

PVA HALF MARATHON CHAMPIONSHIP AT THE WOODROW WILSON BRIDGE HALF MARATHON

By George Banker

On a rainy morning at Mount Vernon, Virginia it was possible to stage the second year of the growing Woodrow Wilson Bridge Half Marathon which was held on Sunday, October 2, 2011. The unique event was a journey from historic Mount Vernon, Va., along the George Washington Memorial Parkway up to Old Town Alexandria and then across the foot path of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge to a finish at the National Harbor along the Maryland shoreline. The race is a prime tune up for the fall marathons.

The race attracts local and international talent all testing the beauty of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and hills at the National Harbor. The inaugural year saw the establishment of what was believed to be some stiff times given the nature of the course with Deresse Deniboba of Ethiopia setting an open record of 1:04:44 and Catherine Ndereba of Kenya setting a 1:13:17. The masters were lead by John Piggott of Williamsburg, Va., with a 1:15:20 and Kristi Markowicz of Arlington, Va., with a 1:20:42.

The event held multiple layers of prize money in excess of \$10,000 including the Potomac Valley Association (USATF) Championship, plus American-only money to help promote U.S. distance runners and bonus money for every U.S. citizen who qualified for the Olympic Trials Marathon. The race was a championship race for the National Industries for the Blind.

Doreen Gentzler, NBC4 news anchor returned for a second year as the Honorary Chair. The race was a benefit for six charity partners: Autism Speaks, Alice Ferguson Foundation, Child & Family Network Centers of Alexandria, Washington Area Women's Foundation, Back on My Feet-DC, and RunningBrooke Fund.

The runners had a modest down hill leading out of Mount Vernon. Going into the fifth mile (23:25) Moses Kigen Kipkosgei of Kenya enjoyed a slight lead over Derese Deniboba of Ethiopia (23:33). Trailing in third was Abiyot Endale of Ethiopia (23:58). Danny Mercado of Flagstaff, Arizona was in fourth position (24:28) with Bobby Mack and Ricky Flynn of Flagstaff hot on his heels (24:29).

Leading the way for the females was Bekelech Bedada of Ethiopia through mile five (26:32) followed by Gladys Asiba of Kenya (28:16). Holding in third was Mekides Bekele of Kenya (29:42). In fourth place was Michelle Miller of Damascus, Md. (30:33) followed by Amy McDonough of Irmo, S.C., and Lisa Cron of Herndon, Va. (31:13).

The runners had the freedom to dominate the Parkway. Going into the 10th mile the runners were cranking out the miles in preparation for crossing the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. Kipkosgei maintained the lead with 47:19 and Deniboba was trying to close down the gap with 47:40. Jordan Horn of Flagstaff had moved up from fifth place into

third with 48:39 as Endale was close with 48:40. Mercado had slipped back into fifth place with 48:42. Bobby Mack of Raleigh, NC and Ricky Flynn of Lynchburg, Va., both clocked 48:59.

Bedada was keeping the pressure up going through mile 10 (54:40) and showed no signs of slowing. Asiba continued the pursuit in second place followed by Miller in 1:00:47 as she moved up from fourth place. Bekele held down the fourth place with 1:00:48.

Once stepping off the Wilson Bridge the runners faced the challenge of a moderate hill on the grounds of the National Harbor. Kipkosgei was on a record pace going into the closing mile and established a new mark of 1:02:37. On the heels for second place was Deniboba with 1:02:56 and third was Horn with a time of 1:03:53 and the first American. In fourth place was Endale with 1:04:01 and fifth was Mercado with a 1:0:03. The top seven runners were all under the old event record.

“The level of competition was really good. I honestly didn't really think it would spread out as much as it did early on, but I was grateful not to have found myself in no man's land, and instead running with my teammate, Jordan Horn, as well as a couple other Americans trying to chase the Olympic Trials qualifier. It was perfectly put together for that purpose. My strategy going into the meet was just to work with my teammate getting settled into the pace needed to break 65 minutes, at least for the first half of the race. I was pretty nervous about the strategy, focusing more on pace rather than letting go and just racing, but the plan definitely fit for this type of race” stated Mercado a member of the McMillan Elite team.

Following suit and maintaining the lead, Bedada was on pace to establish a new record with 1:12:44. Asiba captured second place with 1:15:58. The first American and third place was Michelle Miller with 1:19:43 (PR), followed by Bekele with 1:20:04. McDonough captured fifth place in 1:24:01.

“I selected this race because of its timing, proximity, distance, and prize incentives. I needed a race in the 10 mile to half marathon range about a month or so out to test my fitness as I prepare for the Philadelphia Marathon in November. The bridge was not as difficult as I prepared myself for it to feel. The true challenge was the second hill at mile 11. At that point in the race you are starting to get tired anyway so having to contend with a hill is a true test of commitment to your race plan. The Wilson Bridge Half was a great assessment of where my fitness is at this moment. I am actually in better shape than I thought despite the injury setback so I am really excited to see how the rest of the fall goes”, stated Miller.

Miller adds, “My main motivation is my undying love to compete and test myself. It is very satisfying to set goals and then create and execute a plan to achieve those goals. There are times when you question yourself or motivation wanes and that's when it helps to surround yourself with the right people. The Georgetown Running Company Race Team has been an invaluable addition to my training. Not only do I have a supportive and

talented group of athletes to train with, I also have a coach who is there to pick me up when I am down and to raise the bar when training is going well.”

“I started out the race in 5th place for the first three to four miles. I moved into 4th at that point but did not manage to solidify 3rd place until the other side of the bridge. Just before the bridge a fellow teammate pointed out that the woman in third at the time was not far ahead so I used the last 5k, and my reserved strength, to make a move on the last long hill at mile 11 to separate myself from her”, Miller adds.

Miller addresses preparation for the race, “I suffered a bit of a setback via plantar inflammation in July and early August during my training. As a result, I have been coming back into full training cautiously. My coach, Jerry Alexander, suggested the best approach would be to run the first 10 miles of the race a bit conservatively to ensure that I could finish the race strong. I knew the last 5k to 4 miles had some hills so I hoped with an increased effort I could manage to maintain the pace I had set on the parkway. At that point my goal also turned from hitting pace to racing the competition around me”.

Miller ran for Mount St. Mary's University, graduating in 2003. The focus then was on the 800m and 1500m on the track. She bumped up a lot in distance since then! ? All of her PRs have come this year. She ran 17:31 at the Swarthmore Last Chance meet, 35:39 at Pikes Peak 10k, 59:20 at Cherry Blossom 10 miler. “I enjoy the health benefits, camaraderie, and psychological challenge that running provides. I've been running since I was 12 so I don't really know what life would be like without it. It pretty much is a part of who I am”, Miller states.

Miller comments on balancing the sport and the rest of her life. “I absolutely love the sport of running and thankfully I have surrounded myself with people who share the same perspective. So, I have a little less pressure to put it on the back burner. That being said, I do try to make time for other interests. It usually isn't a problem but I have found it a bit challenging creating a balance during marathon training. Sometimes I feel like all I do is train, work, eat and sleep! I have been making a conscious effort to set aside time on the weekends to visit family and catch up on the other areas of my life”.

If it were not for the shirt it would have been difficult to detect that fifth place finisher McDonough is legally blind and a mother of three. At the age of 12 she was diagnosed with arteriovenous malformation (AVM) which is an abnormal tangling of blood vessels. She has no vision in her right eye and vision in the left eye is 23/100. On May 1, 2011 she clocked her first marathon win out of for with a PR of 2:58:11 at the Flying Pig in Cincinnati, Ohio.

“For me personally, I thought the competition level was outstanding. It was amazing to run with such accomplished runners. My strategy was mainly to not go out too fast. I tend to do that since I can't see a watch. A very cool thing that I learned about myself is that some see me as an elite runner. The challenge in this race for me was when we ran on the sandy gravel path. I was unsure of footing and how much space there was on either side of me. I was wearing my "I am a visually impaired runner" t-shirt. A man came up

next to me while we were on that path; I heard him getting ready to pass me and was a little nervous. He said "Don't worry, you have plenty of room. Doing great!", states McDonough.

The third event time that fell was the master's record as Patrick Kuhlmann of Arlington, Va., passed through 10 miles in 56:12 and closed in with a 1:14:14. Retired Marine LtCol Alex Hetherington of Vienna, Va., was runner up with 1:17:11 (10 mile time 58:45). Former record holder John Piggott of Williamsburg, Va., was third with 1:20:05 (10 mile time was 59:36).

"The level of competition was outstanding as reflected in the finishing times. I thought it was particularly exciting to have run in a race where four Americans broke the 65 minute barrier and qualified to compete in the U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials. As far as the Master's competition goes, anytime I spot John Piggott on the starting line of a race I know I'm going to have someone to chase, albeit with a relatively low probability of catching up, but I occasionally pull it off. John always runs hard and brings focus to my race plan. He's also always gracious, optimistic and enthusiastic regardless of the outcome, in the true spirit of friendly competition" stated Hetherington.

Hetherington comments on strategy and time, "Based on experience gained in the inaugural Wilson Bridge Half, my plan was to stay relaxed and consistent on the George Washington Parkway and go for broke upon reaching the Wilson Bridge. Unfortunately, the last hill behind National Harbor was a challenge, even though I knew it was coming and remembered it well. Next year I think I'll take a more measured approach to the last three miles. As a Masters runner I'm starting to focus more and more on time. As it gets harder to match past racing results, I find that my first priority is to try to beat my times from the previous year. I managed to achieve that at Wilson Bridge, although my time was only a few seconds faster and accomplished under almost ideal conditions. That being said, I'll take it, just as I'll always be looking to get my name as near to the top of the results sheet as I can muster".

Hetherington states in closing, "I love this course! Steve Nearman (Event Director) has put together what I'm certain will become an iconic must do race for the National Capitol Region. Not only does it connect the classic landmark of Mount Vernon with the glitzy new destination of National Harbor, but the journey traverses one of the nation's most beautiful parkways and bridges, providing a unique bird's eye view of the Capitol Building and Washington Monument. Whether you're in it for the competition, the scenery, or both, the Wilson Bridge Half Marathon will give you all you can handle".

Last year Laura Greeson of Alexandria, Va., was third master with 1:31:15 and this year she improved to first master with 1:30:33. The second master was Susan Graham-Gray of Greencastle, Pa., with 1:33:47. Gillian Walker of Springfield, Va., was third with 1:35:17.

"I really enjoyed the race even though I was fighting a bad head cold. I thought the race was competitive and had a wide variety of runners. It was amazing to see how many men

made the qualifying time for the Olympic trials. I also enjoyed the amazing talents of the blind runners. My boyfriend guided John Morgan, one of the blind runners. My strategy going in to the race was to make it a speed workout since I am training for the New York Marathon in November. I really did not have a goal time in mind but wanted to come in around 1:30. I never think of a place, it is more of accomplishing a goal time. I ran the race last year and loved the course, so decided to sign up for this year. It is really fun to run down the parkway and over the bridge. The hill coming around National Harbor is challenging and the gravel part is not fun. I would love it if you got rid of the gravel”, comments Greeson.

No stranger to top performances was Graham-Gray, a mother of three who was diagnosed with Stargardts disease at an early age, a degenerative eye disorder. In 2007 at the Poconos Run Marathon she clocked a 2:45:32 which won her a place in the 2008 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials in Boston where she placed 22nd in 2:58:08. In November 2008 she placed second and first in the age group 40-44 at the JFK 50 Miler with a time of 7:32:56.

“I thought the level of competition was great. There were the Kenyans and Ethiopians who are always up front and some out of reach. The American competition was in my range and competitive level. I loved how the race directors distinguished between the two and offered separate prize money to support American distance running. This fact is largely overlooked in other races and I am very grateful for the support”, stated Lisa Cron of Herndon, Va., finishing in sixth place and third American with 1:24:03.

Cron adds,” My strategy coming into the race was to be smart and keep an even pace. I wanted to run a time closer to my PR of 1:17:30, which I unfortunately fell way short of. I was not prepared for the hills and suffered sore quads in the final miles. I learned that I needed to practice more hill work in my training. I need to run some longer tempo runs as well. The most challenging part of the course for me was the uphill portion near the Woodrow Wilson Bridge. I slowed significantly at this section of the race”.

“The most important thing for me in any race is my time because I am always trying to better myself and see where I am at in my training. Place happened to be near equally important in this race, as I would be fibbing if I said I wasn't trying to win a little money for the effort! I really enjoyed nearly everything about this point-to-point course. One thing I did not like was the gravel sections & so many turns at the end”, adds Cron with the following PR's: 5K- 17:11; 10K- 35:24; 10 mile- 58:14; Half-Marathon- 1:17:30; Marathon- 2:55:11.

“Yes, this was the first time running this event. Actually, this is the first time I have ever run a half marathon. In my younger years (mid 20s to early 30s), I ran a lot of 10ks and 10 milers and a couple of marathons but no half marathons. The attraction was that it was a local race and a great course. I loved the idea of running from Mt. Vernon over the Woodrow Wilson Bridge to National Harbor. The last two miles were the most challenging for me, mainly because my quadriceps were screaming! Time was foremost on my goal list as I wanted to run under 1:45. However, I had looked up last year's times

for the top three finishers in my age category and was hoping to squeak in”, states Suzy Coffey of Alexandria, Va., finishing in 1:43:16, first in the age group 55-59 and first Potomac Valley Association master.

Coffey adds, “My motivation for running this event was my 23rd year old daughter, Erin, who has never really been a runner. However, on Sunday, October 9 she will be running her third half-marathon in the past year. I learned that I can still be competitive even after all these years, if I train correctly. I was an avid runner and road racer (Washington Running Club member) in my younger years. However, once I had children my focus was on work and raising a family and I stopped racing, although I always ran. Now that my children, ages 19, 21 and 23, are out of the house I have more time to focus on training.

The top winners in the Potomac Valley Association Championship was Michael Wardian of Arlington for the open with a time of 1:09:16 (8th place, 1st 35-39, and 5th American) and received \$300. The top master was LtCol Hetherington, USMC Ret’d, with a time of 1:17:11 (2nd 40-44) and received \$250.

Michelle Miller was the top female with 1:19:43 (3rd overall and 1st American, 2nd in age group 30-34) and received \$300. Lisa Cron was second with 1:24:03 (6th overall, 3rd American, 4th 30-34) and received \$200. Valerie Bambha of Alexandria was third with a 1:55:01 (3rd age group 19 and under) and received \$100.

The top female master was Suzy Coffey of Alexandria with a 1:43:16 (1st 55-59 and a new race age group record) and received \$250.