

■ 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.



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