

Beer and M&M's – 1985

By Mark Blaskey

(reprinted from August 1985 newsletter)

There was a question in 1985 about whether to hold the Beer and M&M's marathon. Race founder and resident runner-with-an-attitude, Dick Kennedy, had died a few months earlier in an accident. In early May, word started floating around the running circles that Roger Hubbard, Don Marjala and Steve Liegl had scheduled the run for June 1, in memory of Dick.

Sure enough, on that clear, warm Saturday morning, a deluxe motor coach—no mere school bus--was waiting across the street from the Camaraderie. It was ready to take us to Menomonie for the run back to the Camaraderie. Twenty-two runners, along with a few family members, hopped on board. The six-packs and bags of M&M's were deposited in the pick-up truck parked alongside the bus. Some independent type with no respect for authority brought Reese's Pieces instead of the required M&M's and tried to dumping them into the common bowl, but the sharp eye and quick hand of Al "The Alchemist" Denio intercepted the bogus candies, grumbling to the offender, "What are those? M&Ms only. Can't you follow directions?"

In addition to running alone, I had been running a few times times per week with co-workers Neil Camrud, Lloyd Fleig and Russ Treat at lunch. Running with those guys was not an exercise in creativity or variation. At 12:05 we would walk out of the locker room, Neil and Lloyd would start running and punch "START" on their watches. No stretching, no warmups...just running at (for me) race pace right from the first step. Talk while running? Nah, just breathe hard and work. We ran and timed the same 10K loop every time: from Mondovi Road, through Carson Park, past the "Y," up the steep University hill and back to the Northwest Fabrics' office.

The bus stopped at the Silver Dollar Saloon (which opened early just for us). A row of Miller Lite taps was set up on the bar, waiting for us. I drank a quick one, as did most of us, except for a few hard cores who were running Grandma's in a few weeks and took this run seriously. Twenty minutes later, we climbed back on the bus for the short trip to the official starting line near Wakanda Park. A few runners did cursory stretches while rest of the gang straggled together near Roger Hubbard. He shook a can of Walters beer, said "Runners to your mark" and pulled the tab. Spray coated Hubbard and half the runners. By habit from watching Lloyd and Neil, I started my watch.

The Grandma's-bound: Camrud, John Qualheim, Steve Weld, Ken Van Es, Don Marjala, Jim Ward and some other speedy blurs went right into their 20-mile race pace. Nancy Templar, Russ Treat, Mark Weinberg and I shuffled into an easy lope as we started talking about the day. It was going to be warm with high, wispy clouds and the smell of first-crop hay drying in the sun.

"How far are you planning on going?" Nancy asked our group.

"Ten," answered Weinberg.

"Eight," said Russ Treat.

"I haven't run any longer than six miles this year," I said. "So, I think I'll do eight and hop on the truck."

We ran down the very steep Wolski Bay hill, got onto Broadway Street, crossed the river and veered east, past Burger King and out of town on Highway 12/29. We ran on the frontage roads and down the shoulder. The three mile mark came where the road narrowed to two lanes at the wayside (which no longer exists). The beer and candy truck was there and Nancy, Russ, Mark and I all stopped and opened beers. Camrud et al were already way ahead. Paul Woita, Bruce Freeland and Hubbard were lounging around the truck casually sipping Lites.

"Remember the dead skunk Dick used for the half-way point in the first Beer and M&M's?" Hubbard asked.

"Yeah," said Woita. "He and Cindy Bakula went out the night before the race to mark the course and only took one can of paint, so they ran out. The skunk was near the 13.1 mile mark, so they dragged it to the turn-around. Wasn't there a dead snake at 20?"

"Dick was such a character," Roger said, wiping foam from his mouth. "Remember a couple of years ago when he found out a month before Grandma's he had a stress fracture in his tibia? I saw him limping up to the starting line at Two Harbors. He was grinning and said to me, 'When I found out I had a stress fracture, I just had to run Grandma's. No one has ever run it with a broken leg.'"

"His entire leg was purple and black for months after that," I added.

We all chuckled and shook our heads. Everyone was quiet for a minute as we all thought about Dick. I used to run and bike with him. We had rides every Wednesday night from Putnam Heights School. He'd always be the first there. He'd drink a can of Walters beer, leave the empty can on the curb and then ride quickly and easily. He always wore the barest of clothes: cycling shorts rolled up, a T-shirt, cycling shoes and wire-rim granny glasses — no socks, no gloves, no helmet.

The moment of reverie passed and the four of us headed back onto the highway, beer cans in hand. We ran on the highway shoulder and turned right at the Blacksmith's shop and onto quiet roads where we could run two or three abreast. A couple of turns and we were on Highway "E." We'd been running for about an hour. The beer truck came back to us. We were at the eight-mile mark, Paul told us. We dug into the ice chests for more Lites. The sun was high and the temps were in the mid 70's. We all drained our beers quickly, iced our necks and heads and popped candies into our mouths. Exposed to the sun, the Reese's Pieces were oozing peanut butter while the fabled M&M's stayed solid. I was glad The Alchemist had enforced the segregation.

"I'm having so much fun I think I'll go to ten," Russ Treat said. The year before, Russ, Camrud, Fleig and I had been on a team together at Emily's old WAVY 11.50K race in Chippewa Falls. Sue Fleig had the four of us pose for a team photo. Looking at the photo a few days later, Camrud said to me, "Blaskey, I thought Treat's legs were big, but yours are even bigger!"

Standing there at eight miles looking at Russ's legs, I thought, "Well, hell, if he can run another two, I might as well."

At ten, a few runners were in the back of the truck laughing and having a good time. Emil and Connie Schultz caught up and hopped on. Weinberg and Treat joined them. Nancy said to me, "Let's go the half-way point." I looked up the road. I could see a few runners.

"Sounds like fun, OK," I said.

At thirteen, Nancy joined the mob on the truck while I popped open another Lite and tried a few congealed, orange-brown Reese's pieces. I looked at the crowd in the truck.

"I feel good," I told the group, "I'm going to try for 20." The fast guys running 20 were ahead and out of sight.

"OK," Paul said, "We'll check back on ya." The small pickup, with ten runners drinking beer, eating M&Ms and laughing as they were squeezed into the bed of the truck, hurried up the road to pick up the 20-milers.

An hour later I got to 20 and it was a party. There were two trucks and several cars...and no runners still running. The speedy pre-Grandma types had done their hard 20 and were swilling Lites and sunning themselves. I still felt good.

"Hop on," they were all saying, "We're heading down to the Camaraderie."

"Isn't anyone still running?" I asked.

"No. Come on, let's go, have a beer," Russ Treat said.

"Well, I think in memory of Dick, somebody should finish this damn thing," I said. A few heads nodded and a few heads tipped backwards to drain beers, but no one got out of the truck.

"All right then, I'm going to go on and finish it," I said.

"You're the only one," Bruce said, handing me a Lite.

I shook my head. "I'd better not," I said, "gimme some water."

They piled back onto the truck and into the cars and headed to the Cam. I started running. I was still feeling good.

When I got to the Eau Claire city limits sign on Crescent Avenue I started walking. About then Paul and Bruce came back in the truck to check on me. They drove slowly alongside and encouraged me as I jogged into town and down Water Street. I walked into the beer garden, sat down and looked at my watch: 3:42. Dick would have said, "One Walters and then I have to go home and mow the lawn." I settled for another Lite and headed to the hot tub at the Y.