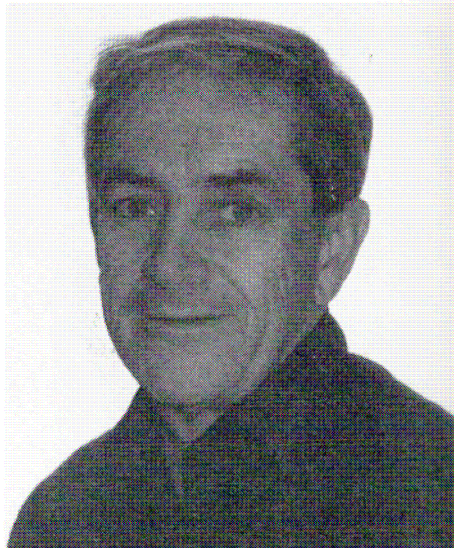
Corporate Speedster continues

Remarkably pain-free through his recent career, Connors nonetheless was reminded of the complexity of human bio-mechanics last year when he suffered a minor knee injury while skiing. "The doctors x-rayed my knee, put the picture up on the screen, then began talking about my age and arthritis and why didn't I take up something more gentle like a 3-wheel bike," says Connors. "But I persisted until they gave me strengthening and stretching exercises, then worked my way back slowly into shape."

He becomes expressive and ebullient when talking about the Track Club, his running buddies and his philosophy of life:

- *What does he enjoy about running?* "Seeing friends, making friends."
- *During races, is he a clock-watcher?* "Time isn't important. Often I don't even check my watch at the finish. I'm just glad to be there."
- *What are the strengths of the Maine Track Club?* "The encouragement given to runners of all ages, and the appreciation shown to race volunteers."
- *What advice would he give sedentary Mainers?* "Get off the couch!"

Russ Connors' enthusiasm is an inspiration to all runners, and those runners can expect to see him lined up at the start of races for years to come.



Dear Friends,

It has been and continues to be a wonderful experience for the Connors family to be members of the Maine Track Club. I think of the Saturday and Sunday runs from Payson Park and the hospitality of some members and their families organizing fun runs from their homes.

I would like to share a little incident that happened to me over fifteen years ago. My family and I were new members of a non-running club. One person and I were working on a small project away from the crowd. After a few hours of hammering and sawing and small talk, he turned to me and asked, "Have you ever noticed that there is a clique in this club?" I answered that I had not. He said that indeed there was a big clique and if anyone wanted to be a part of it, all they had to do was "roll up their sleeves and go to work."

That remark has always made me aware that yes, there usually is a big clique in any club and it always includes all the members that make it work. I want to thank that big clique of Maine Track Club members for making this club one of the finest running clubs in America.

You all "make my day" in the finest sense of the words.

Sincerely,

Russ Connors
President 1984