

# 'Rigger Runs in N.Y.C. Marathon

By Bill Stricklin

Aloha spirit in New York City? You bet! New Yorkers couldn't have done better if they'd been holding pineapples and wearing Primo hats. More cheering spectators stood at curbside in the cold rain than we have total population in our entire state.

The 26.2-mile race began at 10:45 a.m. on Sunday morning, October 23, at the Staten Island side of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Most of the 17,000 invited runners (of 60,000 applicants) arrived between 5 and 6 a.m. in the official buses. They spent the next four hours drinking coffee and psyching up one another in the plastic warming tents near the starting line.

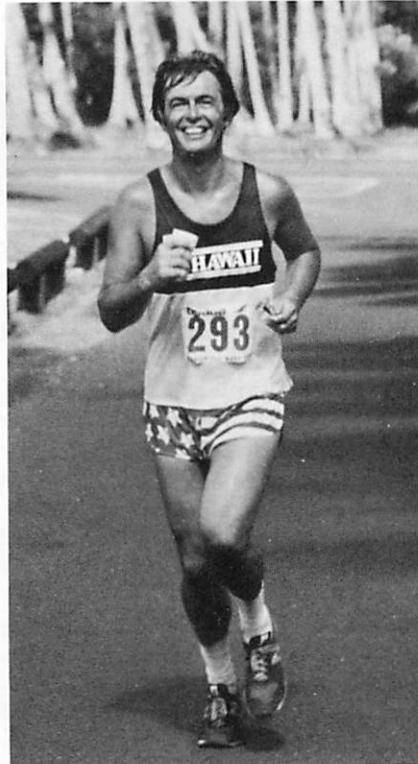
I had just attended the Metropolitan Opera's 100th anniversary gala, an 8-hour, black-tie event. Consequently, when the first buses arrived I was just getting back to my hotel on Central Park South to grab a few hours sleep. With my heels blistered and raw from some new black leather shoes, I got some of the doorman's orange 3M baggage tape and wrapped my feet like they do on late-night TV ("Mummy's Curse") so I could pop out of bed, run for a taxi and make it to the starting line before the gun went off.

I had spent the day before the race with Hawaii's Steve Sobaji, who ran 2:20 last year and needed to shave off just one minute in order to qualify for the Olympic trials. Steve and I had a Brobdingnagian feast of pancakes and more pancakes. We then walked forever looking for a Salvation Army store in which to buy some warm things to wear at the start of the race and to throw away when we warmed up. (I never did warm up and wore mine until I was in my hot tub at Essex House.) Apparently, I was the first person ever to shop in black tie at a New York City Salvation Army store, and I'm absolutely certain that nobody else at the black-tie opera centennial had a Salvation Army package under their seat.

My taxi driver got in the spirit of the thing and talked his way past all of the police. He pointed to my running number and deposited me at the starting line with about three minutes to spare. In the hospital, I found a young medic

who had had a football player roommate in college. He quickly cut off the orange mummy bindings and properly taped my feet so that my ankles could move, which was a real improvement.

Suddenly, the gun sounded and people started throwing off their warm



Bill Stricklin

clothing. Not me. My Outrigger Canoe Club shirt was on top of three layers of jackets and sweaters. Only in New York City: one wealthy young woman threw away a fur coat halfway across the first bridge. The coat looked a bit like well-worn cocker spaniel but her nonchalant toss was still a most impressive act.

As we ran off the Verrazano-Narrows bridge, a runner's mother stood at the Brooklyn curb with a thermos cup of steamy broth. "Hyman!" she yelled to the man just in front of me, "Stop! Have some chicken soup!" "Go home, Mother, please, I'm running the marathon," he yelled back, dropping back until he was beside me. "It's going to rain, Hyman, and you'll need the soup, have some chicken soup now, Hyman,"

she insisted. As I looked back over my shoulder, Hyman was shaking his head with resignation and obediently drinking the hot soup, and I never saw him again.

We raced across the Pulaski Bridge from Brooklyn to Queens and then crossed the Queensboro Bridge, more frequently called the 59th Street Bridge, linking Queens to Manhattan. I looked at my watch. It was 2:18, and I telegraphed to Steve Sobaji every bit of positive energy I could send out. Steve's magnificent performance in the cold, slippery, difficult conditions fell just 45 seconds short of the Olympics trial requirements, I learned later as I waded in the mud of the finish line.

I found myself humming the words of "59th Street Bridge Song" by Simon & Garfunkel: "*Slow down, you move too fast . . .*" The marathon committee had stretched a thin nylon carpet on top of the bridge's grating, providing a better running surface and giving the runners with smaller feet less of a sense that they might fall through the 100-foot-high steel grating into the East River below.

To reach the Bronx and then to return to Manhattan for the Central Park finish, we crossed and then re-crossed the Harlem River, first at the Willis Avenue Bridge and then at the Madison Avenue Bridge. The one-mile run through South Bronx (at about the 20th mile of the race) was a happy run through lusty, encouraging New Yorkers who wanted every one of us to win. The next four miles through Harlem were an excitement of cheers, clapping hands, beating drums, loud rock music pouring out of the ghetto-blasters and nothing but encouragement from everybody in sight.

Our final trek was along Fifth Avenue, in pouring cold rain. I put my mind in its own happy place by singing Irving Berlin's "Easter Parade" again and again. "*On the Avenue, Fifth Avenue . . .*" until at last we sloshed through the mud of Central park and crossed the finish line. Silver medallions on red, white and blue ribbons were put around our necks. Oh yes, we were also given some hot chicken soup!