

Race of the Year

The Magic That is MDI

by John Stevens

How does a marathon conducted at the end of the summer tourist season in a remote and hilly region of Maine attract in excess of 1,200 runners from 47 states and seven countries, 12% of whom end up qualifying for Boston?

Well, it certainly helps that with adjacent Arcadia National Park the course is one of the most beautiful in the country, equaled only perhaps by the Big Sur Marathon on the 'other coast.' But that's not enough to qualify this race as "NER Race of the Year." What sets this event apart is the support of this tight knit community and the dedication of, arguably, the second most iconic marathoner in Maine (kudos to Joan Benoit Samuelson as #1) race director Gary Allen, who is one of a select group of 33 men and one woman (Joanie again) to have run a sub-3:00 marathon in each of the last five decades.

But running marathons and founding the MDI Marathon is not the only thing this virtual spirit of the running world has done. When Allen decided to run 705 miles from the top of Cadillac Mt. to the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. and raise \$16,000 for the Wounded Warrior Project, Cancer Society and the survivors of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings, nobody who knows him was surprised.

"It's a little crazy with some of the things he does, but crazy in a beautiful way. He thinks of things that no one else would ever think of doing. What makes Gary different from the rest of us is that he really does live in the moment. If anyone thinks outside the box, it's Gary," says Mary Ropp, who serves as co-director of the MDI Marathon.

The MDI Marathon had humble beginnings back in 2002 when only 392 finishers crossed the finish line. The race grew steadily until 2007 when it leveled off at 650. Allen



Scenic? You bet!

decided to add a relay event, something he was initially loath to do, and the race started to grow again. In 2012, Gary recognized that the race needed stronger marketing and he hired ARE Event Productions to help grow the event. In 2013 after participation showed signs of slipping, a half-marathon was added and attendance quickly jumped above the 1,000 mark; this year the numbers jumped by 17% over 2014 with a record breaking 1,230 finishers.

"I live here and run here and feel very passionately about the power of a simple idea growing like a pebble tossed into still water. I hope the MDI Marathon continues as an asset

to our community for as long or longer than the Boston Marathon," says Allen.

This spirit is shared by the residents, volunteers and the Mount Desert Island business community who have all wrapped their collective arms around this event with enthusiastic support.

"Hotels and B&B's all over the island and as far away as Ellsworth are sold out because of the marathon. This event closes out the summer season and gives our businesses a strong boost for the winter ahead," claims Nancy McKechnie, executive director of the Bar Harbor Chamber of Commerce.

Event support with a runner's touch man-

ALL TOGETHER NOW ...



MDI Race Director Gary Allen with two-time women's winner Leah Frost (L) and women's course record holder Leah Thorvilson.



ifests itself in a number of ways, such as the 23-page online handbook designed not only for runners but for family friends and spectators as well, showing them where to best observe the athletes along the course and maps of how to get there. The handbook provides a link so that spectators or runners can contact volunteers from the Penobscot-Hancock Ham Radio Club via 911 should they notice any athlete on the course having difficulties.

Another unique touch is that Race bib numbers are color coded so that spectators and timers can differentiate experienced marathoners from 1st time runners, charity runners, half marathoners, and relay runners. In fact, half-marathoners wear a second bib on their back for the benefit of competing marathoners.

Not satisfied with your typical pre-race expo? MDI sponsors a pre-race 1.8 mile "Breakfast Fun Run" on the Saturday before the race that is free to all registered runners, their friends and family. That evening there's a pre-race dinner that features a guest speaker. Over the years runners like Louis Luchini, Sheri Piers, Joan Samuelson and Dick Beardsley have motivated runners at the dinner. And yes, there's more: a post-race party is held at a local restaurant Sunday evening where runners can commiserate and share stories about their MDI experiences.

So how do the athletes feel about running MDI? Glover, VT's Leah Frost, 32, has run MDI three times since 2013, won it twice and this year was only 32 seconds short of the course record held by 2014 winner Leah

Thorvilson.

"At the start line the surge of adrenaline felt when Gary blasts AC/DC through the speakers is electrifying and carries us all through those stunningly gorgeous 26.2 miles up and over punishing hills, against tear-inducing headwinds off the ocean to a welcome festive finish in Southwest Harbor," says Frost. "The race feels like a journey and the other runners like fellow adventurers. Gary and Mary are there at the finish line to greet and celebrate everyone's triumph. All the runners in the front, middle and far back of the pack receive the same arm waving encouragement from Gary. I'm far from the 99 marathons Gary has under his belt but MDI stands out as my favorite for beauty, personality and community. So sure, while it's fun to chase PRs and set time-based goals, the MDI Marathon can serve to remind us why we are out here in the first place."

While Allen serves as both finish line announcer and whirling dervish roofer for all finishers, he makes it a point to corral the top-3 men and women's finishers in both the marathon and half marathon. On a three-

tiered podium by the finish area, they are presented with their awards and monetary winnings, while affording the media the opportunity to honor these athletes with group photos and interviews.

This race may have more smiles per mile than any other. The personal touch doesn't go unnoticed and has received national recognition:

"The best place in Maine to feel good about yourself." - *Downeast Magazine*

"One of the best destination marathons." - *Men's Fitness Magazine*

"One of the 11 races to run before you die." - *Men's Health Magazine*

There are larger races with more runners and bigger dollar purses for winners; flat and fast marathon venues that are designed specifically as a Boston qualifier; but you'd be hard pressed to find a running event that generates more support and enthusiasm from both its participants and community. Again, Leah Frost puts it best: "The community Gary has built around this race is, I think, beyond what he himself knows. Islanders and local businesses generously volunteer their time and services to the race and pop out of their homes to cheer runners on. All this speaks to Gary's contagious enthusiasm and generosity."

The proliferation of new events of all sorts continues to grow. While many race directors sit back and bemoan this fact as they watch attendance figures decline, organizations like MDI strive to "think outside the box" and come up with creative ways to enhance, improve and grow the running experience, which is why Gary Allen, his staff, volunteers and the enthusiastic supportive community of Mount Desert Island have earned the designation of NER Race of the Year.

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Photos by Kevin Morris

