

Run For Your Life

Fred Lebow is probably remembered more today overseas than he is here in the Good Ole USA where he emigrated, was successful in the New York City garment trade, took up running, became obsessed with it (even though he was no good at it), took possession of the New York Roadrunners Club, helped bring the New York City Marathon out of Central Park and onto the streets of the five boroughs, and in so doing completely revolutionized the way big-city marathons are run.

A native of Transylvania (who liked to burnish that background when he traveled to other marathons by frequently wearing all black topped by a long, black leather coat), Fred Lebowitz and several members of his family escaped a demolished Europe and settled in New York.

Fred's story is one of dogged determination to succeed, abject sacrifice when necessary, and confidence in his own instincts that bordered on megalomania. He was a one-off (unlike the garments designs he "borrowed" from high-end designers and then knocked off), the right man at the time (except when he was the wrong man: read that as his big book of big-time marathons whose revelations of under-the-table payments incensed Mayor Koch of New York), and a genius at getting his ideas acted upon.

Screen Media Films has put together a documentary on the mercurial Fred Lebow titled *Run for Your Life* (www.fredlebowmovie.com) that is truly outstanding, both in fashioning the story of Fred's life and in showing the influence he would have upon big-league marathoning while the film holds as close to the truth as possible by including some of Fred's shortcomings.

The documentary is worth the price, if for nothing else than the archival running footage—everything from New York runners trudging at high speed through snowstorms to elite runners at the first city-wide New York City Marathon in 1976 being forced to run up steps as part of the course—which the producers had to rummage through ancient runners' sea chests to find and restore.

Fred's extraordinary instincts brought Norwegian track star Grete Waitz to New York in 1978 to take part in her first (and avowed last) marathon, where she set the world record. (In 1992, after nine New York City wins, Grete would slow down dramatically to run the marathon with Fred as he fought and eventually lost out to brain cancer.)

In between, the patently slow-footed Lebow would run marathons all over the world and would impart his hard-learned wisdom to other race directors so that they could improve their races. Other officials would visit museums in exotic foreign cities; Fred would insinuate himself at the finish area to see how the scoring worked—or didn't.

Chris Brasher, an Olympic steeplechase runner (and one of the pacers for Roger Bannister's first sub-4:00 mile) visited New York to see how Fred and his staff put on the New York City Marathon so that Chris could go back to England to build the London Marathon into one of the world's best and most famous.

The film, in typical documentary fashion, interviews many of the now-elderly people who knew Fred, ran with Fred, worked with Fred, and (in the case of Bob Bright of Chicago) worked against Fred, and their stories are colorful, insightful, and often hilarious. And throughout it all there is the sense of wonder that the little, in-the-shadows sport of long-distance running could become the mass movement it eventually became.

The documentary is slick and professional and because of the material that was searched out, scrounged, and retrieved from dumpsters, it all works wonderfully well to fashion a lively, colorful portrait of Fred while also recording that period in the history of the sport that was nearly as colorful as Fred.

The documentary will give American runners a chance to appreciate in whose giant footprints they run; Fred's legacy is already stamped on dozens of races in foreign countries, where their memories sometimes tend to be longer than ours.

—Rich Benyo