

METER

THE RUNNER'S REVIEW

SUMMER 2020 EDITION



CHRIS LAMBERT

The Unseen Circuit

Chris Lambert on life touring the European B-circuit in search of fast times.

HEATHER IRVINE

A Racing Roundtable

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A small town, a damp Thursday evening in February: the world's fastest 5K?

Race Minds



It was probably when the NBA canceled its season, on March 11th, that people started to realize how big of a deal the coronavirus pandemic was going to be. But the Boston Marathon was still over a month away. The 2020 Olympic Games were in late July. There was no way we'd still be fighting this virus in late summer. Right?

Over the weeks and months it became apparent that the novel coronavirus, which causes the potentially deadly infection, COVID-19, was here to stay and disrupt our lives, including training and racing. Journalists who cover the running community and elite athletes reported on race cancellations and what the global pandemic has done to professional athletes, training, and racing.

But the amateur runner knows that racing doesn't take place in a vacuum. Races and running events require incredible planning and partnerships with sponsors, businesses, and local organizations, including police, fire, and public works departments. Without a strong community backing, our beloved races would cease to exist either entirely or as we know them.

METER sat down with four race organizers over video to talk about how COVID-19 has affected

WORDS BY HEATHER MAYER IRVINE
IMAGES BY ATLANTA TRACK CLUB
& JENNIFER EDWARDS

Four race organizers
discuss how the COVID-19
pandemic affected their
community-led events.

their events and the communities that support them. We chose these races for a few reasons: They fit the bill of being community-led, they draw incredibly fast runners—elite and sub elite levels—and in some cases, there is no prize money, “just” the feeling of being a part of something bigger than themselves.

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HOLYOKE ST. PATRICK'S DAY 10K

Holyoke, MA
Brian Donoghue, Race Director
10K Road Race
Saturday following St. Patrick's Day

The 10K takes place in conjunction with a week-end of St. Patrick's Day festivities and draws 6,000 to 7,000 runners from 38 states. Six blocks of the downtown area are closed down for the race and parade to host 20,000 to 50,000 people.

TRAV'S TRAIL RUN

Newburyport, MA
Don Hennigar, Race Director
3 Mile Cross-Country Race
3rd Sunday in May

The race, in its 20th year, is a fundraiser for a scholarship in honor of Travis Landreth. Landreth ran cross-country for Newburyport High School and went on to train with Nike's farm league. He died unexpectedly while on a training run when he was 24 due to a heart condition. Trav's Trail Run hosts roughly 250 participants.

AJC PEACHTREE ROAD RACE

Atlanta, GA
Rich Kenah, Executive Director,
Atlanta Track Club
10K Road Race
July 4th

Known as the largest 10K race in the world, Peachtree hosts 60,000 runners. This past July would have been the 41st running on July 4th. Two years ago, Peachtree was the United States 10K Championships race. The event draws elite runners from all over the world.

NEW BALANCE FALMOUTH ROAD RACE

Falmouth, MA
Jennifer Edwards, General Manager
7 Mile Road Race
5th Sunday in August

The Falmouth Road Race is one of the most storied road races in running history, thanks to its grassroots foundation. The race is capped at 12,800 participants, who run from Captain Kidd Restaurant and Bar in Woods Hole to Falmouth Heights Beach.

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When do you normally start organizing for your event?

Kenah: While [the Atlanta Track Club] puts on a lot of other events, after the Peachtree Road Race on July 4th, we start discussions on July 5th for the following year. It's safe to say we have a full-time staff, roughly 10 event staff, for this race year-round. ATC works with dozens of people on the planning of Peachtree year-round.

Donoghue: Our race takes place on the Saturday after St. Patrick's Day, unless St. Patrick's Day falls on a Saturday—then it's run on St. Patrick's Day. It's sort of a year-round process, but we definitely have some down time after the race to catch our breath. We really ramp up about six months before the event and the last three months are really crazy. We're unique in that the race is organized entirely by volunteers. It's a volunteer-driven event. Ten people do the bulk of the work, but as we get closer to race day we have more volunteers.

Edwards: I work for DMSE Sports, which puts on about 50 events over the course of the year, including the Boston Marathon. We organize the New Balance Falmouth Road Race, which is one of our biggest events. There are four of us who are dedicated to Falmouth year-round, but we wouldn't be able to do it without our 1,800 volunteers. We'll miss them this year. We organize different parts of the events during different parts of the year. We'll talk to sponsors now [early summer] as they figure out their next year's budget. A few weeks after the event we'll review a report to see how everything went and what we can do better.

Hennigar: Our race is a whole different ball game [compared with Peachtree, Falmouth, and Holyoke]. We have a much smaller operation. I do about 95 percent of the work, and I start planning in January. For this race we don't need a large staff. We have a small group that does a lot of work as we get closer to race day.

Races rely on a large amount of community goodwill, including road closures, securing sponsorship, and recruiting volunteers. How

much time and effort does it take to maintain those relationships?

Edwards: Falmouth is a very small community. Our event is large, but Falmouth is a tiny town on Cape Cod. We're friends with a lot of the people in the community. I went to the chief of police's daughter's wedding. I see members of the community at all kinds of events. We try to keep that community goodwill going throughout the year and give back to these organizations—first responders, department of public works, Falmouth hospital. We acknowledge that our event puts a strain on their systems, so we will treat them to a lunch event, for example, and have ongoing conversations with them. We're lucky to have the history of our race behind us. Our group is all about creating that community connection in which everyone feels valued and appreciated. It's a partnership.

Donoghue: Similar to what Jennifer said, we're not a big city. When we have our event meetings throughout the year, the captain from the fire department comes, a liaison from the police department, someone from the department of public works. That relationship never really goes away. Our event has gotten bigger over the years—this would have been our 45th running. The community comes to expect the race. The



organization is a yearlong process, but it just naturally happens because of our relationships.

Kenah: In a city the size of Atlanta, with the number of events that the city welcomes each year, there are certain processes and procedures you have to follow from a permitting perspective and with respect to safety and security. But you can't have Peachtree without the relationships we've talked about.

Because our race is on July 4th, every seven years it falls on a Sunday. In 1982 when the race was beginning to grow, there was a standoff between the track club and leaders from the local churches. There are a number of churches along the course. Mayor Andrew Young was called in to mediate. He is a Civil Rights leader and known to many in Atlanta and around the world now. The issue was ultimately resolved when Mayor Young said he was going to participate in the event.

At the time we did not have a relationship with the churches, and now we do. We recognize that we have to build and maintain that relationship on years Peachtree isn't run on a Sunday. One example is a church along the course called the Cathedral of St. Philip: the dean is out there every year blessing runners with holy water.

What types of crowds does your race attract?

Hennigar: We're well supported by the community. Travis, for whom the race pays tribute, ran at Newburyport High School and went on to the University of Connecticut. We have high school alumni, parents, and a huge UConn alumni contingent. Our core group has been with the race for all 20 years, and now they're bringing their children. We do bring in people from other places, but it's primarily a local community event and is supported in that way.

Edwards: Falmouth has the summer tradition to it, and people plan their vacations around the race. It's officially the last week of summer for a lot of people. Some people even buy timeshares so they can run it. The whole course—except for a portion through Woods Hole—is lined with spectators, roughly 50,000 to 60,000. Over the course of our three-day expo at Falmouth High School, we see more than 20,000 people. The race is open to Falmouth residents and taxpayers first, who get guaranteed entry, so it stays as much a community race as possible. We focus on giving back to the community and involving the community in any way we can.

Since 2012, our group, Falmouth Road Race, Inc., has given back \$2.9 million to the community in the form of scholarships, grants, and collaborative projects, like refurbishing the high school track.

Kenah: Peachtree draws an elite crowd. Our moniker, so to speak, is the world's largest 10K. We admit 60,000 participants. Last year, we had runners from 49 states and 20 countries. But 90 percent of our race field is from Georgia. So while Peachtree does draw national and international runners, this is first and foremost a community event. It's how Atlanta celebrates the Fourth of July. Depending on the weather and what day of the week July 4th is, we might have 100,000 to 200,000 spectators.

What is it about your race that sets it apart from other large headline acts?

Donoghue: A lot of it has to do with the weekend itself. It's St. Patrick's Day weekend. We call it the Holyoke Homecoming. It's a big party. Making yourself different from other races is

the hardest part, but I think that takes care of itself because of our community.

Edwards: I'm from Ludlow [Massachusetts], and I went to UMass Amherst. I've been to your party. My dad ran your race.

Donoghue: I'll come down and run your race!

Hennigar: The fundraiser is our focus. It's the sole fundraiser for our memorial scholarship. All of the money we raise goes to different organizations in the running community. All of the money comes from the sport and goes back into it. What sets our race apart, too, is we pride ourselves on racing the way racing used to be: without the glitz and glamour. We award top runners with a hand-made mug, and all runners get Fluffer Nutter sandwiches after the race. People usually have a Fluffer Nutter once a year and it's at Trav's.

When did you know your event wasn't going to happen at all or in its usual capacity?

Donoghue: The city made the call for us on March 10th, less than two weeks before our race. We had many conversations before the official cancellation. There was a lot of backlash. For two days there were a lot of angry people, but then they understood. Forty-eight hours after our

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cancellation, the NBA canceled its season and the world shut down. So then they understood.

Hennigar: We made the call in early April. It gets to a point when we're starting to spend money on things we might not be able to use. At some point, from a financial perspective, we have to decide yes or no. We can't wait until two weeks before or it's all money down the drain. It became very apparent that we'd have to cancel. We thought about a virtual option, but that wasn't really in our fabric.

Kenah: We decided in the last few days of April to postpone. We wrestled with the same issues of expenses. And we're all challenged with the same question of do you have it or not? If you don't have it on the normal date, is it better to cancel or postpone? We were just launching our registration when the pandemic really started to take hold, in mid March. We had more than 45,000 people registered despite that. So for us to have 45,000 people say Peachtree is that important to us, we factored that in to postpone rather than cancel. We made the decision to postpone before the city forced our hand because we had the realization that the world's largest 10K could not happen on the Fourth of July even though Georgia, as a state, started to open up more quickly.

We looked at three things when making this decision: what date would allow us to do this safely, what date would give us the same feel and emotion around a family and community event, and what date can help minimize the impact on businesses in a city that's already struggling. We landed on Thanksgiving, knowing full well what we don't know. I don't believe we'll know whether we can have our event until October.

Edwards: Similar to Brian [Donoghue]'s story, town officials decided to cancel all events on March 58th, as we all joked, because of how long March felt. They canceled at the end of April, but we were unaware of their decision, and we woke up to our phones and Facebook blowing up. The news spread like wildfire overnight.

We'd seen the writing on the wall, and we started to create a contingency plan before the decision was made. We were approved for a postponement date for mid November, but there was still so much uncertainty.

We have 150 charity teams that count on funds coming from our event, so we decided we needed to support them and launch an at-home event to give those groups a solid event to work with and plan for. So Falmouth wasn't canceled, it was redesigned. We're still having our 48th running, it's just an at-home edition. We have roughly 8,000 people registered.

We've heard a lot about what cancelled and postponed races mean to athletes and participants, but what was that immediate impact on race organizations and the communities that support them?

Donoghue: The immediate impact on a town of 40,000 people, which balloons to 60,000 to 70,000 on race day, is the income that local businesses would normally get. This has drawn out further than we ever could have expected, five, six, eight weeks into a shutdown. It's been crippling, really, from a local economy standpoint.

Edwards: Similarly, we have a very small community that is dependent upon tourism. We need tourists in the summer for restaurants and businesses. With everything closed, we thought, how can we support local businesses and also bring people back to town when it's safe to do so? We went out and bought 700 gift cards, \$55,000 worth, from different restaurants and businesses in Falmouth. We're randomly awarding our at-home race participants with gift cards so they

can come and use them next year. It feels good to give back to our community.

What about over the course of the year?

Kenah: In the city the size of Atlanta, a city that is accustomed to hosting large events like the Super Bowl, college playoffs—the Final Four [basketball tournament] was supposed to be held here in March—the economic impact of Peachtree is small in relative terms.

But with respect to our organization, the Atlanta Track Club, we are dependent on Peachtree to drive the programming we have throughout the rest of the year. We're a nonprofit organization, and we employ more than 30 people full-time. Peachtree allows us to put on 30 to 40 other events and programs, so not having the race will have a significant economic impact on our organization for years to come.

“We went out and bought 700 gift cards, \$35,000 worth, from different restaurants and businesses in Falmouth. We're randomly awarding our at-home race participants with gift cards so they can come and use them next year.”

Thankfully, our organization, long before I became involved, was well-led and governed, so we will weather the storm, but the effects will be felt for years to come, even if we do host the race in November. We've been able to protect the vast majority of our staff, but we did lay off 10 percent of our workforce. Even if we are able to have the race in November, right now, we only have 45,000 participants compared with our normal 60,000.

Hennigar: There are more Thanksgiving day races than on any other day of the year, so people may be married to their traditional Thanksgiving day race.

Kenah: We have a Thanksgiving day event we canceled to have Peachtree. To Don's point, the second most popular day to run a race is July 4th.

Moving forward, how might the lessons learned from the global pandemic affect your events?

Kenah: There is only one sports organization that was smart enough to plan for this. And that was Wimbledon, which took out pandemic insurance. I imagine all of us have plenty of insurance, but none of us have pandemic insurance.

Rich, can you talk a little bit about your unique year, having hosted the Olympic Marathon Trials at the end of February?

Kenah: If you told me at the beginning of the year that Marathon Trials would be the easiest thing we'd do this year, I'd have told you you're crazy. We budgeted for a loss this year because of the Trials, but that doesn't really play into what we're faced with now. They're two very different things. We were lucky to be able to have hosted the Trials. If they had been a week later, I don't think we would have.

Don, your race, a memorial, holds a special place in your community's heart. How has the community dealt with this year's cancellation?

Hennigar: It's unfortunate in so many ways. We took a big hit this year because we still made our donation to the scholarship fund, but we had virtually zero money coming in. And being the 20th anniversary, we were going to make it extra special this year.

A number of people went to the state park where we hold the race to run like they would have if the race had happened. The spirit of the race was still there. We had significant donations; those who pre-registered told us to keep the fees for the donation. People even entered after we had to cancel so they could make donations. We got a lot of support from people who have supported us all along, and that gave us some spirit for next year.

What have these unprecedented times shown you about your communities?

Donoghue: My day job as a sales rep for Asics gives me a unique perspective that we're seeing the next running boom. As running stores are reopening, the sales they're making in the first few weeks are amazing. These shops are the backbones of the running community, and running is something anyone can do.

Edwards: This situation has given everybody a sense of appreciation for what we offer to our communities, not just the running community, either. We're incredibly lucky to have the community support.

Kenah: The Peachtree phenomenon is something that's hard to explain. It was lightning in a bottle when it took off in the 70s, and it remains that way today. Tens of thousands of people include Peachtree as part of their July 4th routine and tradition. There's so much pent-up emotion around Peachtree. And at a time when so much of our country is divided, we see this pandemic as a way of bringing the running community together in a way it hasn't had to before.

We'll look back on this year, 2020, as a disruptor that made the industry stronger and forced us to be reborn. It's up to our respective organizations to make lemonade out of these lemons, and I think we did. **M**

The alarm goes off at 4:30 a.m., but I'm already wide awake. It's October: early spring here in New Zealand and the season for the National Road Relays (NRR). Excitement has been coursing through my system for several days now. This year it's in Fielding, a small, rural town on the North Island, and its surrounding country roads. Although I am over 70, the thrill and anticipation of competing in a relay is just as exciting as it was nearly half a century ago.

Like many Kiwi kids, rugby was my first love, and I played it well into my late thirties. I was also a reasonable sprinter, with just enough endurance to survive cross country. When rugby finished in September, I was often dragged into a local harrier club team for the big relays. The main event in our region was the iconic Wellington to Masterton Relay, a 10 person saga from the capital city, over a mountain pass to the plains of the Wairarapa. The total distance was just over 60 miles, including a climb of over 1600 feet.

I remember well, as a young rugby player, getting conned into participating. “We'll give you the easy downhill lap from the top of the Takas,” offered a knowing mate. With my rugby fitness and sprinter's speed, I duly tore off down the steep downhill, passing at least five teams in the first mile, then running out of steam badly as the lactic took over on the small uphill going into the change zone. I couldn't walk for at least a week. In those days there was no national event, just a series of regional contests, which in certain key years were “open” to “gun” clubs from other centers. The most famous events were Wellington to Masterton, and the even older Takahe to Akaroa, which is still going in Christchurch and involves some serious climbing. These relays came into being before and after WWII, partly to commemorate fallen servicemen.

The idea of a road relay emigrated with the many fine runners of British descent, but also had roots in the famous Japanese Ekiden tradition, using relays of runners to deliver post and telegrams. The most unique thing about relays in NZ is that they adapted to much of the mountainous terrain in the country. It is no accident that NZ runners have done well in running hills, with Jonathan Wyatt for example (from the same high school as the Willis brothers), recently voted the GOAT of World Mountain Running. So in the road relays there has to be a significant hill or hills to climb. Harrier clubs in New Zealand derive their name and tradition from British harrier clubs, which emerged as paper chase racers, often with two groups, hounds and hares, the same game I learned to play in NZ Boy Scouts. They are predominantly winter clubs, although like some of their English counterparts they often have track and field sections in summer. At a time when joining any kind of club is rather uncool, harrier clubs have persisted, and in some cases thrived. Remember also that NZ, with few universities, has no real university sports system supported by scholarships, well-paid coaches, and NCAA championships.

Harrier clubs play an important role for these athletes.

letes. Road relays, too, are one of the main reasons why harrier clubs are still in good heart. The relays come at the end of our winter season in October, and it is almost as if everything in the season leads up to this annual contest and celebration.

These clubs start their planning for the NRR very early in the season, to recruit and get the best teams on the road in October. International runners may spend most of the season running the circuits in Europe or America, but where possible they are encouraged to block out the first week of October for the relays. Team managers and selectors will often travel early to the intended course, plotting which athletes will run the long or short laps, the uphill and the downhill. Elite athletes of the past, including gold medallists like Murray Halberg, Peter Snell and John Walker, have often supported their clubs in this way, even into the professional era. In 2019 for example, Rio 1500m Olympian Hamish Carson, took his winning Scottish team into the lead only on the last leg. The idea of a NRR was the brainchild of my good friend, running Professor, author and former elite runner, Roger Robinson. Roger and his mate Ken Parker were on a lunch time run, and realised that it would be easy to implement an NRR, given that there were already good relays in existence in the provinces and it would be just a matter of sharing it around.

“When I moved from England in 1968, I found all New Zealand team championships were contested among the eight regional Centers - Auckland, Canterbury, Otago, etc. Auckland won almost everything,” says Robinson. “That seemed dull, as I was typical in feeling a much stronger loyalty to my club. Road relays were already huge vibrant events, and new ones were appearing, and I saw those as the perfect opportunity to add a national club title. Relays test a team's depth so wonderfully. Every runner matters equally. That's why I was confident a National Road Relay would be a success, because it created championship opportunities for the sixth or eighth best runner in every club, not only the elites.”

The NRR officially began in 1977 and it was shared around for several decades. However it is true that today the list of possible courses is more limited, due to traffic congestion and health and safety regulations. But, compared to much of the world, the list of possible venues in NZ is really quite solid: over a third of our population lives in Auckland and only one million in the whole of the South Island. Even as our country has changed, road relays have adapted and made

the most of our sparse populations. One of my favorites, The Marton to Wanganui, used to be held on main highways, but has now retreated to the backcountry, replete with historic “long drop ” toilets on hill tops, and winding gravel roads. Last year my club swapped the lead with the Manawatu Striders several times during the 10 laps, before finally besting them on the hills of the penultimate lap.

The racing has always been competitive. As Grant Mclean recalls in his book, The Story of Wellington Scottish: “There have been many wonderful teams crammed full of talent - the New Brighton hard men of the late 1980s and early 1990s (including current NZ steeple record holder Peter Renner. The great Auckland University teams of the 1980s including Dick Quax, Rod Dixon, and John Bowden. The University of Canterbury and Wellington Scottish teams, both with five year winning streaks.”

So it was as an older athlete that I came afresh to the NRR. With my 85kgs of old rugby muscle and expanding midsection, I realised that my knees and hips were not going to stand up to the training needed for running. After rugby I toyed with running distance with about 10 half marathons (best 1:28) and one full marathon (about 5:50), all based on no more than three days training per week. Because of soreness in my knees, I made the decision to re-discover something I had learned in my childhood. Growing up on a Taranaki dairy farm in the 1950s, I longed to test myself over more than the maximum 220 yards allowed for both children and women. In my local market town, Hawera, my father had an insurance agent who happened to be an Olympic Gold medallist. Norman Read, had won the 50k racewalk in Melbourne in 1956. He ran coaching clinics and I learned the techniques of race walking proper. Unfortunately, I then went to a very English, provincial, boys' boarding school, where the prevailing atmosphere was a severe disincentive to wobbling my bum, race walking style, even if there had been such an event in the school athletics sports.

And so the re-discovery of this race walking ability in my latter years was a good way to exercise, without doing further damage to my knees. I now belong to a small club near my home, which caters for both runners and walkers. For the past three years we have won the walking section of the NRR, albeit the competition is not as rigorous as for the runners. In this way I have come to appreciate again the delights of the 'big

dance' of a national event, the anticipation, the thrill of the chase, the pushing of one's ancient body more than one ever thought possible, the post-race exhaustion and cramps, and the esprit de corps of the post-race celebrations. The great thing about race walking is that some ancient walkers seem to go on forever, competing well into their 80s.

The great thing about NRR is that it is not just for the stars. In 2019, there were over 85 teams in Fielding. Since the race's inception, women, junior men, junior women, walkers, over 40, over 50 and over 60 grades have been added along with B and C grades to keep each of the separate races competitive. In addition there is a Top Overall Team Prize, with clubs such as Wellington Scottish always being strong competitors.

This spirit is well captured in a 1985 NZ Runner article by Roger Robinson where he said, “Above all, thousands of ordinary runners have been part of their team and part of a national championship race on exactly equal terms with Quax and Walker and co., co-mingling with them in that unique module hotch-potch of exuberant drama, rivalry and shared excitement which is road relay running.”

The NRR might not be what we're famous for, but ask any athlete who has competed in the New Zealand club scene and they'll tell you the Road Relays was the one event they'd love to win. If you're a club from America or further afield, why not send a team? We promise a warm welcome, even if we can't guarantee we'll go easy on you. **M**

Relays

NZ