





# The Descent of Man From Central, or, The Origin of the St. George Marathon

BY RON AHRENS

The 1977 running of the *Deseret News* Marathon in Salt Lake City doesn't stand out much from others before or since. Demetrio Cabanillas won; that's not unusual because he's taken eight of the last nine and the one he didn't win he didn't enter. It was a moment of genesis, though, because when Sherm Miller came across the finish line his footfalls continued to resound, in a sense, and even to grow in volume to sound like thousands of pairs of feet.

Miller was then with the City of St. George Department of Parks and Recreation, and he liked the marathon he'd just run so well he thought, 'Hey let's have one of these at home.' Problem was, the idea never occurred to anyone else in town where, as someone has described it since, folks thought you got an aerobic workout by doing gardening. In other words, fifteen thousand people didn't fling their Stetsons into the air and start stockpiling blanks for their starter's pistols.

"The big cry was that I'd use public money," Miller said. Nevertheless he laid out a course, gathered up some Chronomix timing equipment borrowed from the Salt Lake Track Club and Keith West of the *Deseret News* Marathon, and enlisted 58 daredevils to run. He'd settled on a course that went from the base of the Pine Valley Mountains to the city park on Bluff Street; he'd driven the route five times in his car to get a close gauge on the distance, although it wasn't close enough to earn the sanction of any of the sport's governing bodies.

"Basically I picked that course because, number one, I thought it would be the most scenic, and, number two, we could handle the traffic," Miller said, meaning not much traffic travels U-18 anyway, so he'd keep his fingers crossed. If he'd plotted out a course from another direction, from over in Hurricane, say, he'd have had all kinds of problems herding runners under Interstate 15 and into St. George; some might still be orbiting Middleton.

A sports page headline in the Friday, November 4th, 1977 edition of the *Color Country Spectrum* said "Marathon Set Sat." as if the writer only half believed it himself, and well into the five-inch-long article he wrote, "The general public is invited to view the marathon," an invitation that would

doubtless guarantee spectators four-deep all along the route. Yet before anyone knew it there huddled 57 runners and one wheelchair racer, a couple of race officials, and a handful of astonished cows in the creosote bushes up toward Pine Valley on a semidark November Saturday morning.

"It was bad news," Miller said. "Colder than heck, windy." Yes, and unsanctioned, people laughing at you from their stools in the coffee shops back in town, winter coming on fast.

"Let's just get this thing going," Miller finally announced, and they took off without the AAU, TAC, NCAA, NAACP, Frank Shorter, Demetrio Cabanillas or anybody else.

Debbie Zockoll was in the knot of runners that turned south into the freezing headwind at the junction in Central, and she remembers fooling around with the three

## The runners are treated as special guests of the city.

other women along the way—horseplay. (Out of thirty-eight finishers her time of 4:50:00 would put her next-to-last.) It wasn't a real marathon, for goodness' sake, just some adventuresome joggers wanting to know if they could hold out. They'd roll giggling into town in time to make the gardeners look up in wonder from the last withering pumpkin vines and ask, "My heck, whatever's goin' on?"

The runners plodded into Veyo, their sweat condensing to vapor and rising as steam into the cold air. They chugged straight up the side of the volcano, which, unfortunately, had gone extinct just a few moments before, geologically speaking, in the Quaternary period and could supply no heat. They passed more creosote in Dammeron Valley and reached the twin cinder cones standing sentinel at the entrance to Snow Canyon, that bastion of carmine sandstone. Then something magical happened. The sun rose higher, the air warmed, and everyone realized it was downhill into St. George. Maybe they weren't so foolhardy after all; the negative self-image they shared was only an illusion. Here they were at the rim of Color Country engaged in a race that was rather, well, spectacular.

The moment of charm didn't mean everything went perfectly from there on out.

"Debbie Zockoll almost got run over," Miller said. "They got down at the 20 or 22-mile point, and a hay truck came around the corner, and they had to jump off the road.

Then at the finish Barbara Paterson, the first-place woman runner, who'd come clear from Northridge, California, for the race, accused Miller of staging it on a course 40 yards too short. Otherwise, by the next day, even the newspaper perked up a bit with sports page coverage that gave race results priority over college football scores. There were big pictures of the overall winner, Steve Naylor, of Salt Lake City, crossing the finish line in 2:27:17. The second-place finisher, Tom Hensley, of Flagstaff, said, "This course is a fast one. It will attract more runners as word gets around." As long as no one mentioned the hay trucks.

It took a couple of years before Miller was satisfied with the cooperation he was getting from the city government, service clubs, and merchants. But word-of-mouth about the swift and scenic course brought 378 runners to the starting line in 1978 and all those bodies convinced the skeptics they indeed had something worth promoting.

"By the third year we had everything computerized," Miller said. A system was developed by which finishers' numbers were fed into the city's master computer and a half-hour later results were tabulated and released to the town crier. There were volunteers besides the couple of scout troops and members of the Exchange Club to man the aid stations.

"We did a good job the first three or four years," Miller said. He credits two things with helping spur the race's growth. (650, 950, 1524, 1753 and 2207 runners year by year from 1979 to 1983.) First, the city coughed up some money for promotion. Then, Miller was distributing questionnaires to runners after the races to accumulate their reactions and tailor the race to their likings. The course itself changed, too, so that the starting line shifted to Central and the finish to the midtown city park. And the Track Athletic Congress extended its sanction to the race, meaning a runner's time counted when considered in qualifying for other races.

"I think it's evolved into a great marathon," Miller said. "That was probably my major contribution to the City of St. George."

Ron Ploger succeeded Miller as race director, and in turn he was succeeded by current co-directors Rob Snow and Kent Perkins. Snow said the St. George Marathon is the biggest in the intermountain west. Because of the downhill course, which drops from 5,700 feet in elevation at Central to

*Opposite page: Top, Jill Molen-Koeven, 1983 women's overall winner, crosses the finish line at the city park. Center left, Exchange Club members help exhausted runner. Center, running through scenic Snow Canyon area. Center right, St. George offers a unique scenic course. Bottom left, headed south at Mile 17. Bottom right, wheelchair racer catches his breath after finish.*

2,800 feet at St. George, the race is the first choice for rookie marathon runners and veterans seeking eligibility for the Boston or New York Marathons, or, in a pre-Olympic year, the Olympic trials.

"One other reason the race is as popular as it is," Snow said, "is because of the community support." Any trace of apprehension has disappeared as radio clubs, 4-H and church groups and service clubs have joined the scout troops and individuals in volunteering to send messages, serve as race officials, organize equipment, hand off drinks, daub wounds, paint signs and present awards.

"The runners are treated as if they're special guests of the community," Snow said.

Perkins noted that the first-time and women marathoners receive particular attention, and their recommendations bring other runners to St. George in following years—so many that there might not be room for the race to continue growing.

"We've reached a limit in terms of some of the things we can provide," Snow said. Motels filled up last year, and the number of school bus seats available to transport runners to the starting line is limited.

## It's a good race to qualify for Boston.

"We now look to do a lot of fine-tuning," Perkins said. Snow agreed, saying that with 2,200 runners, a finite number of race officials and toilets—and a steady rain—last year's starting line was "a madhouse," with runners milling around in the glumness like early morning hobgoblins wearing green plastic garbage bags to stay dry and burning fires kindled from wood cut and stacked weeks earlier by Snow and Perkins. The good citizens of Central probably thought the trolls and sprites had descended upon them for a ritual ceremony.

"There were people falling off the barbed wire fences," Snow said.

Fine-tuning also means refinements to the course.

"Last year we went through a very intensive measuring process," Snow explained. "The course was measured not to the inch, but certainly within the foot. We found our course was a little short, and we had to move the starting line back 153 feet."

If you asked around, though, you might not realize any fine-tuning is needed.

"Wherever we go," said Debbie Zockoll, who last year ran a 3:26:45 to snag eleventh in her division, "the St. George Marathon is known as a fast course." Which is apparently what the frustrated speed-burners of the world want, so why tinker? "Just tell them one thing," Debbie added. "We guarantee it won't rain again."

Naturally there are no guarantees about the hay trucks. ■

## 1983 MARATHON RESULTS



Chad Bennion and Jill Molen-Koeven, 1983 overall winners with their beautiful plaques.

**T**wenty-two runners won the 1983 St. George Marathon. That's because the race was contested in as many divisions—thirteen men's and nine women's, with two overall winners. Altogether, seven race records were set.

Chad Bennion of Murray, Utah, took the race in 2:20:42. He won't be defending his championship this year because he's serving a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints in San Antonio.

Nearly two minutes behind was the second-place finisher, Nick Barton of Salt Lake City, top man in the Sub-masters 35-39 division. He led with only three miles to go before the nineteen-year-old Bennion passed him.

Jill Molen-Koeven, a University of Utah All American runner, won the women's race in a record 2:48:30. She and the next three women qualified for the Olympic trials, beating the required time of 2:51:16. Molen-Koeven is still running strong, having placed second in the last *Deseret News* Marathon on a mountainous course at Salt Lake City.

Among the 1983 record setters were: Jim Peterson of Layton, Utah, Wheelchair division 1:57:44; Jon Eric Thalman of Claremont, California, Juniors 13-14, 3:02:00; Chad Bennion, Open 19-24, 2:20:42; Michael Mahler of Santa Monica, Masters 40-44, 2:25:39; Melvin Smith of Salt Lake City, Veterans 55-59, 3:02:11; Tricia Burton of Salt Lake City, Women's Juniors 15-18, 3:23:26; and Jill Molen-Koeven, Women's Open 19-24, 2:48:30. ■

### 1983 DIVISION WINNERS

#### MENS

Chad Bennion	First Overall	2:20:42
Jim Peterson	Wheelchair	1:57:44
Noah Hunt	Bantam 12-Under	3:36:23
Jon Eric Thalman	Jr. 13-14	3:02:00
Michael Benson	Jr. 15-18	2:41:41
Chad Bennion	Open 19-24	2:20:42
Paul Peterson	Open 25-29	2:28:24
Chuck Walker	Sub Mst. 30-34	2:26:30
Nick Barton	Sub Mst. 35-39	2:22:14
Michael Mahler	Masters 40-44	2:26:39
William Johnston	Masters 45-49	2:28:49
Paul Nance	Veterans 50-54	2:44:43
Melvin Smith	Veterans 55-59	3:02:11
Wilson C. St. Martin	Senior 60 & Over	3:19:57

#### WOMEN'S

Jill Molen Koeven	First Overall	2:48:30
Jane Wellman	Wheelchair	2:58:43
Tricia Barton	Jr. 15-18	3:23:26
Jill Molen Koeven	Open 19-24	2:48:30
Suzan Jones	Open 25-29	3:10:29
Colleen Monk	Sub Mst. 30-34	2:49:45
Linda Hammann	Sub Mst. 35-39	3:01:50
Marit Glenne	Masters 40-44	3:14:30
Janis Lyon	Masters 45-49	3:27:19
Maxine Brown	Veterans 50 & Over	3:58:29