

History of the Charleston Distance Run



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**Photos courtesy Charleston Newspapers,
Gary Smith, Tallman Track Club**

America's 15-Miler

Editor's Note: Gary Smith, the author of this historical account of the Charleston Distance Run, is a member of the Distance Run Committee and was the race director of the 2007 Distance Run. As of 2007, the Tallman Track Club member and veteran area road racer had finished 34 out of 35 Distance Runs.



Gary Smith

1973 to 1977

America's 15-miler is born

In 1971, the Charleston Sternwheel Regatta began as a Labor Day weekend community festival celebrating our river heritage. The festival grew in 1972 and in early 1973 local runner Don Cohen was approached about adding a road race to the event. Road racing was starting to take hold across the country (the New York Marathon and the Peachtree 10-K both started in 1970), and Don wanted a quality event for Charleston. Rather than deciding on a distance and then figuring where he could lay out a course, Don decided he would like to include as many Charleston neighborhoods as possible and started driving around the city. After laying out a course that took in the state Capitol, the Kanawha riverbank, the East End, West Side and South Hills, he found he had created a 15-mile race course.

There were very few races held in West Virginia at that time, and Don and the other race organizers didn't know how many runners to expect.

They invited some well-known runners to Charleston to speak or run at the inaugural event. Four-time Olympic gold medalist Jesse Owens, Olympic gold medalist Dave Wottle, Steve Prefontaine, Jeff Galloway and Franci Larrieu all came to Charleston in 1973. In addition to the first Distance Run, the year also saw the first Falmouth Road Race and the initial Cherry Blossom 10 Miler.

Some things happened in the first race that were never repeated — there was no entry fee for instance (race costs were borne for the most part by Don Cohen). Also, the race started and finished at the Civic Center. In that first year, race promotion included the selection of a “Miss Charleston Distance Run.” Jane Young of Clendenin was chosen. The first year's race had 213 finishers. In place of the standard five-year male and female age groups common in races since the 1980s, the first Distance Run had five “divisions” — Boys under 17, Men 18-30, Men 31-45, Men 46 and over and Women. There was no electronic timing at the finish either; it was stopwatches and clipboards for recording the time and order of finish. The top 10 finishers received Accutron watches.



1977

Overall men's winner was Jeff Galloway of the Florida Track Club in 1:16:29. Runner-up was Lucian Rosa of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1:17:35. The women's winner was Jacqueline Hanson of the Beverly Hills Striders, finishing in 1:39:28. The second place woman over seven minutes behind her in 1:46:44 was Francie Larrieu of San Francisco. From the very beginning, the race drew runners from across the country and around the world. Other notable runners that year were Hal Higdon (one of the founders of the Road Runners Club of America) who won the men's 31-45 division; Thomas Fleming who finished fifth and was the American 15-mile record holder at the time (1:16:11); WVU track star Carl Hatfield; and John Pianfetti, who at 66 was the oldest runner that year.

The first few years over half of all runners were affiliated with a running club. The inaugural race saw one group of runners who belong to the ultimate

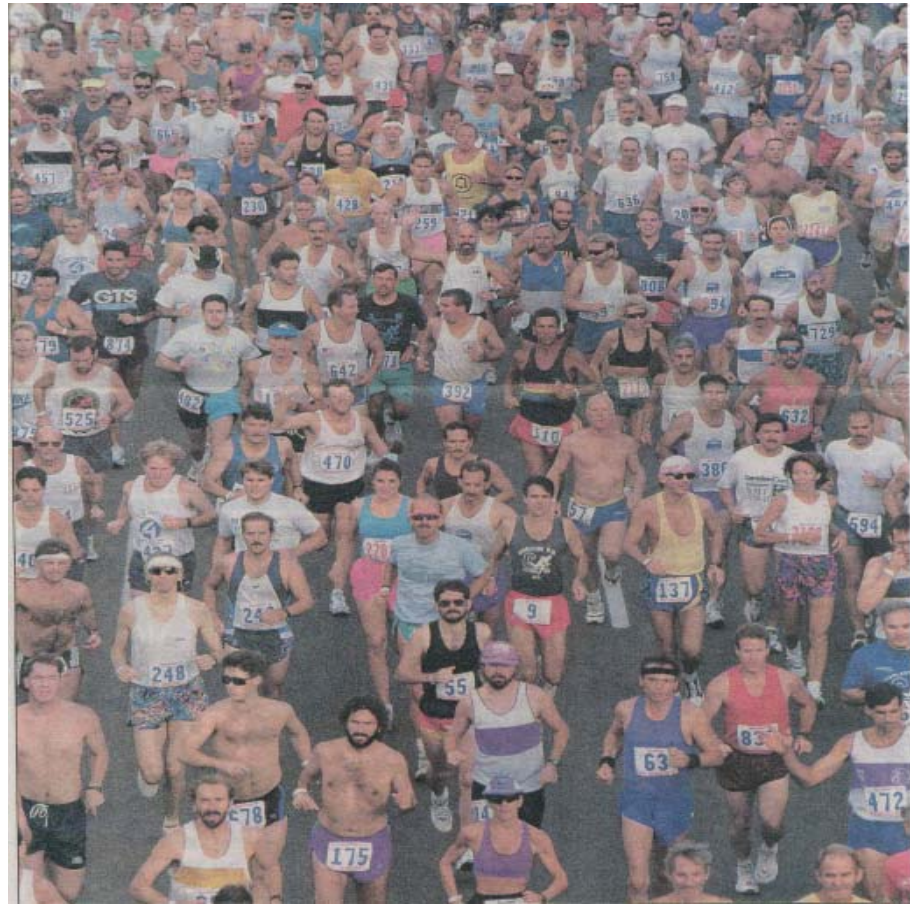
club — the family. Jay, Sr., Jay, Joe and Debbie Wildt all finished the first race.

Another notable aspect of 1973 was the start of what would become a decade-long conspiracy to keep local sportswriter and runner Danny Wells off the winner's dais. Dave Wottle's wife, Jan, approached Danny before the start and told him the story of a runner in another race who dropped dead of a heart attack, then indicated with her silence that Danny should slow down.

There was tremendous growth in the race in 1974. Finishers ballooned to 1,308 (by comparison there were 1,951 entrants in the Boston Marathon that year). Entrants were given a race T-shirt, a black lightweight running jacket and a small canvas tote. High school sophomore John Frazier ran his first Distance Run in 1:26:58, capturing 76th place. John would improve and finish in 20th three years later.

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The course was redesigned. The start remained at the Civic Center, but the finish was moved to Laidley Field. Olympians Rafer Johnson and Jim Ryun spoke at the awards banquet. Heat and humidity were high race morning, and three runners were treated for muscle spasms or heat stroke at local hospitals. Jeff Galloway quit at mile four with muscle spasms. Harry Cordellos, the blind runner from the San Francisco Bay area, ran in 1974 and became a perennial crowd favorite.



1995

Philip Ndoon won the race in 1:18:03, John Vitale of Connecticut was second and Bill Rodgers was third. As we were enjoying our second year, The Virginia Ten Miler and the Berlin Marathon celebrated their first year.

In 1975, Steve Prefontaine, one of the marshals in the inaugural race parade, died. The Distance Run dedicated our race to his memory and printed "A salute to Pre" on the back of the runners T-shirts. This was the only year sleeveless shirts were given out. The top 10 male and top three female runners received blue Distance Run logo watches along with their trophies. John Vitale won in 1:17, and Barry Brown was second. Lucian Rosa and Jeff Galloway were among the top 10. Kim Merritt was the female

leader. Local businessman Jack Goldfarb, who is legally blind, finished his first Distance Run in 1975. He would go on to run 23 more times before opting for the 5-K.

In 1976, the Marine Corps and Chicago marathons started up. In Charleston, 11-year-old Laura Craven beat most of the men and all but one of the women to take the second place female trophy in a time of 1:33. Kim Merritt repeated as overall female winner. Frank Shorter won the race in 1:14:37, and Gary Tuttle was second. Lucian Rosa, John Vitale and Amby Burfoot were among the top 10.

The first change in the race committee chairman position occurred in 1977 when race founder Don

Cohen stepped aside to let Mike Reed take the helm. The race clinic started at 2 p.m. Friday and continued for three hours. Three college track coaches spoke before keynote speaker Dave Wottle. The Charleston Gazette steps up its sponsorship of the race in what some saw as a Machiavellian attempt to disqualify Gazette employee Danny Wells from winning the race. By the time it was determined that Wells was not disqualified, the psychological tricks had done their work and once again he was kept out of the winner's circle. Kim Merritt made it three in a row, and William Haviland of Ohio won the men's crown. The Chicago Marathon was founded this year. Jim Fixx's "Complete Book of Running" was a best seller in 1977.

1978 to 1982

Taking a different course

In 1978, William Haviland wins again. Due to construction at Laidley Field, the course was changed. Leaving out everything west of the Elk River, the course

crossed the South Side Bridge a third time to finish in Kanawha City at Watt Powell Park. This resulted in a course of approximately 14.8 miles. When the finish returned to Laidley in 1979, the committee over-compensated and the course was approximately 15.2 miles. Clinic speakers included the venerable New York writer and runner, Dr. George Sheehan. To honor the state's mining heritage, the overall winner trophies were made of coal.

There was a new overall men's winner in 1979 — Robert Perkins who beat William Haviland. John P. Case of Buckhannon was the first West Virginia finisher, placing 22nd in 1:24:00. Robert Parker's "Once a Runner" was published, giving voice to a generation of lean and hungry runners. Jerry Traylor of Parkersburg finished the race in 3:44, negotiating the course on crutches, while Danny Wells struggled with a different handicap, "heavy pins." Extra-heavy safety pins had been planted in Well's race packet. Over 15 miles, the extra weight extracted its toll, once



1990

again keeping Danny from winning. Tony Gallo began a six-year stint as race director that year. All runners were treated to a free pre-race pasta dinner courtesy of C&P Telephone. C&P (now Verizon) would continue this tradition, marking its 30th year of pasta dinners in 2008.

In 1980, the Columbus Marathon began, and America boycotted the Moscow Olympics. Rosie Ruiz became a household name with her taxi-assisted Boston Marathon finish, but Bill Haviland needed no taxi to cruise in the rain to his third Distance Run win. Someone who could have taken a taxi without shame was Teresa Petrovic of Doctors Creek in Kanawha County, who finished the race in under three hours. Teresa was seven months pregnant.

Alberto Salazar broke a 12-year-old world marathon record in 1981 at the New York Marathon that was televised live for the first time. In Portland, Ore., a young company called Nike helped a local race be the first ever to overtly award prize money in

a road race. And at Boston that year more than 320 men ran the race in under two and a half hours. Here in Charleston, Terry Baker of Hagerstown, Md., won in 1:15:43, and a Charleston native was second, John E. Dotson in 1:16:12. The top two women were June Keller and Susie Comer. The youngest finisher in race history, 8-year-old Patrick Board IV ran 2:13:35, finishing ahead of 230 runners.

In 1982, Terry Baker repeated his first place finish followed by David Olds. Julie Isphording and Karen Cosgrove led in the women's division. Ronnie Williams suffered a heart attack in the last mile of the race but was able to joke about it later, saying the clock was still running and he would get out and finish the race as soon as he was out of the hospital.

1983 to 1987

Road racing welcomes youth; State native claims race title

Mark Stickley won in 1983 followed by William Haviland. Haviland finished in the top three



Runners head up Corridor G.



1984

for seven consecutive years. Beth Dillinger won the women's race, and Charleston's Joni Adams took second. Both Stickley and Dillinger were Blacksburg, Va., residents. For the first time, the race was televised live

Prior to August 1983, secondary school track and cross country runners in West Virginia could not compete in road races. That year, just a few days before the Distance Run, Judge Andrew MacQueen ruled that road racing was not the same sport as cross country and track. This allowed Eddie Gannon (represented by Charleston runner, lawyer and later judge, Tod Kaufman) and every high school and junior high runner since then to compete in road races.

Stickley repeated his first place finish in 1984, cutting his finish time by a minute and a half to 1:14:33. Karen Cosgrove of Cincinnati was the first woman finisher. Top West Virginia finishers that year included Jerry Dotson, Tom Cherchuck, Frank Lewis, Tim Coffman, David Kline and David Duncan. On the

international scene, Russia retaliated for the USA's 1980 Olympic boycott by staying home when the U.S. hosted the 1984 Olympics.

A West Virginian won the state's premier road race for the first time in 1985. Steve Taylor was 20 years old when he edged out the 1982 runner-up, David Olds, by 21 seconds to win. The women's race saw the great Grete Waitz of Oslo crush the field, winning by more than eight minutes in 1:24:57. Nemo Nearman also took the helm of the Distance Run, serving as race director for the first of his four years.

A new course record was set in 1986 when Don Norman beat 38-year-old Bill Rodgers by a minute and a half, finishing in 1:13:54. Julie Isphording won the women's race by a wide margin.

Still, a West Virginia native but now a resident of the Commonwealth, Steve Taylor returned in 1987 to win again, cutting two minutes off his 1985 time to finish in 1:14:31. Priscilla Welch cut five seconds off



1998

Grete Waitz's time of two years earlier to win and set the women's course record that still stands.

The Distance Run has never had a costume award but that has not kept runners from having some fun. Gary Fanelli from Pennsylvania competed in 1987 in a white button down shirt, tie, black jacket and fedora and sunglasses, a.k.a. the Blues Brothers. As it has been many years, humidity was high and heat exhaustion took its toll on the runners, including Jim Pritt of Scott Depot. But hot weather training and racing paid off a few years later when Pritt was the first West Virginia runner to finish the 1992 New York Marathon.

A special 15th anniversary poster showing racers crossing the South Side Bridge with a sternwheeler passing underneath was created that year. Ten runners had run all of the first 15 races. They were: John Pianfetti, Bobby Griffith, Ray Harmon, Jim Jones, Mark Allison, David Berry, Danny Wells, Frank Branner, Worley Stout and Tom Poole.

1988 to 1992

Curp leaves Mark on CDR

Don Norman won for a second time in 1988, Zack Barie was second and Bill Rodgers was third.



Running legend Bill Rodgers watches participants warm up near the starting line. Rodgers, 55, planned to run in the 15-miler, but he broke a bone in his right leg last weekend during a practice run. He did speak Friday at the SportMart Runners Clinic for today's participants.

2003

Charleston's own Mary Heidelk won the women's race finishing about a minute and a half ahead of Beth Howell. Shawn Chillag, physician, runner, and in 1988, Batman, ran the entire 15-mile race as the caped crusader. Shawn went on to run the next 19 years in various costumes. He was Superman, Dennis Rodman, Tattooed Man (believe it or not, those were two different characters), Spiderman and many others. Jimmy Fisher of Elkview ran under 1:33 in 1988 even though he is legally blind.

Don Cohen returned to serve as race co-director along with Danny Wells. Danny it seems had given up dreams of winning the race and settled for directing it, a job he held for 13 years. Running has improved the health of most of its adherents, but Roy Wheeler of Mount Alto collapsed at about mile 12 and his heart and breathing stopped. William Carroll, running behind Wheeler, started CPR and stayed with him until paramedics arrived and then went on to finish the race. Wheeler ultimately recovered.

There was a definite home state advantage in 1989. Steve Taylor won for his third time, and Scott Depot's Bubby Dent finished second for the men. Hurricane's Mary Heidelk finished second for the women, only 30 seconds behind the international star,



Shawn Chillag dons one of his costumes.

Priscilla Welch. In the men's 40-44 division that year, there was a Ron trifecta with Ron Norman, Ron Lane and Ron Plantz taking the top three spots in that age group.

In 1990, Steve Taylor cut four seconds off his 1989 time, but it wasn't enough with Mark Curp finishing more than a minute and a half ahead of him to



1997

CRAIG CUNNINGHAM/DAILY MAIL



1988

win. Julie Isphording and Mary Heidelk took first and second for the women. The hills in the first six miles of the race can be intimidating, but for the second year in a row, seven wheelchair participants completed the race led this year by Scot Hollenbeck for the men and Diana McClure for the women. Construction on the South Side Bridge changed the course, which crossed the Patrick Street Bridge early putting the hills in the middle of the race. As they came down Loudon Heights Road, runners crossed Grosscup Road to Bridge Road to MacCorkle Avenue. Then they ran along the river to the 35th Street Bridge where they went back across the Kanawha River to Piedmont Road and Laidley Field to finish.

In 1991, Mark Curp won again with Dan Held almost three minutes behind him. Held later made history by being the only American to make U.S. distance running World teams in four distances: cross country, half-marathon, marathon and 100-K. Julie Isphording again won the women's crown. It was in 1991 that the committee first instituted cash awards in the race.

It was three in a row as Mark Curp won the 1992 race ahead of Steve Taylor. Debbie Kilpatrick-Morris was the female winner.

1993 to 1997

Gideon reigns; 5-K joins fun

Ed Eyestone won the race in 1993, beating Dan Held and Mark Curp. Ed made Olympic marathon teams in 1988 and 1992 and numerous World Championship squads. He was named American Runner of the Year five times. Debbie Kilpatrick-Morris repeated as the women's winner. In an effort to broaden our base of participants and reach out to runners who might not be ready for 15 miles, a 5-K event was added in 1992 (317 runners participated in that first year.) The 5-K started and finished at the same locations as the 15-mile race, but its course left out the bridge crossings and hills giving runners a flat, fast, shorter alternative.

Gideon Mutisya won the 15-mile race and set a new course record in 1994. He followed that with a

win and a new course record in 1995. Gideon made it three in a row with another victory in 1996, once again setting a new course record. That record (1:12:24) still stands, even though Mutisya entered Laidley Field second that year. His friend and fellow Kenyan, Simon Karori, running here for his first time, made a wrong turn near the Capitol, turning his race into a 14-miler. Simon didn't know he made a mistake until he approached the finish and realized his time was impossibly fast.

Gideon returned in 1997 and won again but could not best his own record that year.

Shawn Chillag competed as Elvis complete with blue suede shoes in 1997 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Elvis' death. He followed up in 1998 with what was perhaps his best received costume, as Monica Lewinsky (black wig, sunglasses and a beret) with help from his running partner that year, Ron Plantz as Bill Clinton.

Our silver anniversary was observed in 1997. It also was the first year the state's two largest and oldest universities first met on the gridiron – on the Saturday before Labor Day, our traditional race day. Director Danny Wells made a tough decision and chose to move the race back a week. Some Charleston runners complained that the new date made it difficult for runners who participated in one of the state's other big races, the Parkersburg Half Marathon. Since the two long races would be only a week apart, it would

not allow enough time to recover from the first and run well in the second. A boycott was called. The Distance Run Committee met with the boycott promoters and promised to return the race to its traditional weekend in 1998. The boycott was called off.

1998 to 2002

Thirty years and going strong

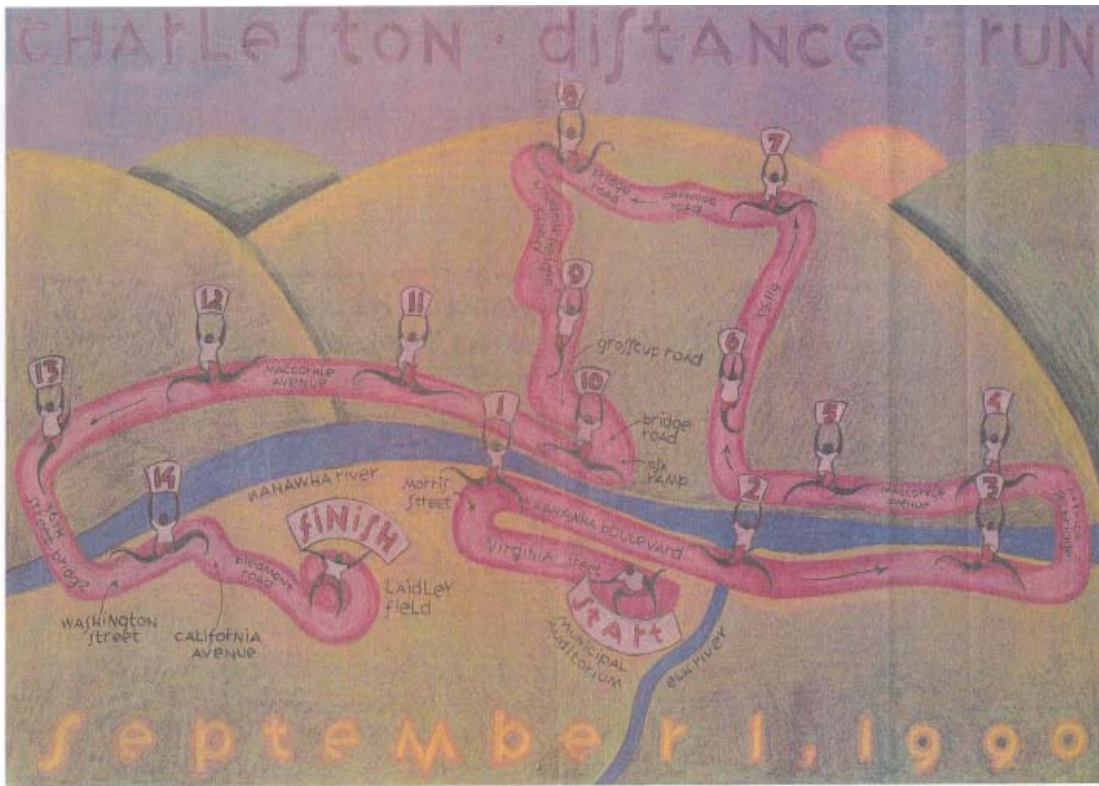
After winning four years in a row, Gideon Mutisya had to settle for second when Andrew Musuva beat him by 23 seconds in 1998.

In 1999, both Mutisya (third) and Musuva (second) were bested by Simon Sawe. A loose German Shepherd on Loudon Heights Road accosted the second- and third-place women runners, giving them a shot of adrenaline, but it wasn't enough for them to catch Russian Nadya Guselschikova, the women's winner.

In 2000, Mutisya showed he still had the fire as he won for the fifth time.

Wilson Onsare won in 2001, and Zabloh Mokaya won in 2002.

The 30th anniversary of this race was marked in 2002, and Race Director Kelly Castleberry tried to add some excitement and value to the event. Kelly oversaw the creation of our website (www.charlestdistancerun.com) and introduced finisher medals provided by Bayer CropScience that were given out as the racers crossed the finish line. Also in our race packet that year was a commemorative 30th anniversary pin. The winner of our inaugural race,



Jeff Galloway, was brought back as the clinic speaker. We saw participation in the 15-mile race increase for the first time since 1988.

2003 to 2007

Closest race in CDR history; New touches for a great event

Hillary Lelei finished first in 2003. Bill Rodgers, clinic keynote speaker, planned to run here again that year but a broken leg kept him on the sidelines. State of the art “Champion Chip” timing also was introduced that year, keeping the race up to date.

Shawn Chillag was back in black (cowboy hat, that is) playing the part of local lottery winner Jack Whittaker, and winning the crowd over by handing out (play) money as he ran the 2003 race. In 2004, he played a devilish George Bush and in 2006, he

played a part from one of the most highly publicized yet least watched movies of that year with his “Snakes on a Runner.”

Douglas Momanyi was in first place in 2004. Relay teams were introduced that year at the suggestion of long time committee member Joni Adams to try to beef up participation. The first runner covers six miles including all of the hills then a second runs five miles, and the cleanup runner does four miles. David Fenwick in his first of three years as race director brought Alberto Salazar to town to highlight the runners’ clinic.

Francis Bowen was the top runner in 2005. In 2005, Gideon Mutisya finished fifth giving him a top six finish 11 of 12 years since 1994. Don Kardong was our clinic speaker, and the addition of WOWK as a race sponsor gave us broadcast media exposure

to complement the print exposure longtime sponsor, the Charleston Gazette, has provided.

In 2006, spectators saw the most exciting finish in race history with only four seconds separating first place and fifth place. A new face, Jacob Yator, was first to the tape. Anne Jelagat won the women's race, and Susan Graham-Gray, a West Virginia Wesleyan alumni, finished in the top five for the third consecutive year. Susan is legally blind and does most of her training on a treadmill.

Unfortunately, there were fewer spectators and participants because Marshall and West Virginia University played an early game in Morgantown on race day that pulled 60,000 plus people to the northern part of the state. John Hall, retired Union Carbide engineer, missed his first race since he began in 1974 due to an Achilles injury. That left Chuck Barr of Clendenin and Gary Smith of Hurricane as the runners with the most completed races. Both ran every race but the first and along with Hall participated in the 2007 edition. Danny Wells has entered and started every race, but some of his innovative training methods such as interval resting, carbo sleeping and substituting reading about running for actual muscle damaging training backfired leading to a few DNFs.

The Distance Run marked several milestones in 2007 – it was the 35th running of the 15-mile race and the 15th anniversary of our 5-K. Under the direction of first time Race Director Gary Smith, the committee decided to spread the prize money around by paying less to the overall winners (but still a substantial \$1,100 to the first-place male and female). For the first time, prize money was given to the top two finishers in each age division. This increased the number of cash recipients from 32 to 78. Add to that Sport Mart T-shirts, Bayer finisher medals, Thomas Hospital finisher towels, the Friday Verizon Pasta dinner, the Saturday WOWK awards banquet, complete results in the Sunday Gazette-Mail, the Friday runners' clinic, Appalachian Power Champion Chip timing and the Distance Run after 35 years still is the best value race for the runner.

Over the years, dozens of committee members, including Danny Wells and Johnnie Barker who served all 35 years, dozens of sponsors, including the city of Charleston, which has supported the race for 35 years, hundreds of volunteers, thousands of spectators and thousands of runners have made this race special. I wish we could tell the story of every one of them; they are all important.



2006



Top, a pack of Kenyan runners comes off the South Side Bridge in 2006, setting the stage for the closest finish in Distance Run history. The first five runners all finished within four seconds of each other. Above, W.K. Munsey was a crowd favorite in 2005 when he ran as the West Virginia State University Yellow Jacket. At right, Zachary Warren ran an amazing 1:35:45 while juggling in the 2006 race.



**Author
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at the CDR**



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