

MARATHONERS OF THE DECADES

As part of the celebration of the 40th running of the New York City Marathon, New York Road Runners and a panel of distinguished sports journalists selected eight runners to honor as Marathoners of the Decades.

These eight extraordinary individuals have made an indelible mark on the race, by virtue of their accomplishments in New York on more than one occasion. They will be honored and recognized throughout race week.

Additional details and contact information are available from the race-week media team.

1970s

Miki Gorman

It was an unenlightened age, a time when the world governing body of the sport frowned on women running the marathon distance. Women were “too frail,” and running was an unladylike activity, the argument went. Or, as Miki Gorman, recalled of her early years at the Los Angeles Athletic Club in the late 1960s, “Some members gave me dirty looks because I was a woman running. One, a doctor, even said I should be home in the kitchen.”

Led by pioneers including Nina Kuscsik and Kathrine Switzer, from the early 1970s onward women gained acceptance into the big-city marathons, although it would be 1984 before the Olympics let them in. Too late for Gorman, who might have been an Olympic champion had there been a women’s marathon on the 1976 program in Montreal.

Instead, that year Gorman played a memorable role in an historic New York City Marathon. The winds of change were blowing strongly in New York, and women were already a fixture when, in 1976, the race was moved from four laps of Central Park to the first five-borough run.

Gorman seized the moment. If you could find her, you would not mistake her. Only 5 feet, 2 inches tall and weighing 89 pounds, she was a 41-year-old of formidable talent, an American citizen born of Japanese parents. Delicate in build, she had a giant stride to match her heart.

The day began with the first helicopter shots of runners pouring over the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. For Gorman, it ended with a 2:39:11 clocking, within a minute of the world record and the second-fastest time ever run by a woman. She retained her New York title in 1977, in 2:43:10. It’s no wonder writers dubbed her “the Mighty Atom.”

Bill Rodgers

Despite being the only person to win the New York City Marathon and the Boston Marathon four times apiece, Bill Rodgers comes across as just another runner. Talking with him will result in comparisons of injuries and favorite local races rather than any mention of his three years as the world’s top-ranked marathoner, his world record at 25K, or the year that he won 27 of the 30 races that he entered.

Born in 1947, Rodgers ran track and cross country at Wesleyan University. Following graduation, he ran little and took up smoking, but he was eventually inspired to rededicate himself to the sport by memories of the 1968 Boston Marathon victory of his former teammate Amby Burfoot. After a few middling early marathons, Rodgers broke through with an American record of 2:09:55 in Boston in 1975. (A few fans—who’d happened to notice Rodgers’ third-place finish in the 1975 World Cross Country Championships—weren’t shocked by the performance.)

Injured before the 1976 Montreal Olympic marathon, Rodgers limped to a 40th-place finish. Seeking redemption, he headed to the first five-borough New York City Marathon three months later. There was no stopping—or keeping pace with—Rodgers as he scorched the course, which included a flight of stairs, in an event-record 2:10:10, beating archrival Frank Shorter by more than three minutes.

It's the stuff of legend that Rodgers won the next three New York City Marathons as well. His year of racing in 1978 is also legendary: Among the 27 races he won were the national 10K championship, the Falmouth Road Race, and the Boston and New York City marathons. After a career that included 22 marathon victories, Rodgers was inducted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame in 1999.

1980s

Grete Waitz

It still boggles the mind: Grete Waitz won the New York City Marathon nine times (1978–80, 1982–86, and 1988). She was the gold medalist at the inaugural IAAF World Championships Marathon, in 1983, and the silver medalist at the first women's Olympic marathon, at the 1984 Los Angeles Games. She broke the marathon world record four times: in New York in 1978 (2:32:30), 1979 (2:27:33), and 1980 (2:25:42), and in London in 1983 (2:25:29). She won the IAAF World Cross Country Championship and the NYRR New York Mini 10K five times each and ran world bests at 8K, 10K (twice), 15K, and 10 miles.

Waitz was a junior national champion at 400 and 800 meters in her native Norway, the European junior 1500-meter record-holder (4:17), and the bronze medalist at that distance in the 1974 European Championships. In 1975 she ran a world-record 8:46.6 for 3000 meters. Despite these accomplishments, she was a virtual unknown when New York City Marathon race director Fred Lebow invited her to the 1978 event as a rabbit. She was assigned bib number 1173 and wasn't expected to finish. When she did—in agony, having never before run farther than 12 miles in training—she vowed never to run another marathon. We're fortunate that she broke that promise, again and again.

Though Waitz retired from competition in 1990 after finishing fourth in New York, she returned to the race in 1992 for what became the most meaningful run of her life. She and Lebow, who was in remission from brain cancer, ran the five-borough course side by side and finished in 5:32:34. Their tearful finish-line embrace is considered one of the most moving moments in all of sport. Lebow succumbed to cancer two years later.

Alberto Salazar

Bill Rodgers had won four in a row in New York City and three straight in Boston. East Germany's Waldemar Cierpinski had just taken his second successive Olympic title. The world record was more than 10 years old. The marathon needed shaking up.

Alberto Salazar arrived, ready to shake.

In 1980 the Cuban-born Salazar, 22 years old, was the most promising debut marathoner anyone could remember, based on strong cross country and track performances. Oh, and he knew it. He told Rodgers that, not only did he intend to beat him, he'd also take his New York record of 2:10:10, set in 1976.

"No rookie is going to beat me," Rodgers responded. But at 14 miles, Rodgers was tripped, lost 80 yards, and finished fifth. Salazar, meanwhile, went on to win in 2:09:41, the fastest debut by an American at the time. (All for the glory—there was no prize money back then.)

Predicting 2:08 in 1981, Salazar was as good as his word again. Despite a storm dropping an inch and a half of rain the day before, with winds up to 50 m.p.h., the weather on race morning was ideal—cool and overcast, with a light breeze. The race was televised nationally for the first time, and Salazar ran alone from 17 miles to clock 2:08:13, beating the world record of 2:08:33 held by Australia's Derek Clayton since 1969.

Three years later, the course was found to be 148 meters short, invalidating the world mark. By then, Salazar had added a third successive New York title in 1982 (2:09:29). Typical of the man, he held up three fingers as he crossed the finish line to signify his treble.

1990s

Tegla Loroupe

The only athlete capable of outsmiling the ever-cheerful Haile Gebrselassie, Tegla Loroupe became the first African woman to win a major marathon with her 1994 victory in New York. She has been a gregarious ambassador for the sport ever since.

Now 36 and still running at a decent pace—1:19:41 for 16th place in England's Great North Run this September—Loroupe was just 21 when she made her 2:27:37 marathon debut in New York. She'd kicked the door open for African women, and others would soon come rushing through. But not before tiny Tegla—5 feet tall and 85 pounds—had rewritten the record books.

A second New York win in 1995, in 2:28:06, came with emotional impact. Her finish-line tears were explained by the sudden death 13 days earlier of her sister, who had insisted on her deathbed that Tegla miss the funeral and "fulfill her responsibility" in New York.

Loroupe was important for the sport not only for her talent but for her willingness to open up to the media, like Gebrselassie, at a time when most African athletes were either shy or reluctant. She looked the part, too. When Tegla came to run, she also came to shop. In athlete hotels she stood out in her exquisite outfits bought from top department stores in London and New York. Hers was a classic tale of the African farm girl who went on to amass a fortune, a significant part of which she's since used to fund initiatives to support peace and children's issues.

She broke the world record twice, running 2:20:47 in Rotterdam in April 1998 and 2:20:43 in Berlin in September 1999, and in between finished on the podium again in New York—third in 1998. Two world records, two New York wins, one amazing lady.

Gérman Silva

The early to mid-1990s was Mexico's time in the men's marathon. Martín Pitayo won Chicago in 1990, Salvador García triumphed in New York in 1991 and was followed by compatriots Andrés Espinosa in 1993 and Gérman Silva in 1994 and 1995. Meanwhile, in London, Dionicio Ceron picked off three in a row from 1994 to 1996.

But only Silva's first New York victory has passed into legend. So securely, in fact, that it was named last year as the number-one Great Moment in New York Road Runners history. Silva couldn't have done it alone, though. He needed the help of a New York cop.

When Silva turned into Central Park at Seventh Avenue, with just over a half-mile remaining, his fellow Mexican and co-leader, Benjamin Paredes, kept a steady course along Central Park South. Silva took 12 strides in the wrong direction, realizing his mistake only when his immediate surroundings turned quiet and a cop shouted at him to go back. He rejoined the course 60 yards behind Paredes.

Having mistakenly followed a television truck, Silva recovered his composure and caught Paredes in the last 200 meters to win by two seconds in 2:11:21. The NYRR, as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations in 2008, announced that Silva's "wrong turn" victory topped the list of five greatest moments in its history, as chosen by voting among members.

At a news conference to mark the moment, the personable Silva said with a smile, "What a stupid mistake! But, thanks to that stupid mistake, I'm back here today."

And, thanks to Silva's 1994 victory, his home village of Tecomate got TV. Because of his win, the governor of Veracruz state asked Silva what he would like as a gift. "Bring electricity to my village," he replied. Within months, Tecomate had power.

2000s

Paula Radcliffe

To doubt Paula Radcliffe once is human, to doubt her twice is foolish, and to doubt her a third time is plain crazy. There have been three ING New York City Marathon victories for Radcliffe so far this millennium, and each one is a comeback story of remarkable proportions.

To be fair to those who doubted her the first time, they had a point. Radcliffe had collapsed at the roadside in tears as she dropped out of the 2004 Athens Olympic marathon in mile 23, the world record-holder and favorite appearing to be a broken woman. But, 11 weeks later, against most expert predictions, she won in New York. Not only that, Radcliffe triumphed in a titanic battle with Kenya's Susan Chepkemei, who matched the Briton stride for stride until Radcliffe made a final move just before the finish. She won by three seconds, in 2:23:10, in the closest women's finish witnessed in the race before or since.

Three years later, Radcliffe returned, this time on only 10 weeks of full training after childbirth and injury. On this occasion, some writers suggested, she was definitely biting off more of the Big Apple than she could chew. Ethiopia's Gete Wami, an old rival, would stick with her almost to the finish, but Radcliffe was again too strong, and she won in 2:23:09.

Twelve months later Radcliffe was back in New York again, but not before another harrowing Olympic experience, as she painfully limped home in 23rd place in Beijing, not yet recovered from a stress-fractured femur. But, as she had proven in 2004, 11 weeks can change her world. By the 21st mile, she'd dismissed the last of her challengers, and she coasted home to win by almost two minutes in 2:23:56.

Across the Hudson River from New York lies Hoboken, NJ, hometown of Frank Sinatra, the so-called king of comebacks. In Paula Radcliffe, New York has found a queen.

Marilson Gomes dos Santos

When Marilson Gomes dos Santos scored the first of his two New York City Marathon wins in 2006, it started a celebration in Brazil. When he repeated his victory two years later, his country was asked to show patience.

"Probably there will be a parade and a celebration," Gomes said after his dramatic 2008 win. "But it's going to have to wait a bit because I'm planning on going on vacation with my wife to Disney World."

Really, the first celebration was two years overdue. In 2004, Brazil was preparing to acclaim its first Olympic marathon champion as Vanderlei de Lima held a 25-second lead approaching mile 23 on

the Athens course. Then a lunatic leapt out of the crowd and pushed de Lima off the road. Whether he would have maintained his lead will never be known, but the shock slowed him down and he placed third.

“When that happened to Vanderlei, I felt it all over my skin,” Gomes said, reflecting the state of mourning in Brazil. Thankfully, though, when Gomes adopted similar breakaway tactics in New York two years later, taking off after 19 miles, the lunatics kept their distance. A surprise winner in 2:09:58, Dos Santos became New York’s first South American champion. Back in Brazil, the fans went wild and the president gave him a medal to commemorate his achievement.

Again wearing his distinctive black hat and arm-warmers and yellow singlet, Gomes returned in 2008, but with different tactics. Moroccan Abderrahim Goumri pulled clear in the 21st mile, but Gomes ran him down on Central Park South. The Brazilian hopes to end the decade by becoming the first non-American three-time men’s New York champion.

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