

*The Madman, the Marathoner:
The Life of Marathoner Don McNelly*

BY JUANITA TISCHENDORF

It is usually fairly easy to gauge the age of a person you are walking behind by noting the way the person ambulates along. As people age, their step loses its spring, their step becomes halting and uncertain, and at some point in the maturation process, that step turns into a shuffle, or possibly even a limp—an amalgamation of all the miles and miscues those legs have endured over the decades.

On numerous occasions I've walked behind Don McNelly, usually at marathon expos, and besides finding it difficult to catch up to him, his walk belies his 90+ years. There is as much spring in his much used and abused legs as there is in a new pair of Bosch shock absorbers on the newest model Ferrari.

Don has been running since 1969; his first marathon was at Boston that year. On February 1, 1998 Don ran his 500th marathon. On June 4, 2006, he ran his 700th. (All of his marathons are listed in an appendix.)

Juanita Tischendorf, a friend of the McNellys for many years, does a neat job of bringing together an enormous amount of statistical information (just listing Don's marathons takes up 45 pages) to turn it into a warm and enduring profile of madman Don. She starts off by introducing Don the child and his siblings in Brookville, Ohio. (Juanita sprinkles long quotes/remembrances from Don and his wife in the text, making it more personal and breaking up the straight narrative.)

Born in 1920, Don's childhood was pretty much an invocation of the blue-collar American family. His father worked for General Motors and upon graduation from high school, Don attended the General Motors Technical Institute. When war came he joined the Navy and served as a lieutenant aboard the USS Kyne, a destroyer escort. Trained as an engineer, after the war Don went to work for the Fort Wayne Corrugated Company, along the way expanding his little family.

His organizational skills were noted, and eventually he went into management, by 1966 becoming vice-president and a member of the board of directors of St. Joe Paper.

But a few years later Don's life would change radically when a close friend, Ken Evans, up and died of a heart attack. Ken had gone to the General Motors

Institute around the same time Don had, and in fact lived in the same fraternity house. In the mid-'60s they ended up working a block from each other and their families frequently socialized together.

Determined that their parallel lives would not have parallel conclusions, Don took up running and the rest, as they say, his history.

The book does a nice job of tracing Don's start in running, which led to Boston in 1969, and from there to the madness that Don perpetrated on himself. The book doesn't strain the reader's patience by detailing every one of Don's 700+ marathons, but instead pulls out races that were highlights. All in all, very interesting reading.

My only complaint is one that has nothing to do with the book. Having known Don casually for decades, and knowing him to be a kind and gentle and humorous fellow, I have yet to see a photo of Don where he is smiling. He seems to harbor a deep-seated fear of the camera so that every photo I've ever seen of him looks as though he is scared to death of the camera lens. Smile, Don! It won't kill you to let the camera know that behind that grimace, you're a happy guy.