

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

Fall 12-13-2020

Fifty years ago, my grandfather won the NYC Marathon and changed New York history

Colin M. Kern

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/500

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Fifty years ago, my grandfather won the NYC Marathon. New York, running and my family have all changed since.

On September 13, 1970, my grandfather, Gary Muhrccke, won the first New York City Marathon. At the time, he was a 30-year-old runner in decent shape, and the entire country was on the brink of a 'running boom' in which he would be a major player in. But truthfully, he didn't even want to run that day.

The night before, he had been up late responding to calls as a firefighter at the Far Rockaway precinct. On the morning of the race in 1970, he had bib number two pinned to a jersey in his bag, but he felt tired and wanted to spend the day resting at home. Thankfully, his wife (my grandmother), Jane Muhrccke, told him to get out of bed, stop whining, lace up, and run a marathon in Central Park. She got her way and followed with their three children.

Gary told me all this information while we were on a run together on the morning of September 13, 2020—exactly 50 years to the day from his historic win. He was 80-years-old by then. The gun had gone off for the first New York City Marathon around noon back in 1970.

The course then didn't resemble the five-borough course used today. Back then, it was a brutal four-lap slog up and down the hills of Central Park. When the gun went off for the first time in 1970, it was also 85 degrees out that. Gary went out slow that day and eased into the race.

For the first three laps, Gary's confidence grew. He settled into pace and slowly picked off the competition. By the fourth lap, he passed 19-year-old Tom Fleming on Central Park's southeast corner and snuck into second place. Right before Gary climbed Harlem Hill for the fourth and final time, he passed Moses Mayfield in the northernmost section of the park and put himself in a position to win. "Mayfield had a big reputation for going out too fast," Gary told me. Mayfield fell back to eighth place, and Gary cruised to victory without once considering that he was making history.

The race started and finished in front of Tavern on the Green and only cost \$1 to enter. Someone brought cans of soda to the finish, but there was a commotion when no one could find a can opener. There were 127 competitors and 55 finishers that day. My grandmother recalls only one reporter showing up to document the race. There were a handful of spectators, but most weren't sure what they were witnessing. Gary won in a time of 2:31:38.

The most iconic photo in my family is a grainy black and white image of Gary breaking tape that day. In it, he is a skinny hippy-looking runner with a scruffy beard who is holding up two peace signs as he crosses the finish line. The second is him moments later holding his trophy around his three smiling kids. My mother is the youngest and was only six years old at the time. When I was roughly that age, I broke that trophy in half while playing with my cousin in my grandparents' living room.

To Gary, that race was nothing more than something to do on a Sunday morning. There weren't months of mental preparation and a well thought out training plan. When my grandfather broke tape in 1970, he certainly wasn't planning on that race becoming one of the most iconic displays of athleticism on earth. He didn't think it would become a cultural and financial pillar that his family would contribute to for the next two generations.

Since his win, marathons have grown into a global sports industry. Culturally, the goal of completing a marathon is a bucket list must, and represents a level of personal dedication, will and grit that some will talk about until the day they die. In America, every major city has a

marathon that provides its own unique culture along with a lucrative sports industry selling shoes and t-shirts on the side. Even the professional marathon racing circuit is marketed as a world event that unites earth's most important cities through the universal sport that transcends borders: Running.

Since my grandfather's win, the New York City Marathon has grown to be the biggest race in the world and attracts roughly 55,000 runners every year—half of them traveling from abroad—and over 1 million in-person spectators lining the streets to watch every year. The New York City Marathon has even outgrown the Boston Marathon, which was founded in 1897 as the world premiere marathon and was for decades the biggest race anywhere.

In its long history, the New York City Marathon has developed a colossal culture, filled with its own stories and traditions that have touched an immeasurable amount of people. Even from a young age, I always felt a sense of pride that my family so intimately carried out many of the marathon's oldest traditions. Every year I watch the race, I look for the laurel wreaths awarded to the male and female winners on the podium. Since 1976, my grandmother has made them by hand every year with the laurels that grow in her backyard in Huntington, Long Island.

I am now a 24-year-old competitive runner, and I will never win the New York City Marathon. Although my grandfather put up an impressive time, and the race is now run on a faster course, the winners now typically finish almost 25 minutes faster than him. I'm quick, but not that quick. I have also never even raced a full Marathon.

After competing in collegiate cross country and longer track races, I planned on racing my first marathon at the 2020 New York City Marathon. In addition to celebrating the half-century anniversary of my grandfather's win, it would have been a perfect progression for my running career to longer distances.

Unfortunately, the pandemic canceled my original plans, but I made arrangements to run with Gary at the site of his win exactly 50 years to the day. When I got on the phone with him, it was unclear how far he would be able to run (he was having knee issues) or how far he wanted to run. But he wanted to make the date a celebration.

It wasn't easy, and it wasn't convenient, but I ended up driving from North Carolina to Central Park this past September just to go for a run with my grandfather.

When they were my age, Gary and Jane lived the quintessential American dream. Both were born into poor Brooklyn families, married at 18 years old, worked hard every day of their lives, and retired with the assurance that their future generations were better off because of their efforts. After a lifetime of hard work, Gary has always expected respect for his efforts. Even when I was a young age, calling him grandpa was grounds for a swift kick to the shin. I was supposed to call him Gary and that was it.

Originally, Gary worked as a New York City firefighter but eventually hurt his back on the job in 1976 and was forced to retire. Although he could run a marathon in two and a half hours, he was no longer able to pass the physical test that required him to lift a 200-pound human. The news was a huge disappointment but didn't deter his running career. Between 1970 and 1980, Gary won three Yonkers Marathons and the first-ever Empire State Building Run Up.

In 1976, Gary and Jane started a new career selling running shoes and clothing out of a van. The business was mobile from the Bronx to Long Island and was dubbed "Super Shoe on

Tour." The name eventually turned to Super Runners Shop when the business became fixed in a location—and when the original "Super Shoe" in California sued over the rights to the name. Most days in the late '70s, Gary parked his van by the 90th street entrance to Central Park. To this day, his favorite stories are tales of women trying on tricot shorts right there on the sidewalk.

Gary didn't seem eager to start the Super Runners Shop because he wanted to mix business and pleasure; he started the business because he saw an opportunity. Running shoes were just becoming available to the public in the mid-'70s. Previously, they were almost unheard of. Back then, running shoes were made of bright, colorful suede fabric and had large lug-like grips on the bottoms. Gary claimed that he had the greatest assortment of running shoes in his van during this era. Nike was mostly leading the charge as one of the first successful manufacturers of footwear specifically made for running. On the other fold-out door of the van were Onitsuka sneakers—the predecessor to the running giant Asics. Decades later, even though his business had grown to nearly a dozen stores, Gary still took me to freezing cold track meets and road races to sell shoes out of a van.

Super Runners Shop grew in tandem with the New York City Marathon. As the race became a cultural touchstone for the city, so did the store that supplied its participants. Other early competitors like Paragon and The Athletic Attic showed up, but Super Runners Shop offered an unmatched level of craftsmanship. In addition to only hiring trained, knowledgeable runners, the shops were finished with mondo flooring (the material used to make tracks) and phone booths as dressing rooms to match the Superman-esque logo and theme for the business. Since the opening of those first stores, Gary has worn a Superman belt buckle to go along with the business. And still, every year, members of my family take turns putting the Superman-phone booth ornament on our Christmas tree. The ornament used to have an electronic motor in it that spun Clark Kent around to show his two sides as a journalist and super hero, but the motor hasn't worked for several years now.

The first physical Super Runners Shop was near Gary and Jane's home on Long Island and opened in 1978. Next, they opened the store on East 89th Street. "And then we realized that people on the east side don't go to the west side. And people on the west side don't go to the east side." Gary told me. "So, then we put a store on the west side." After opening a store on West 77th and Amsterdam, he opened stores consistently across the city for the next 30 years. The 7th Avenue store in Times Square received the most exposure. When I was in grade school, my entire family was shuttled there on a hot summer day to help prepare the store for opening.

While growing up in the hype of New York City's running culture, I never felt pressured to become a runner. It's something I gravitated to naturally and looked to my grandfather for encouragement.

When I was a young teen starting out in the running world, I instinctively felt competitive with my grandfather. However, Gary consistently explained that challenging him at anything was a lose-lose proposition for me. If I won, he said, beating a senior citizen wasn't a brag-worthy accomplishment. If I lost, I lost. As my body developed and I got faster, Gary aged and was only running slower. A sweet spot of competition between us occurred when I was 13 during a 5K road race in Oyster Bay, Long Island.

After three miles of running at a redline pace, I saw him enter my sights on the final stretch. I dug deep, pumped my arms, and gave it everything I had, and just narrowly managed to cross the line in front of him. Instead of celebrating my first win, I fell onto my hands and knees and puked for ten minutes. Gary laughed about it for the next 12 years. I still have the bib number from that race in my childhood bedroom. That was the only time I ever received bib #1 for a race.

The following week we ran another 5k on the south shore of Long Island. Despite a temperature in the low twenties, I wore shorts because my juvenile brain didn't think running tights looked cool. Someone at the start line asked, "Did your mother see you leave the house dressed like that this morning?" My body never warmed up, and I stayed in first gear the entire race. Gary beat me by half a mile. Again, he laughed at me, and I shivered miserably. That was 2010.

Gary ran in the fortieth anniversary of the NYC Marathon earlier that year. The only thing I remember about that day was me complaining about having to drive around in a hot van all day while following his progress with my family. I will never forgive myself for being so ungrateful. I did not appreciate the fantastic spectacle I was witnessing. He was 69 years old at the time and finished in a time of 3:46:25.

By the marathon's tenth anniversary in 1980, the race had already captivated the city and garnered national attention with favorite athletes and rivalries. Bill Rodgers had won four New York City Marathons and four Boston Marathons. By the time his career started to eclipse Frank Shorter's, Rodgers had become an American sweetheart dubbed Boston Billy. Grete Waitz was becoming known as 'Grete the Great' and was well on her way to winning nine New York City Marathons between 1978 and 1988—marginally more than any other runner in history. And it became national news in 1980 when it was revealed that now-infamous amateur runner Rosie Ruiz only ran half of the Boston Marathon course and clearly did not win the race with a 25-minute personal best and world-leading time despite claiming the victory at the finish.

The 1980 New York City Marathon had 12,000 participants and was won in a then-course record time of 2:09:41 by the now-disgraced former head coach of the Nike Oregon Project, Alberto Salazar. Salazar was sentenced to a four-year ban from coaching in 2019 for trafficking performance-enhancing drugs, among other offenses. "That was always a nasty guy," Gary once told me.

The only professional runner I ever heard Gary root for was a Brooks sponsored marathoner named Brian Sell. It was known that Sell worked a full-time job at Home Depot in addition to his professional running career. "He carries bags of fertilizer all day. That is a real man," Gary once mumbled to me while walking out of his shop in Huntington.

Super Runners Shop built its own team of elite runners in the '80s, including former American record holder in the marathon, the late Pat Peterson. "Putting on that jersey felt like running royalty," said Curtis Minus, a former Super Runners Shop team member, and employee. "If you were on the start line of the marathon and wearing a Super Runners Shop jersey, people would look at you and think 'oh, that guy has it going on,'" said Minus. "The logo on the jersey made you look like Superman, and you felt it too." Although marathon running isn't a team sport, the Super Runners Shop team was marginally faster than the Central Park Track Club in the '80s

and '90s, according to my father—which is why he opted to run with the latter when he married into the family and started an amateur runner career in 1988.

During this period, my mother, Heidi Helrich, left her job at Tiffany's to help manage the business. Her original job as a child was to make sandwiches for the finisher of the first handful of marathons. When she joined the business 20 years later, she managed employees and created graphics and advertisements. "It is all I wanted to do," my mother told me. "I just wanted to work with my family." I was not alive to witness the business's growth, but I watched it peak in the late 2000s at the New York City Marathon expo in the Jacob Javits Center.

Jane and Gary always received a contract to do business with the leading sponsor of the New York City Marathon. While Asics was sponsoring the marathon, it was their job to staff and manage the Asics retail "booth" that took up half of the convention center. As a legal senior-citizen, Gary constructed 12 wooden checkout counters by hand to service the booth. "I modeled them after the cash wraps they had at Zabars at the time," Gary told me. That number eventually grew to 40 checkout counters, but he outsourced the construction of the rest.

I was pulled out of my classes as a freshman in high school to work at the expo. My job was to collect the hangers from behind the cash wraps—which turned out to be a colossal job—and I was paid \$5 an hour.

In 2012 the business was sold, but my mother and grandfather managed to hold onto the original store in Huntington, Long Island. Gary considered it a hobby and Jane retired. The Huntington store pattered along for several years, but online retail giants increasingly snatched sales. After decades of success, I don't think Gary could fully understand why he didn't seem to win as big as he used to. Watching him hand out physical flyers made by my mother to high school runners at Van Cortlandt Park was frustrating. He was getting old and didn't seem able to adjust to a digital world.

The week Gary and I ran in Central Park to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his win, he was in negotiations to sell his final store. He was 80 years old, and finally, felt ready for retirement. "I've felt like I was 40-years-old since I was 40," I once heard him say. "Then I turned 80 and felt like I was 80."

The corporation that purchased the business had dwindled the operation into a fraction of what it used to be in a matter of years. While working as a young journalist in New York City, I often stumbled by the carcasses of my family's legacy. I often passed by the former store in Grand Central Station. It's now a Warby Parker. While on the Upper East Side last fall, I walked past the original 89th street store and started to cry. The storefront was empty and gave me a deep sense of FOMO that transcended several decades.

Watching my grandparents age was more painful than I anticipated. Every year they used to throw a Christmas party for Super Runners Shop employees at their home that was so big they would hire a magician to entertain the children. From my childhood to adulthood, the party halved in size three times. And as the young runner attempting a noteworthy running career, I became the entertainment. Every year while socializing with New York's running royalty, my ears were bent for coaching and training tips. I was always interested in new sports sciences and training theories but found it hard to stray far from Gary's running advice, which was never scientific or data-driven, like most of the running world is today.

His philosophy: "I never beat anyone who trained harder than me." I took this training tip as gospel.

In the years between the seventh grade and my college graduation, I didn't just feel the need to run more miles in training than my competitors; I had to run those miles faster as well. Often, I ran more than 100 miles in a week and set unrealistic goals for the paces of those miles. As a result, I shined bright in brief glimpses during breakout performances but spent most of my career fatigued and overtrained. And now my ankles hurt and are often out of commission. It was only in the moments that I ran on a track team in North Carolina, far from my grandfather's view, that I raced consistently well.

In the years since walking away from competitive running, Gary's training advice turned out to be better advice for life, though. Running those long hard miles provided me with a grinder mindset. I can settle into any uncomfortable task, not pick my head up until I am finished, and then feel rewarded for my efforts. But when it comes to running, I now know, "I will never beat anyone who trains *smarter* than me."

My former training plans for my marathon debut at the 2020 New York City Marathon were long and thought out. My goal was to beat Gary's original winning time: 2:31:38. It was a reach goal I refrained from fantasizing about, but as my year of training went on, I slowly began to feel like I could meet it. I learned from my past experiences and started training in a smart, efficient way to guarantee health on race day. Instead of loading my calendar with pointless goals to run an unreasonable number of miles, I focused on progressing specific workouts at obtainable paces. My transition from overly ambitious training plans to a well-thought-out and manageable one made me feel both healthier and more mature. It took years, but I was finally learning from my mistakes.

Then the pandemic hit. As my personal and professional life fell apart, running suddenly felt minuscule.

At the dawn of the pandemic, I quarantined with my family on Long Island before I decided to live with an old circle of friends in North Carolina. While I was huddled in my mother's kitchen, playing a game of Scrabble, she predicted that the city would reopen, and the marathon in November would be a beacon of inspiration that would bring the city back to life. I didn't agree.

I thought the marathon could be a mobilized bioweapon. It is an international crowd of 55,000 compromised immune systems, traveling shoulder to shoulder across all five boroughs of the country's most densely packed city. "I predict that marathons will be the last thing to return," I said to my mother. I said it louder than I thought.

Running the 50th New York City Marathon was something I spent a year preparing for and the last five years thinking about. Being robbed of the opportunity while experiencing so much pain in the world frustrated me. Iconic marathoner Kathrine Switzer famously said, "If you are losing faith in human nature, go out and watch a marathon." She was right. More than ever me, my family and the world could use a marathon to revive our spirits, but like so many other things during the pandemic, I didn't think it was going to happen.

My mother didn't respond and sensed my frustration. She seemed upset at my prediction and refocused on our game of scrabble, where she was trying to play made-up words like "qat." We had all been drinking a lot during those days.

The only other New York City Marathon to ever be canceled was the 2012 marathon because of Hurricane Sandy. It came the year after superstorm Hurricane Irene knocked expectations for what a storm can do to the Northeast. But Sandy topped expectations again. The New York Road Runners Club was strongly criticized for waiting too long to cancel the race. There was no power in the city, and lines to get gas went on for hours in the days leading up to the race. No one knew whether they were required to go to work or not, so most New Yorkers stayed at home and took cold showers in the dark.

In the days leading up to the race, there simply were not enough staff or police to put on the race. People traveled from across the world only to have their hearts broken in New York. At the expo, people who bought merchandise from my grandparents were returning it faster than they bought it.

On the same day of the 2012 marathon, I was supposed to run in the Suffolk County State Qualifier meet, which was also canceled. My team went on to run in the state federation, and county championship meet, though. But once again, I was fatigued from another season of overtraining.

One of my most vivid memories was after a cold and disappointing race at the end of that season. Gary came up to me and firmly asked, "Colin, why are all your friends running faster than you?" I always remember my running failures better than my wins.

On September 12, 2020, I drove to my dad's house on Long Island from North Carolina and planned to run with my grandfather the next day. Exactly 50 years ago that night, my grandfather was a young man on shift at the Far Rockaway firehouse. Similarly, I was also a young man and got bogged down with work from my remote job. I left North Carolina at 10 AM, arrived at my father's house at 10 PM, and then woke up at 6:30 AM to drive to the east side of Central Park. It was a thrill when I easily found a parking spot on 65th and Madison. That was the biggest favor the pandemic gave me.

It was the first time I had been to the city since the dawn of the pandemic in March. The city felt stuck in a slower gear. There were fewer people, less of a hassle and more space. But the park seemed alive and filled with runners. The air was crisp and chilly. While leaving the house, my father said it was the first time it felt like fall all year. I made it to Tavern on the Green at 8 O'clock sharp.

Gary walked over from the west side of the park in black shorts, a black shirt and a blue surgical face mask. It made me happy to know he was wearing a mask and taking the pandemic seriously. He was accompanied by two of his friends from the New York Road Runners Club who wanted to document his run for a promotional video on social media. My grandmother, who always shied from the media, trailed several feet behind them. I hadn't seen them in months.

"So, are we going to do this? Can you run this slow?" Gary said with a laugh. No hello, or how are you doing between us.

"Whatever you want, big guy," I replied. The last time I went for a run with Gary from start to finish was several years ago. He seemed embarrassed by his average pace in his older age and less eager to run with me than he did when I was a child.

I could tell the two NYRR representatives made him feel nervous. He never wanted to make a big deal about his legacy.

As we got going, he told me how he was still running with a group of friends every week in Central Park and asked me for an update. I told him my work as a journalist was still progressing, and I was also working part-time as a lifeguard on the oceanfront.

"You work in the news," he said. "It must be a hard day for you because there is absolutely no news today. Know how I know?" I shrugged, and he laughed. "Because I'm on the cover of it," he cackled.

It was true. That morning he was on the front cover of *The Daily News* with the headline "He's 80 going on 26.2." It was tongue in cheek. No one expected him to run a full marathon. In the photograph, he is wearing a faded T-shirt says, "The older I get, the faster I was." It has been his favorite T-shirt for more than a decade now.

As if he knew exactly what I wanted to hear, Gary started breaking down the race that happened in that exact place half a century ago. Never before have I ever seen him get excited to talk about that race.

"And this is where I caught Tom," Gary calmed his breath to tell me as we passed the southeast corner of the park by 66th Street. Gary was starting at a slower, more comfortable pace but planned to transition into a faster stride like he usually does.

"I was in second place at this point and had less than a lap to go. That is when the competitive juices started flowing," he said.

As we kept running, he waved and stopped to say hi to almost everyone in the park.

"How you doin'?" he said in a thick New Yorker accent to most runners who ran by us. Most of them he knew, but some he didn't. Many waved first and shouted out his name as we ran past. I felt included in a giant running community that I have only had limited involvement with. Running with my 80-year-old grandfather made me feel cool.

A man who appeared to be slightly younger than Gary's age waved us down and talked to him about meeting up for a run later that week. While jogging away Gary leaned into me and giggled, "His last name is Rockefeller you know?"

As we approached the straight away on the 90th Street park entrance, Gary said, "This is where I saw Moses for the first time and thought I could get him." We passed the historic statue of Fred Lebow, founder of the New York City Marathon—he was a good friend of Gary's before passing away in 1994. He took a glance at it and didn't say a word. Shortly after, we passed the street entrance where he used to park his van on the Upper East Side. He used the opportunity to explain the story of women trying on running shorts on the sidewalk once again.

"You should have seen it! They slipped them on right under their skirts," he said. He was a creepy old man, but I let him have it and laughed along.

We started off at roughly a 10:30 mile pace and were picking it up. He was breathing heavily but still saying hi to everyone he saw as we kept going.

As a group of teens ran past us, Gary laughed and pointed out one of the runners who was wearing a more fashionable, less credible Adidas running shoe that let his ankles roll inwards with every stride. After a lifetime in the shoe industry, the sight killed Gary. He pumped his arms and caught up to the kid just to make fun of him in front of his friends. Gary calls this "teasing."

They were all—justifiably—confused. I explained the situation with a little more ease, and then Gary added, "Go to the Super Runners Shop on 77th and Amsterdam. They will get you the right shoe." The kids didn't know how to respond and jogged off, but Gary had a good laugh about it when they were gone.

"This is the spot I got Moses," Gary said right before going up Harlem Hill. He was winded at this point, and it was all he could get out. This was the steepest hill on the course. He didn't say a single word while running up. He just kept his head down and ground through it.

We got back to the start in under an hour. The NYRR club put out the actual tape they used for the marathon. A group of reporters recorded Gary as he held up two peace signs like he did 50 years ago and broke the tape. I let him take the lead, eased off the back, and walked onto the sidewalk. I didn't want to take it away from him.

He was exhausted by the finish. Thankfully, the reporters gave him a minute to catch his breath.

"I just hope to inspire someone to get off the couch," he told one reporter. "I guess that is my goal in life." He followed up with a more morbid, unprompted quote. "I think if I stopped running, I would die," he said.

"What does it mean to have your grandson with you today?" another reporter asked.

He took a moment and looked like he was thinking carefully before answering.

"It was an absolute honor. He drove all the way from North Carolina to be here. It is an absolute honor."

I tried to make myself scarce in the background. I was emotional and didn't want to be seen. My grandmother was still hiding from the cameras on the other side of the street, and I wish I were there with her.

Before leaving, Gary invited me to go fishing with him and my brother later that afternoon. I desperately wanted to spend time with him, but I had work mounting up that I needed to tend to. I also had to sit down and take notes of the morning. I told him that I wanted to but was busy with my job. He didn't protest. It was his time to rest, and it was my time to work.