

*Marathon Man:
My 26.2-Mile Journey from Unknown
Grad Student to the Top of the
Running World*

BY BILL RODGERS & MATTHEW SHEPATIN

In 1980, at the height of his road racing career, Bill Rodgers wrote an autobiography with Joe Concannon called, simply, *Marathoning*. It was a combination autobiography and a bit of an advice tome; the first 13 chapters related Billy's up-and-down career as a runner, while the remaining five chapters covered things such as "Women, Health, and Fitness" and "Inspiration, Sportsmanship, and Coaching." The book provided insights into the guy pretty much dominating American road racing as the '70s turned into the '80s while it was still happening.

Bill's new book is sort of a look back at that golden era now three decades old while attempting to recreate it by using his surprising win of the 1975 Boston Marathon as the spine of the story. (Interestingly, nearly the same photo is used on the covers of both books. On *Marathoning*, it is a color photo of Bill breaking the tape at Boston shot from above and off to one side, while he grasps his wool hat in his right hand and sports his BR running gear; the cover of *Marathon Man* was shot a half-second earlier, as he approaches the finish tape--it has not yet been breached) and grimaces, but in a sepia-tone format, making it, symbolically, a nostalgic voyage back to those halcyon days.

Fortunately, Bill kept a journal of his running, so he is able to cite workouts from 35 years ago. Some of the rest of it he kind of wings as he goes along. Let me explain that: The new book relates his career from early childhood as tangents from his book-length recreation of that 1975 Boston victory. As a result, he has an awful lot of mileage and pages to fill in as he runs from Hopkinton to Boston on April 21, 1975, and although Billy is outstanding in remembering high—and low—points in races and specific incidents, even though he can't remember where he parked his car, it is hard to believe that after 35 years he can so vividly remember what he was thinking as each mile progressed. Hence, it reads more

like a fictional recreation of the race, which is fine for we readers, it's just that we boggle at such a steel-trap memory dredging up such detail. We love to think that's what Billy was thinking at mile so-and-so, how he was going to take it to Jerome Drayton at a specific point on the course, etc.

We all edit and rework our memories, sandpapering off rough edges, tweaking as necessary to hone our story. And most of what Billy reports here is true, or as true as it is possible to recreate it, and it is an astonishing story, and it benefits by Billy giving his former college roommate and 1968 Boston winner, Amby Burfoot, such a huge role in the story, as mentor and friend. The relationship adds texture to Billy's story, and further fleshes out some of his training and racing strategies through the golden years of his career.

But on page 223, Billy says that Amby was a writer for *Runner's World* in 1975 and that he came by to stay with Billy and his wife Ellen before the '75 Boston. In point of fact, Amby's first piece for *Runner's World* was on page 48 of the February 1978 issue and was titled "The Meatless Runner." Amby would join the staff as East Coast Editor with the June 1978 issue, where he would write the cover feature on that year's Boston Marathon. But why let sticky facts get in the way of a good story?

And it is a damned good story. Classic Greek stuff. Billy rises, falters, rises again, falters, pulls himself up, and erupts as the heir apparent to the mighty Frank Shorter, the two of them filling out the 1970s (Frank the first half, Billy the second) during America's decade of dominating the marathon. (To be briefly eclipsed in the early '80s by Alberto Salazar.)

Although it is virtually impossible to stretch the tension of the 1975 Boston out as thin as salt water taffy, especially since we all know the outcome, what Billy and Matthew Shepatin inject between the strides on the way from Hopkinton that April 21, is fascinating stuff, a truly American story of talent rising to the top in spite of several points along the way where Billy nearly lost it all.

It was an exciting time of marathoning's growth, and Billy Rodgers was right in the thick of it, keeping the pot stirred and churning and boiling.

(The book could have benefitted from a wider variety of photos from Billy's illustrious career instead of concentrating so heavily on 1975.)