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Sports

Top American Man Is 24th (Without His Dog)

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He ran with an injured left leg, wore No. 147 on a faded Lehigh University jersey and was urged on by friends who wanted him to finish quickly so the post-race party could get under way at a West Side pub. Joseph McVeigh, the party's host, obliged, covering the New York City Marathon course yesterday in 2 hours 21 minutes 12 seconds, to place 24th and earn a somewhat dubious distinction as the top-finishing American in the men's race.

Passing through the finish chute in Central Park in the glare of the midday sun, the 33-year-old McVeigh was in a hurry. "The party starts in 10 minutes," he said. "I'm going to be late."

McVeigh's bash was not planned as a victory celebration, but it may as well have been one. A journeyman runner who said one of his biggest victories was a 1994 "doggie dash" in Athens, Ga., with his mutt Pixie as racing partner, McVeigh was brought to the same podium as the surprise overall winner, Giacomo Leone of Italy, to tell who he was, where he had been and how his race went.

McVeigh lives in Haworth, N.J., is a Wall Street stock researcher with Dean Witter, has run in only five marathons and said his race yesterday did not go terribly well, in part because of the 40-degree temperatures.

"I felt terrible; I just managed to make it to the finish," he said. "It was too cold. I needed 65 to 70 degrees to warm my hamstring. I tightened up badly at 22 miles."

Nonetheless, McVeigh kept passing other runners. With no American men even listed among the top 50 contenders before the race, the foreign domination of marathoning was never more apparent. The last man from the United States to win in New York was Alberto Salazar in 1982; since 1990, only three American men have placed in the top 10.

"During the race, I knew I was around 25th," McVeigh said, "but what's that worth when there's such a paucity of Americans in the field?"

McVeigh represented a new marathon type: the beleaguered, anonymous American man. His personal best was an unspectacular 2:19:23 in the 1994 Boston Marathon. The only people who knew McVeigh were the buddies who were eager to begin their toast.

McVeigh was not only anonymous; he was also a throwback to the amateur days when runners were lucky to win a pair of running shoes for a victory. In fact, McVeigh, who receives no sponsorship money or even gear from a shoe company, competed with a pair of shoes that he won at a 10-kilometer race last month.

McVeigh finished 11:18 behind Leone, whose first-prize winnings were \$30,000 plus an automobile. Had McVeigh or any other American won, the reward would have been \$100,000. Unlike other road races, the New York City Marathon does not give separate prizes for Americans, so McVeigh earned no monetary award for his efforts.

While many elite contenders trained for the race in Kenya's Rift Valley or on a high-altitude volcanic plateau outside Mexico City, McVeigh trained alone in darkness after work on the roads of Haworth. McVeigh has no coach and a three-and-a-half-hour round-trip bus commute to cope with, but he managed to put in 80 miles a week on dark suburban lanes.

Ashen from yesterday's effort, McVeigh told how he was "not even the best runner on my high school team." He was a 4:34 miler at Bergen Catholic High in Oradell. This was his third New York City Marathon and his best finish despite the discomfort.

Actually, until the hamstring rebelled, McVeigh was on a hot streak. In September, he won a half marathon in Jersey City in 1:09:28 and on Columbus Day, he won the Long Beach Island 18-mile run on the Jersey Shore. He was happy to win a trophy and a free dinner.

"But I couldn't drink any beer," McVeigh said. "I was in training for the marathon."

Now, he was ready to make up for that.

"I can't believe what time it is," he said. "The party is probably well under way."

As a collegiate runner, McVeigh never had any reason to celebrate. He never won a race as a track and cross-country competitor at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa. -- never even managed to crack the top 50 in the IC4A cross-country race. After graduating in 1986, McVeigh gave up competitive running for three years, got his master's degree in business administration from Lehigh in 1992 and worked his way to the University of Georgia in Athens to start a Ph.D. program.

There McVeigh rounded into peak shape, and finally entered the winner's circle with Pixie in a 1.4-mile race. "We won \$50 in food and merchandise," McVeigh said. "That's two months' worth of dog maintenance."

McVeigh sustained his fitness to qualify for the United States Olympic trials marathon in February in Charlotte, N.C. He ran poorly, finished in the middle of the field and was devastated.

"I wanted to do well at the Olympic trials, then walk away from running," McVeigh said. "Like Sandy Koufax did after winning the Cy Young award."

McVeigh took one last drag on his water bottle, rose tentatively and nodded toward the door.

It was time to celebrate.

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