

INSIDE: A COMPLETE HONOR ROLE OF ALL RACE FINISHERS

Memorial Day Run

TUESDAY, MAY 27, 1997

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■ A symbol of all the good things in sports, Bob McCarren and daughter Diane are as much a part of the Memorial Day Run as an American flag

It's come to this now, after 17 Memorial Days on the run, in the middle innings of a sporting life. Bobby McCarren cheats.

It goes without saying, if you know him, or if you played with McCarren or against him, that he's the only one who sees it that way.

This is a guy, Bobby McCarren, who spent most of his life quietly kicking butt ... you name the game, or the race; just tell him what time to show up ... without ever starting an argument or calling attention to himself, admired by his enemies as well as his teammates. Then he changed lanes, pushing his severely handicapped daughter in road races all over the neighborhood, raising consciousness and making friends wherever he went. A guy who was once fined by Earl Weaver because he didn't show the proper enthusiasm for throwing at hitters.

That was in 1957, a lifetime ago in Fitzgerald, Ga., Class D, where Weaver was in his first season as a player-manager. The opposition was taking liberties with the new kid pitcher when Weaver jogged in from his position at second base, with orders to knock the next guy down. "And if you don't," he said, "it'll cost you five dollars."

McCarren tried, but his heart wasn't in it. The batter leaned away from an inside pitch, and McCarren peeked over his shoulder to see how the little man was taking it. Without looking up, or taking his hands off his knees, Weaver growled, "Just leave the five bucks on my desk."

And now with one knee operation behind him and the cartilage gone, McCarren wears an experimental brace from the Hospital for Special Surgery that allows him to keep running the races with his daughter. And when the pain digs in, he leans on Diane's wheelchair. "I cheat on the chair," he says.

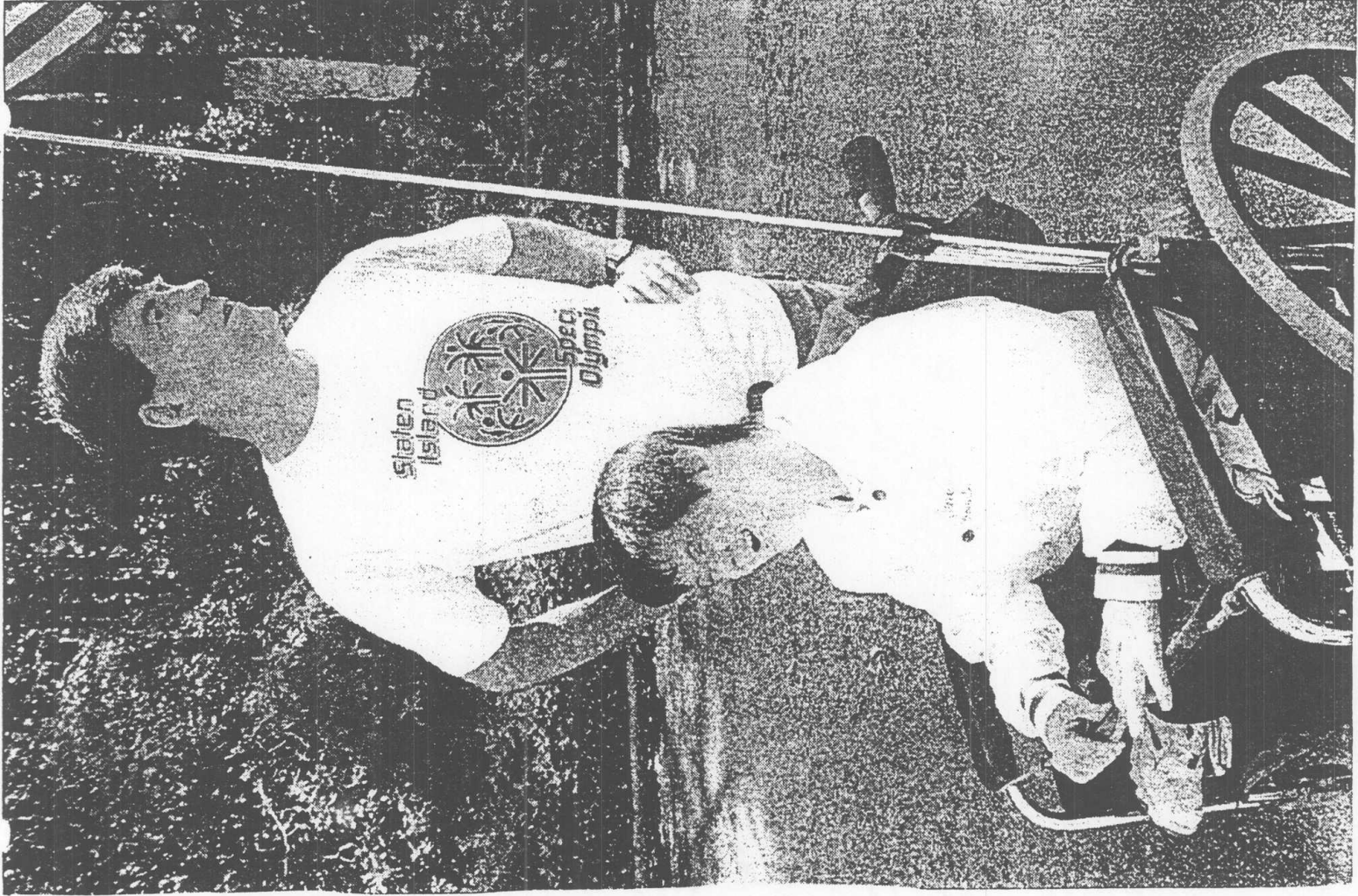
He started running late, when he was 42. So in its way McCarren's running career has matured — literally, as well as figuratively — along with the Memorial Day race.

The Advance Run, as it was known in 1981 when it grew out of a national running boom, and before it was co-sponsored by the Sisters of Charity Health Care Systems and Staten Island University Hospital, was fueled at the start by the competition between local running clubs and the clash of individual egos.

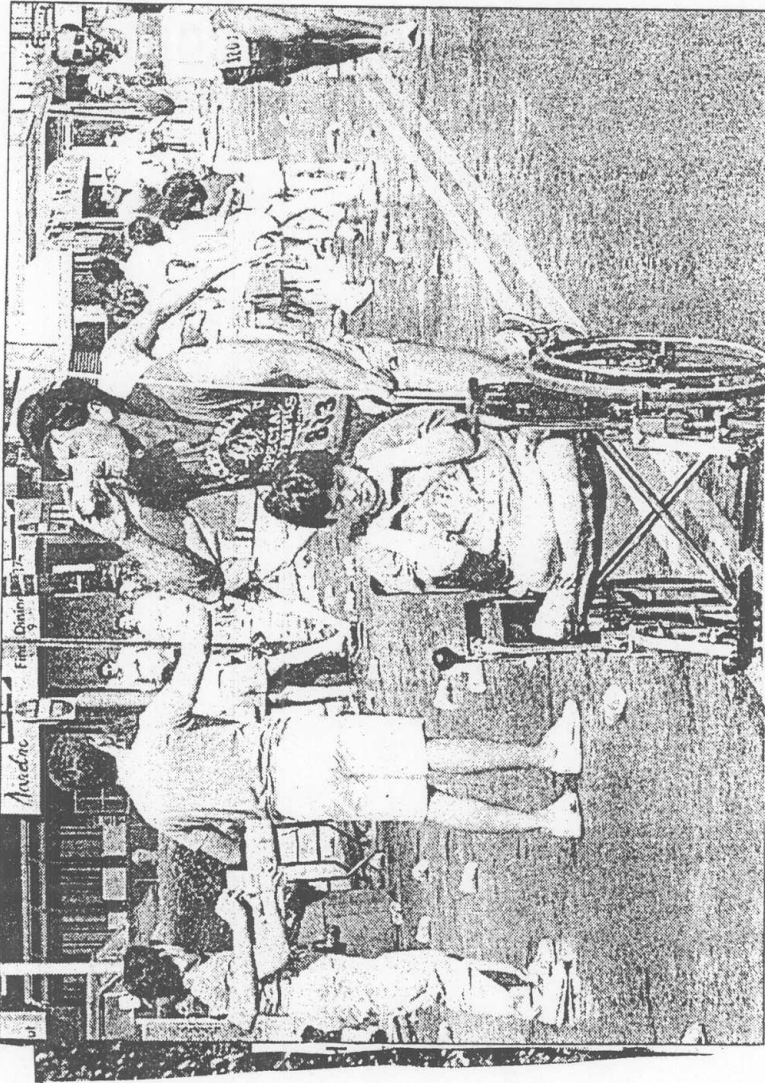
There's still plenty of speed on the front end, where Alem Kabsay ran away from everyone but runner-up Gary Dennis yesterday, to win for the third straight year. But for many in the field of 1,000, the race is as much a community gathering as it is competition; a low-key, no-pressure start to summer. If Pepper Martin is the Island's Homecoming Weekend, this is Opening Day.



JAY PRICE



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ HILTON FLORES



McCarren's not the only one who's run every Memorial Day. Bernie Wright's running career began in Dan Kelly's gym class at PS 40 in New Brighton. Thirty-six years later, he's still going hard, 10 races in the last 11 weeks.

Wright's log books show he's run as much as 4,800 miles in a calendar year; earlier this year, he finished third in a national age-weighted half-marathon. Still following his notion that "if you think you're good, you have to bump heads with good people." But as Wright chases the competition, McCarren has learned to get along without it.

He was 42, still playing softball and touch tackle when Sal "Shoes" Pucciarelli, another all-sandlot guy in this neighborhood, introduced him to running. McCarren ran around his block in Oakwood a couple of times, showed up for his first fun run in Clove Lakes Park, and ran the three miles in 20:07. The next week, he ran 19:07.

He didn't know anything about running; he was just stronger than everybody else. When the Advance Run was a five-mile race, McCarren did it in 27:57; five years later he was still winning his age group in 30:47 while pushing Diane.

The knee wore out three years ago. "It took me a good year, if not more," he says now, "to get used to people going by me."

"My ego got in the way," he says.

He shrugs, runs his hand through Diane's hair. "Now I can have fun! Diane enjoys it more, because it takes longer to run the races," he says.

"She gets to say hello to everybody."

So, on Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, Bobby and Diane run in Spring Lake, N.J., where everybody knows them, and would be disappointed if they didn't show up. On Monday they come home to meet old friends, and make new ones, on Hylan Boulevard. And when the pavement bites Bobby McCarren in the knees, he can cheat by leaning on the wheelchair.

After all these years of pushing Diane, now she's taking some of the weight for him.

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Perennial champs Alem Kabsay and Kari Proffitt are the top male and female finishers in the 17th annual Memorial Day Run

By JACK MINOGUE
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Alem Kabsay ran scared. Strange for someone who entered yesterday's Memorial Day Run with an unprecedented string of six straight victories in Staten Island Triple Crown races.

"I'd never run against him (Gary Dennis)," Kabsay said, "and I saw right away that he had very good form. I was scared."

But form and grit could only take the former Lafayette College star so far. Just past the halfway point, the two-mile mark, on the Hylan Boulevard incline approaching Poillon Avenue, Kabsay was unable to answer one of the surges which have become the Ethiopian's trademark.

Kabsay pulled away from there and was accompanied only by the appreciative applause of the crowd which lined Luten Avenue to the finish line, outside Tottenville High School.

Kabsay finished in 20 minutes, 5 seconds for his third consecutive Memorial Day title, while Dennis was timed in 20:35. Mike Crowe was third in 20:59, followed by Curtis HS star Claudius Caesar (21:12), who barely held off Kevin White (21:13).

Three-time women's Triple Crown winner Kari Proffitt got a leg up on an unprecedented fourth title as she posted an unchallenged wire-to-wire victory.

The Fort Wadsworth resident was timed in 23:53, while Lafayette College star Megan Smith was second (24:05), Josephine Piccinic third (24:41), Jeanine Sluck fourth (25:53) and Cheri Walsh fifth (25:57).

The race was sponsored by the Staten Island Advance, the Sisters of Charity Health Care Systems and Staten Island University Hospital.

"Kabsay started surging at the very beginning," Dennis said. "I guess he was trying to feel things out."

"I decided to just go with him."

Which is precisely what Dennis did, down Luten Avenue, south along Hylan Boulevard and through the tight turn as the pair headed north to begin crossing the course's T.

"I was testing him with the surges," Kabsay said.

Dennis appeared ready for an "F" about 1½ miles in. Kabsay surged on an incline and Dennis didn't respond.

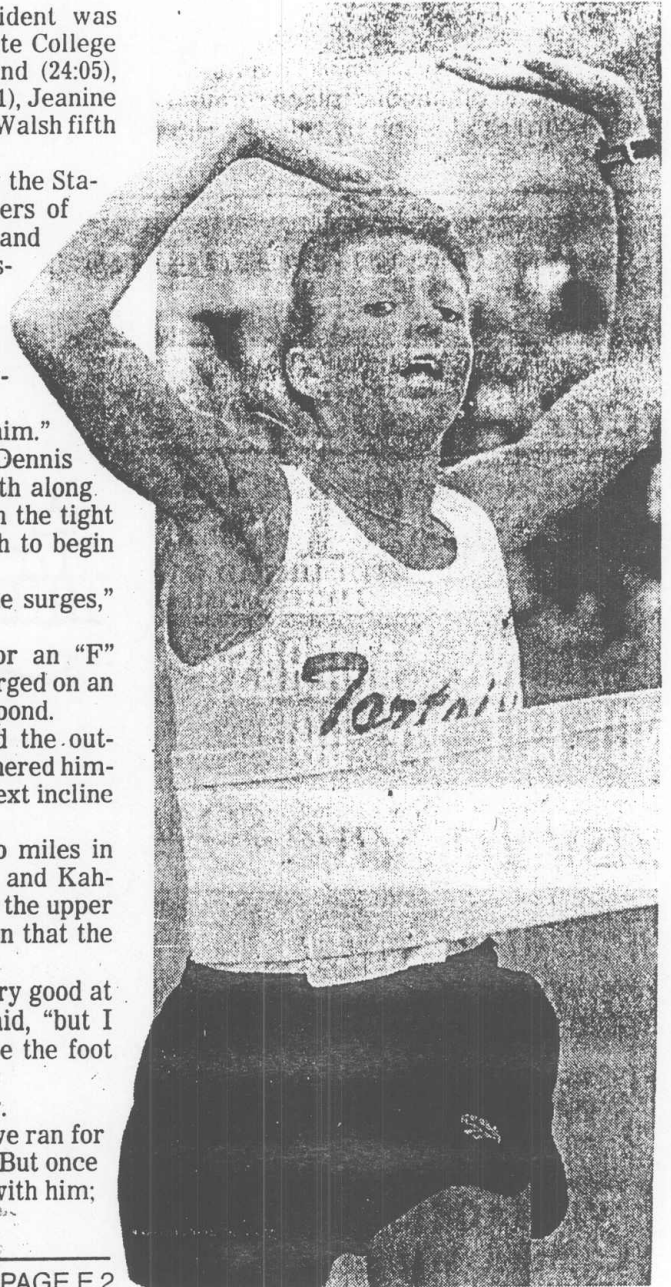
But just when it appeared the outcome was history, Dennis gathered himself and came back, ran the next incline hard and took the lead.

The pair went through two miles in 9:56 with Dennis in the lead, and Kabsay tucked in behind him, but the upper Manhattan resident knew then that the race was his.

"He (Dennis) is probably very good at longer distances," Kabsay said, "but I knew then that he didn't have the foot speed."

Dennis' assessment exactly.

"I did all right at the pace we ran for the first two miles," he said. "But once he picked up, I couldn't stay with him; the legs didn't respond."



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"But through three miles, I

tried not to lose contact because I wasn't sure how he felt."

Everything was fine with Kahsay, except his time. "It was slow," he said, "so after 2½ miles, I just went my way."

An 18-second lead on the turn on to Lutén became 35 seconds at the finish.

Proffitt also ran that last 1½ miles, but for a completely different reason.

"I don't have a great kick; plus, I haven't been on the track much," she explained.

"I had run the first mile conservatively — I've blown too many races on that first mile — and I was afraid someone would come up on me on the straightaway on Lutén."

Smith had designs.

"She (Proffitt) was running on the outside, so I saw her at around 2½ miles," said Smith, fresh from the ECAC championships on Friday and her graduation Saturday.

"I decided to try to catch up."

Too late.

"I tried to push on that last hill," Proffitt said. "I like hills; I seem to do better on them."

"I wanted to get enough of a cushion."

Which she did.



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For Kari Proffitt, it was pretty much a one-woman race, as she ran unchallenged throughout the course.

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